

English Grammar and Style

Good Writing Practice



The trouble with apostrophes (1)

The purpose of the articles in the Good Writing Practice section is to focus on style, not on punctuation or grammar. However, apostrophes are a stumbling block for many writers and so

require some discussion. Some people have simply not learned how to use them correctly. If you fall into this category, or if you would like a refresher, Lynne Truss has succeeded in making a book on punctuation funny as well as informative, and we recommend it.¹

In terms of writing style, the best approach to apostrophes is to avoid them whenever possible. Apostrophes fulfil two main functions: to show that one or more letters have been missed out and to show possession.²

If an apostrophe is used to show that something is missing, the resulting language is consistent with spoken English but is sloppy writing, e.g. won't for will not, wouldn't for would not, they're for they are (not to be confused with their and there). Words such as can't, would've, it's, etc. do not have a place in professional writing. It is better to write the words in full.

Apostrophes that are used to show possession are the ones that cause the most problems for writers, particularly when the precise meaning of a word or phrase is open to interpretation. Why does EMWA stand for European Medical Writers Association and not for European Medical Writers' Association? The explanation is that EMWA is an association of medical writers, or equally, that EMWA is an association for medical writers. EMWA is not an association that belongs to medical writers and so we do not need to use an apostrophe. Now, one can argue that legally, EMWA does belong to its members and, therefore, that Writers should have an apostrophe. This is how disputes arise; the argument in favour of using an apostrophe is reasonable and some people will feel strongly that Writers should have an apostrophe. In the absence of a referee, since all of the arguments carry equal weight, we

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recommend applying the reasoning that results in the most straightforward text, i.e. without the apostrophe.

Having established that we do not need an apostrophe for European Medical Writers Association, the same reasoning can then be applied to an Investigators Brochure rather than an Investigators' Brochure or even an Investigator's Brochure. The brochure does not belong to one or more investigators; the brochure is for the investigators to use. Again, one could argue that the brochure belongs to the investigators after it has been given to them, but this reasoning seems to be an attempt to justify using an apostrophe. There are no prizes for using apostrophes, just as there are no prizes for using abbreviations. We recommend avoiding apostrophes whenever possible.

Sometimes apostrophes creep into text because of the way the sentence is structured. In such cases, it is better to restructure the sentence to remove the apostrophe. Taking an example from a report of a study in patients with cancer:

To investigate survival, the patient's status was followed-up monthly.

This raises the question of whether we mean that only one patient was followed up or whether we mean that each patient was followed up. We could have written:

To investigate survival, the patients' status was followed up monthly.

This makes it clear that we mean more than one patient, but the reader is likely to backtrack to check that the apostrophe is in the right place. We could remove the apostrophe by replacing it with the missing words and restructuring the sentence slightly:

To investigate survival, the status of the patients was followed up monthly.

This is clear but at the price of lengthening the sentence. If we give the meaning of the text a little thought, we do not need the word 'status'.

'Survival' implies that patients are being followed up to determine their status so we could write:

To investigate survival, patients were followed up monthly.

No apostrophe, no confusion, or backtracking.

As an aside, we would also suggest removing the need for the comma at the same time as prioritising the action that was done:

Patients were followed up monthly to investigate survival.

References

1. Truss L. *Eats, shoots and leaves*. UK: Fourth Estate. 2009. ISBN-10: 0007329067, ISBN-13: 978-0007329069.
2. Seely J. *Oxford A-Z of grammar and punctuation*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 2013. ISBN-10: 019966918X, ISBN-13: 978-0199669189.

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'Ups' and 'downs' in (medical) writing (1)

This topic is also inextricably bound up with one punctuation mark – the hyphen – but is also a matter of style, personal preference, and frequency of usage, so we think it is worth saying a few words about it.

Do you write *set-up* or *setup*, or *work-up* or *workup*? Are drastic measures a *crack-down* or *crackdown*? Is a disappointment a *let down*, a *let-down*, or a *letdown*? All of these terms are derived from a very frequent language construction in English: verb + preposition, resulting in a meaning sometimes completely different from that of the core meaning of the verb. For simplicity, I am using verbs together with only *up* and *down*, but many other prepositions are used in this way. This is an unregulated area as far as grammar is concerned, but one thing is certain: when the verb is used together with the preposition, they are never hyphenated, regardless of the tense. *Follow* and *up*, *set*, and *back and up* are not hyphenated in the following sentences because these are being used as verbs with prepositions:

We decided to follow up patients with levels higher than ...

The study was set up to include patients with a KPS of ...

The system is backed up every 24 hours.

The question of hyphenation or writing the words together only occurs when adjectives and nouns are formed from the verb + preposition:

Follow-up (adj.) investigations every 4 weeks were planned.

There was no follow-up (noun) in this study.

A build-up (noun) of gas in the intestine caused ...

And this is where personal preference and style come in, as no rules govern this. Most of us would agree that *followup* and *buildup* look strange (without being able to say why) and that it is highly unlikely that the hyphen will ever be dropped, as has happened with *setup*, *workup*, and *backup*:

System backup is performed every 24 hours.

Laboratory workup included ...

Study setup did not permit ...

Some writers still prefer to use *back-up*, *work-up*, *set-up*, etc., and this is quite legitimate. It really depends on how you feel about hyphens. If you try to avoid them as far as possible (as I do), then you will no doubt opt for the unhyphenated version. It is impossible to say when a term firmly crosses the non-hyphenation threshold and is usually only ever written together, but this obviously happens: *layout* and *breakdown* are examples. The most likely reason for this is the frequency of usage. If *followup* and *buildup* were used frequently enough, it may well be that one day they would make this transition. But somehow I do not think they will.

An issue when using term of this sort is how consistent you need to be, and this is one area where you have to be pragmatic. You will never achieve consistency across terms, i.e. hyphenating them all or writing them all together, and that would be a complete waste of time. Also, achieving consistency across different texts is illusory. The best thing to strive for here is consistency *by term* in one text, which means that you should always use *workup* and not a mixture of *work-up* and *workup* in one text. I think that the readers do not expect

consistency here – by that I mean that readers will not be irritated if *workup* and *set-up* are used in the same text. They have probably been in the same quandary themselves.

An important stylistic issue for authors of medical and scientific texts is that a wide range of these ‘verb + preposition’ terms are used in speech or in informal or journalistic writing, but not in formal writing. The following examples illustrate the informal nature of these terms:

The conference got a very good write-up.
His comments on her skill as a surgeon were

something of a put-down.

They backed down when they realised how unreasonable they had been.

Government cracks down on hospital waiting lists.

Last year’s models were sold at knockdown prices.

That really messed up my plans.

Obviously *workup*, *backup*, *setup*, *breakdown*, and many others are in normal use in any type of scientific or medical text, but care should be taken if they sound unusual that they are not too informal or inappropriate to the style of your text.

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