

# 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.

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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 substances 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.

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