English Grammar and Style

Points of view

Some more four-letter words

I published a series of articles in The Write Stuff on short words frequently used in the medical and scientific context between Volume 16(3) 2007 and Volume 18(4) 2009. Since then, at training courses and in email enquiries, I have been asked questions about the usage of some further short words not covered earlier.

Wide

Wide is an adjective (a wide band), an adverb (wide awake; we could see nothing far and wide), and a noun, but only in the mysterious world of cricket (Note: Oxford English Reference Dictionary: ‘a ball judged to pass the wicket beyond the batsman’s reach and so scoring a run’). Its use as a single-word adjective is clear and needs no special explanation. Wide frequently crops up in our texts as part of the terms worldwide (used to represent all three terms below), companywide or countrywide, where it means affecting the whole. The most frequent question here is, do you need a hyphen before wide? You can adopt a couple of approaches:

- Never put a hyphen before wide whether you are using world wide as an adjective – the world wide incidence of; or an adverb – we observed an increase of 23% world wide. I do not agree with leaving a space before wide.
- Many would prefer hyphenation: the world-wide incidence of and we observed an increase of 23% world-wide, because here world-wide is being used as a ‘compound modifier’ and the hyphen shows that the word wide is linked to the word world.
- The simplest alternative that needs the least checking is to always write worldwide as one word: the worldwide incidence of and we observed an increase of 23% worldwide.

I use the style described in the second or third point and try to remain consistent in one text.

I think you can apply this to countrywide and companywide. The addition of wide in this way does not seem to have pervaded English very far. It is not generally acceptable to tag wide onto the end of words to indicate affecting the whole. We do not seem to have invented laboratory-wide, organ-wide, club-wide, school-wide, party-wide, or university-wide yet, with or without a hyphen, although hospital(-)wide and nation(-)wide are in common use.

Is there a difference between broad and wide? Do you talk about wide or broad bands in a chromatogram, or a wide or broad bandage? These questions illustrate nicely that sometimes words are interchangeable and sometimes they are not. A band in a chromatogram can be broad or wide, and the reader will understand the same whichever adjective is collocated with band. But a margin and a bandage are almost exclusively collocated with the word wide. Nobody could claim, however, that a broad margin or a broad bandage was incorrect or that they would be misunderstood: they just do not sound right.

Long

As with wide, long used as a single-word adjective poses no problems. Do not be tempted to use lengthy instead, unless you are talking or writing more informally or even jocularly. Long is also a noun, even though you may not recognise it as such (the long and the short of it …; it didn’t take us long to realise that she was …). It is when long is tagged onto the end of another word, such as hour, that a similar problem to that with wide emerges: hour long, hour-long, or even hourlong?

I definitely come out in favour of the hyphen with long and no other solution. Comprehension of the written word relies entirely on the visual effect of strings of letters and punctuation, and hourlong, weeklong, and lifelong just do not look right. So I would always go for … a month-long course of XXX or a year-long sabbatical. Adding long to the end, can, of course, be avoided by saying a 1-month course of XXX or a 1-year sabbatical, and I really do feel that these alternatives are better, and that ‘-long’ formulations should be avoided in our type of writing. Except for life-long: try expressing the
idea of a life-long disability in so few words without using life-long.

Long is also a verb and should find only rare use in our context, as it means to yearn for, and not to lengthen. I attended a course on understanding ECGs quite a few years ago now, and the course leader kept saying ‘... notice how the QRS complex longs ...’ and ‘... again we see longing of the QRS complex ...’ I just sat there longing for her to talk normal English.

Grow

You can grow:

• plants
• old
• angrier and angrier
• a new leg if you are a newt
• and antlers if you are a deer

but, as far as I am concerned, you still cannot grow your:

• assets
• organisation or
• involvement in a project.

This may be evidence of a somewhat old-fashioned streak (it took me a long time to drop the out after sort, as in that has been sorted), but the older I get the more progressive I get, so there is hope for me yet.

Ones

Here we are concerned with the use of the word one as a noun, rather like a pronoun.

When making a verbal presentation about the results of a clinical study or in a conversation about the results, it would be quite normal to say something like this: As you see, the patients in Group A, who were given antibiotic prophylaxis 24 hours before dental surgery, didn’t develop infection. The ones in group B, however, who didn’t have any prophylaxis, all developed infection.

Instead of repeating patients in the second sentence, many of us would use ones in this way. This sounds fine when you are speaking. Here is another example: Here are the eggs our hens laid today. The ones they laid yesterday were broken before I could bring them to you. Again the ones sounds perfectly acceptable and is what most people would say.

Substituting one or ones for previous words like a quasi-pronoun does not work in our types of text. It sounds too informal or spoken: Metabolism of exogenous substances and some endogenous ones is mediated by enzymes. Or: We were able to confirm the results in mice, but not the ones in rats. Or: This was the effect we saw in rats; the one we saw in rabbits was different.

So how do we deal with this?

The simplest solution is to repeat the word that one or ones replaces. Hence: Metabolism of exogenous and some endogenous substances is mediated by enzymes. Using those or that often does the trick, hence: We were able to confirm the results in mice, but not those in rats. Or: The effect in rabbits was different from that in rats.

To avoid ones, some authors may opt for the following solution to the first sentence in the previous paragraph: Metabolism of exogenous and some endogenous substances is mediated by enzymes. This is acceptable when the distance between the adjective before and (exogenous) and the noun it modifies after and (substances) is very short, which is the case in this sentence – lengthened only by one very short word, some. Any further apart is a source of annoyance for the reader. Writers whose first language is not English sometimes leave too long a distance in such formulations because it is more acceptable to do so in their first language.

However you solve this, avoid using one and ones as quasi-pronouns in our types of text.

Alistair Reeves
Ascribe Medical Writing and Translation
a.reeves@ascribe.de