English Grammar and Style

Good Writing Practice

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Myths 46, 47, and 48

I reached Myth 45 about English in *Medical Writing*, Vol. 21(1) 2012. Three more have turned up since then, which all fit into the category of language users who rule by whim. All were – as so often – claims made by native speakers, which again just goes to show that we native speakers of English do not know it all.

Myth 46: The word 'timepoint' does not exist

Huh?!? It does not exist in German, French, Cebuano, and Brezhoneg, or any language other than English, where it has a firm place. This sounds to me like a claim made by one of those people who discovered by chance that 'timepoint' was not in the Oxford English Dictionary or Merriam Websters (at least in older paper versions) and wishes to bask in their own (hollow) erudition. True, it is not in either of these noble works on paper that I have, nor did I find it in my copy of the Oxford English Reference Dictionary, but that is far from proof that it does not exist or is not in common use and understood by many. The SpringerExemplar* text database of more than 9 000 000 documents published by Springer Press throws up more than 117 000 articles that match the strings 'timepoint', 'time-point', and 'time point', with first use in 1953. Of these, about 115 000 (94%) are found in the following subject areas: Medicine and Public Health, Biomedicine, Life Sciences, Oncology, and General Biochemistry. This number does not include the immeasurable amount of documentation produced the world over to gain and maintain marketing authorisation for a vast number of drugs and devices, where I know from my own experience the term 'timepoint' abounds. Nor does it include all of those other areas of science and technology where 'timepoints' are also in common usage.

I think we can say that 'timepoint' is a fairly new term which has established itself in life science research over the past half century and that it has an unequivocal meaning. It is not unusual to find that terms in common use are not in dictionaries. 'Evaluable' was only recently admitted into Merriam Websters, but had already earned respect in writing for more than a century (first use documented in 1880), and 'to code for' in its genetic sense is now rearing its dictionary-worthy head.

It is true to claim that 'timepoint' is often used where the word 'time' would suffice, but it is also true that the extra precision added by the word 'point' is equally as often desirable, with a grey area that is just as large. To claim that 'measuring time' is 'better' is spurious, because 'measuring time' and 'timepoint' can mean the same thing, so what is important is consistency in one document.

In case you are wondering whether timepoint should be written with or without a hyphen or as two words. The answer is very simple: it is of no importance whatsoever, just be sure to be consistent in one document and don't waste your and everybody else's time arguing about it!

Myth 47: You cannot say 'a neonate aged two days…'

The rather weird explanation given for this one was that the client claimed that the word 'aged' is not appropriate for neonates as 'they can't be aged'. Here it sounds as though someone really has confused the words 'aged' pronounced 'AYJD' meaning 'of the age of' and 'aged' pronounced 'AYJID' with the first syllable stressed meaning 'having lived long'. The fact is that neonates can be two days old or aged (ayjd) two days and centenarians can be 100 years old or aged (ayjd) 100 years, but only the centenarians are amongst the aged (ayjid). If the client's claim were true, which it patently is not, this makes me wonder: when does being 'aged' begin?

Myth 48: My client says we should be 'diagnosing diseases in people' and not 'diagnosing people with diseases'

Yet again, evidence that our clients have time on their hands to play around with words and invent rules we don't need. 'To diagnose a patient with a

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disease' is a perfectly respectable collocation (a combination of words that sounds 'right') and implies the process of diagnosing up to diagnosis, hence 'a 66-year-old man was diagnosed with Crohn's disease' tells you that he went through all the usual tests to arrive at the diagnosis. 'Crohn's disease was diagnosed in a 66-year-old man' is also perfectly respectable and tells you the same. Both also have the same number of words, so neither has the advantage of brevity. A quick check in SpringerExemplar in their database of more than 9 million life-science documents showed more than 92 000 hits for 'diagnosed with' and just fewer than 17 000 for 'was diagnosed in'. The difference is so small and the search terms are vague which means that the only conclusion we can draw is that both formulations are in common use.

This client's objection hinges on what the adverbial phrase *with a disease* modifies. In the sentence *he was diagnosed with hypertension*, *with hypertension* does not modify *was diagnosed* but *He*, i.e. the disease is not being used to make the diagnosis. This is the common-sense way of reading this formulation and so familiar that it is always understood and can safely be used. Anyone claiming the contrary is looking for a problem where there is none.

In short, the two formulations are interchangeable, but given the following sentence:

Hypertension was diagnosed in a 66-year-old man in 1972, angina pectoris in 1977, and COPD in 1980.

I would rather see:

A 66-year-old man was diagnosed with hypertension in 1972, angina pectoris in 1977, and COPD in 1980.

This keeps the list together and does not put undue stress on the hypertension.

Another four-letter word

I am surprised I have not yet found myself writing about ***each***. A recent question in an EMWA workshop and an email from a valiant teacher of medical English in Germany gave me cause to spend some time thinking about this sometimes challenging little word.

Each is used adjectivally – *Each ward has 25 beds* – and as a pronoun – *The hospitals have 10 wards each or The hospitals each have 10 wards or Each of the hospitals have 10 wards*.

When used adjectivally it immediately precedes the noun it modifies as is almost always the case in English:

Each patient on the ward was receiving antibiotics.

We have defibrillators on each ward.

When used as a pronoun, it usually indicates that several groups or factors had the same number of characteristics, and the main problem is where to position it in your sentence or whether to render it by expressing it differently – and there is no single answer to this.

Let's consider the following:

Statement	Comment
1. Nausea and headache were the most common TEAEs (each in 12% of patients).	No misunderstanding this – it can only mean that 12% had nausea and 12% headache. But why put important information – that it was 12% – in brackets?
2. Nausea and headache were the most common TEAEs, each in 12% of patients.	No misunderstanding this either. And the important information – that it was 12% – is no longer deemphasised. But the position of *each* interrupts the flow of the sentence.
3. Nausea and headache were the most common TEAEs in 12% of patients each.	This is also clear and the sentence flows well, avoiding the comma needed if you position *each* before *in.*
4. Nausea ([in]12%) and headache ([in] 12%) were the most common TEAES.	Avoids the *each* problem, but cumbersome with the repetition of (in) 12%.
5. Nausea and headache (both [in] 12%) were the most common TEAEs.*	Elegantly avoids the *each* problem by using *both*.
6. 12% of patients each had nausea and headache…	Having each before the two symptoms is not incorrect here, but it is disturbing, although the meaning will still be understood.
7. 12% had nausea and 12% had headache …	Repetition of the 12% is a little cumbersome, but this is not the case for *12% had nausea and 10% had headache*. This is how to avoid *each* and *both* if you are not sure where to position them.

*If you had a list of 3 TEAEs or more, e.g. nausea, vomiting, and headache, then 1–5 would be constructed in the same way, except that you would use *all* instead of *both* in 5.
TEAE, Treatment-emergent adverse event.

Exactly how you deal with this is a matter of personal style and preference. Using each, I prefer sentence 3 with *each* at the end, or the solution with *both*. And as we are talking about what was most common here, I would prefer to make this the subject of the sentence in both cases:

The most common TEAEs were nausea and headache in 12% of patients each.

The most common TEAEs were nausea and headache, both in 12% of patients.

Points of view

Let's stay personal

Am I the only one amongst us who deplores the use of *that* instead of *who*, as in the following examples?

Patients that were enrolled before amendment 6…

The group of physicians that opted for…

Patients that received…

The freelancers that opted to set up a private pension…

I still prefer to retain the distinction between people, animals, and things here and reserve *that* for them and who for people or groups composed of people, like teams, groups and patients. I cannot claim that *that* used in this way would be misunderstood or lead to confusion, but it forms part of the use of depersonalizing language and, as such, should be avoided.

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