



Four letter words and others (3)

by Alistair Reeves

I start this time with a word you might not expect to see here: *some*. I recently edited a set of 130 narratives from different authors in oncology patients, and *some*, as an adjective, was often used not incorrectly, but inappropriately for the written context of our work. This is followed by a few words about *upon*, much more about *either*, and finally I explore the use of that innocent-looking word, *nor*. All have one thing in common: not surprisingly, they are used more loosely in spoken than in written English, which means that care is due when using them in written texts.

Some

Three examples from narratives:

He had reported some headache in the 4 weeks before the study treatment was started.

According to the patient, she had had some pain in the leg before she was admitted to the emergency room.

She had had some diarrhoea after starting drug X and took OTC loperamide without consulting her doctor.

“What is wrong with these?” you ask. Nothing is ‘wrong’ with them; but you can literally *hear* the patient speaking here, and this illustrates very well that *some* used as an adjective in this way is a constant feature of spoken English, but that when you write it, the meaning is imprecise. The general feeling when speaking is that *some* used in this way means that the symptom was not severe, occurred infrequently or was transient. But what does *some* really mean in these examples? A few episodes of headache, or just slight continuous headache? Intermittent pain, or just a dull ache, or a few episodes of shooting pain? Continuous diarrhoea for 2 days or isolated episodes over an extended period? Often when writing narratives, you don’t know. Had the word *some* plus the symptom been enclosed in inverted commas in these examples, it would have been clear that the patient (or investigator, i.e. CIOMS form) was being quoted and signals to the reader that ‘*We have only this information and cannot supply anything more precise*’.

Quote from a patient leaflet: *You may have some blurred vision for a short period after you start taking drug X.*

What is this supposed to tell the patient? The culprit here is not only *some*: what is a *short* period? Several hours, several days? The intention is obvious: not to alarm the patient by suggesting with *some* that blurred vision may occur, and

that it most likely will be mild and transient. Whatever the case, the statement should be more precise, e.g.: *You may have mild blurred vision in the first few days after you start taking drug X.*

Either

Either is a real all-rounder: it can be an adjective, a conjunction, a pronoun, or an adverb. When using *either* as an **adjective**, take care that it cannot be misunderstood as a conjunction:

The antiproliferative effect of the combination was compared to that of either monotherapy on two breast carcinoma cell lines (EMT-6, 4T1) in a concentration range of 1 nM to 10 µM for DRUG A and 10 nM to 100 µM for DRUG B.

This sentence is complicated by the fact that the effects of each drug as monotherapy were compared with those of the combination, but the effects of the individual drugs were not compared with each other. Maybe you were lucky and read *either* as an adjective and therefore didn’t feel lost at the end of the sentence. If you read it as a conjunction, expecting an alternative introduced by *or* after the clause following *either*, then you will have been lost at the end of the sentence and had to backtrack. It is our business to know when we might make readers backtrack, and avoid it where we can. With the same word order, this could have been avoided here by saying *each* or *the individual drugs* instead of *either*.

You might also consider changing the word order: *The antiproliferative effect of the combination on two breast carcinoma cell lines (EMT-6, 4T1) in a concentration range of 1 nM to 10 µM for DRUG A and 10 nM to 100 µM for DRUG B was compared to that of either monotherapy.*

With this word order, it is much less likely that *either* would be read as a conjunction, but, for me, the ‘basic’ subject (*The antiproliferative effect*) is too far away from the verb (*was compared*). The actual ‘compound’ subject in this sentence is enormous. It stretches from *The antiproliferative effect* to *DRUG B* because the information on the cell lines and the concentration range are positioned before the verb. So the problem with *either* may have been solved, but the sentence itself has not been improved. I am still not keen on *either* because what is really meant is *both*, so would probably prefer *both individual treatments*. I am not yet at the stage where I feel comfortable with monotherapy in the plural.

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>>> **Four letter words and others**

In the following example, *either* is used as a **conjunction** together with its frequent conjunction partner *or*, indicating a choice between alternatives: *The Territory Managers will return the specified items to CPG, or to Head Office, with the appropriate forms, clearly marked either for reworking or destruction.*

Purists would say here that you should say *for either reworking or destruction*, or, if you want to have *either* before *for*, then *for* has to be repeated before *destruction*. This is because they consider that the entire phrase *for reworking or destruction* is governed by the *either* as a single element and claim that a further possibility is required, otherwise the sentence is incomplete: ... *clearly marked either for reworking or destruction, or for filing in the central archive.* For me, the original sentence would only be misunderstood or held to be incomplete by a bad-willed reader, and I don't waste time correcting this sort of very marginally incorrect positioning of *either* as a conjunction, unless I think it will lead to confusion, which not often the case.

A further example of this is: *After treatment of the animals either with DRUG A or DRUG B as described above, they received 5-bromo-2-deoxyuridine (BrdU) after the last treatment to label mitotic endothelial cells.*

Again, some might insist on ... *of the animals with either DRUG A or DRUG B.* At the risk of sounding to lax, I no longer do.

An interesting conjunctive use of *either* in the sense of 'not any more than the other' is positioning it at the end of a sentence as a linking word: *Clearance of DRUG X was rapid and there was no evidence of accumulation in plasma; although clearance of the vehicle was much slower, there was no evidence for accumulation in plasma either.*

This is the sort of sentence you will *hear* every day. I stress the word 'hear', because this is a good example of a correct formulation that you would not normally write in scientific texts because it sounds too 'spoken'. In conversation, you might say *We didn't find any impurities in the sample*, and your conversation partner might answer *No, we didn't find any either* (or *Neither* or *nor did we*, of course). What is the solution if you want to express the same idea in writing so it doesn't sound spoken? Here are two possibilities, but there are certainly more.

... *although clearance of the vehicle was much slower, there was also no evidence for accumulation in plasma, or Clearance of DRUG X was rapid and there was no evidence of accumulation in plasma, nor was there evidence for accumulation of the vehicle, although it was cleared much more slowly.*

Example of *either* used as a **pronoun**: *Clean the slides thoroughly with fresh water or alcohol; either is suitable.* When used as an **adverb**, there is clear overlap with its conjunctive use: *Either reuse the slides after thorough cleaning with alcohol or discard them.*

Upon

I have yet to find an instance where the preposition *upon*, frequently used when speaking, cannot satisfactorily be replaced with *on* when writing in our context. *Upon* does not sound 'better' than *on*. It is acceptable if it forms part of a collocation, e.g. 'to put upon' (I don't want to put upon you, but ... [=I don't want to cause you unnecessary effort, but...]), 'Once upon a time ...', 'The holiday season is almost upon us', but in almost all cases such collocations are used only when speaking or in non-scientific writing.

Nor

Nor is a conjunction and is therefore a linking word. I was recently asked whether *nor* is dropping out of common use in English. My questioner had noticed that when 'native speakers' used *neither* they 'usually' followed it 'these days' with *or*. I have noticed this too, but would not say that it is 'usual', and it happens mainly when people are speaking. *Either...or...*, *neither... nor...* was what we learned at school, and this still holds true for writing. Here is an example from a text I edited:

Neither Method 1 or Method 2 was chosen; we selected Method 3 because ...

This should clearly be: *Neither Method 1 nor Method 2 was chosen; we selected Method 3 because* And I make no exceptions to this when editing.

Nor without *neither* is a useful linking word, as in the examples for *either* above and the following:

... *and there was no evidence of accumulation in plasma, nor was there evidence for accumulation of the vehicle.*

The physician admitted that he had failed to measure the blood pressure according to protocol, nor had he documented the ejection fraction correctly.

Note: When *nor* is used in the above way, the subject and verb are **always** inverted (a rarity: a 100% rule in English).

Caution with *nor*: it can sound poetic or formal because of the subject-verb inversion and because it can help in presenting an idea in a compact phrase, a device often used in literature. Its perhaps most illustrious use in English is in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

*Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.*

(often misquoted as: *But* or *And not a drop to drink*)

The necessary inversion of the verb and subject after *nor* without *neither* is not a common device in English (the most frequent use is in conditional phrases such as '*Had we selected the nonparametric model, we would have ...*', '*Were we to opt for a twice-daily regimen, we might...*'). This can lead to text sounding a little too 'literary': *A marked increase in AUC was not seen, nor was expected.*

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This compact formulation is acceptable and grammatically correct, but some authors prefer to avoid this type of formulation in scientific texts. e.g.: *A marked increase in AUC was not seen, and (this) was not expected*, or *A marked increase in AUC was not expected and was not seen*, or the very compact *A marked increase in AUC was neither expected nor seen*.

The number of the verb after *nor* coupled with *neither* depends on the number of the subject nearer to the verb:

- A) *Neither the study physician nor the study nurses were present*
 B) *Neither the study nurses nor the study physician was present.*

If both nouns are singular, the verb is in the singular; if both nouns are plural, the verb is in the plural:

- C) *Neither the study nurse nor the study physician was present*
 D) *Neither the study nurses nor the study physicians were present.*

I must add, however, that when speaking, many people (including me, as I am unfortunately not consistent here) spontaneously use ‘were’ for examples B and C, because the feeling is that the subject of the verb is a plural idea.

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How to shorten text—we owe it to our readers

A little thought can relieve the reader of a great deal of stress. Consider the following:

Observation of neurobehavioural variables, automated motor activity (CNS) and assessment of the respiratory function were performed in male rats at <NameX> doses of 0.5 mg, 1.0 mg and 2.0 mg/kg b.w. lipid-complexed <drug>. The CNS variables were measured 5 min, 6 hrs and 24 hrs post-dosing, whereas the respiratory measurements were done 5 min, 15 min, 30 min, 60 min and 150 min post-dosing.

No effects were observed in any of the neurobehavioural variables measured after the treatment with <NameX> at any of the dose levels and time points tested. Likewise no effects of <NameX> treatment, neither as a main treatment effect nor as an interaction with the time were observed demonstrating that the breathing activity, the tidal volume and the ventilatory flow were not affected at any of the dose levels and time points tested.

The first reaction is to make the following changes (amongst others):

- Delete the unnecessary abbreviation ‘CNS’ in the first sentence (It had been used before in the text to denote ‘neurobehavioural variables’ and ‘automated motor activity’).
- Use ‘h’ instead of ‘hrs’ as the abbreviation for ‘hours’ (‘hrs’ is not the scientific abbreviation, and units are never used in the plural).
- Remove inappropriate definite articles, e.g. before ‘respiratory function’ in the first paragraph and ‘time’ in the second paragraph (controversial).
- Substitute ‘after dosing’ for ‘post-dosing’ (jargon).
- Change ‘neither’ and ‘nor’ to ‘either’ and ‘or’ in the second paragraph (double negative because it says ‘no effects’ earlier in the sentence).

Then you start to think: **but what are these two paragraphs actually telling me?** They are telling me: ‘We did this and saw nothing’. Obviously the text cannot be reduced to this, but it can be reduced by two-thirds and retain the same message:

Neurobehavioural variables, automated motor activity and respiratory function were assessed in male rats at <NameX> doses of 0.5, 1.0 and 2.0 mg/kg b.w. lipid-complexed <drug>. CNS variables were measured 5 min, and 6 and 24 h after dosing, and respiratory function 5, 15, 30, 60 and 150 min after dosing. No effects were observed.

The first paragraph is simplified by:

- Removing the active linking voice by putting the action in the sentence into a verb, in this case: ‘were assessed’ instead of ‘Observation of ... and assessment of ... were performed’, and choosing a new subject, in this case, the variables that were determined.
- Taking out the repetition of units.
- Taking out the confusing conjunction ‘whereas’: this is too strong a linking word for this situation. ‘Whereas’ implies a degree of unexpectedness or ‘unusualness’, or that something special has to be taken into consideration. This is not the case here: all the author wanted was to list the measuring times for different sets of variables, and the times for each happen to be different, which is not surprising. This is achieved by simple ‘and’.

And, as you see, the second paragraph can be reduced from 72 words to 4, because the message you want to leave with the reader is: *No effects were observed.*

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