

## ■ Errata

### Unforced errors?

Those of you who remember Dan Maskell's tennis commentaries at Wimbledon will be familiar with one of his favourite phrases, the *unforced error*. These were errors made when the player was under no pressure and should have managed a perfect shot. Well, they don't just happen in tennis, they happen in writing too—and no writer is exempt from them.

Editors are in the business of spotting errors made by other people, so you would think that they would pay particular attention to their own texts to ensure that no errors creep in. And I'm sure we have all developed strategies to ensure that this does not happen. We have, however, all had that awful moment when we rush to an article that has been published (and let's be honest, we all do reread our articles when published) and *immediately* notice a glaring error that should have been corrected by the time we had read through out text for the umpteenth time before it was published. One tiny error can sour the whole pleasure of writing, rather like that misjudged volley that landed in the net, unlike the previous hundred shots, which were perfect.

This happened to me in the March issue of *TWS* when the first thing I read in '4-letter words (5)' was *proceed* instead of *precede* in the very first line. This was most likely a spell-checking error. It is easy to slip into a mesmeric state when using the spellchecker, sometimes resulting in the choice of a wrong word or storage of incorrectly spelled words. It is also easy to put too much faith in the spellchecker. Since I noticed this, I have put together quite a long list of words that I check specifically with the 'Search' function (e.g. *it's* and *its*, and *their* and *there*, which are not picked up by the spellchecker, of course) as a last step. *Proceed* and *precede* will now be added!

Now and again, it is also worth printing out and checking the file where you store all the words that are not in the spellchecking dictionary supplied with Word. This file is called 'custom.dic' (or may be called something else—in the German version it is 'benutzer.dic'—but I assume the filename suffix is always the same). You can open it up in the Notepad and print it out to check it on paper (the path on the computer is C:\Documents and Settings\(\your username)\Application Data\Microsoft\Proof\custom.dic). A decidedly boring but ultimately rewarding task. Give it a try—you'll be surprised at some of the errors you have stored! This is followed by the equally boring task of deleting all the errors from 'custom.dic' and storing it again. But it is a worthwhile exercise. For example, I noticed that *hematuria* was not being detected as an error in a British English document, only to find that I had stored this spelling in 'custom.dic' as correct.

If you wish to take Word to (one of) its limits, you can create personal custom dictionaries (per subject area, for ex-

ample, or per language) by clicking on the 'Options' button in the Spelling and Grammar window. I did try this several years ago in an earlier version of Word, but it took me past my limits: it was too complex remembering to switch dictionaries on and off, and all sorts of words got stored in the wrong subject areas.

The error with *proceed* was in the first line of the article, and this is one of the typical places to find errors that should have been detected. Other typical places are the last lines of paragraphs (especially if two lines have been carried over to the top of a page), page headers, first and last lines on pages, title pages, all section headings and subheadings, figure captions, table headers, table footnotes, and manually generated lists (of appendices, for example). Tables of contents and lists of tables and figures generated automatically also contain all errors missed in section headings, figure captions or table headers. Even the most conscientious editor is human, and these are the parts of texts which everyone tends not to read properly—even if you think you do. In the days of clinical expert reports when we submitted dossiers on paper, a report I was working on once carried the page header *Clinical export report on ...* through every review cycle. This was not noticed until the documents were being loaded up for delivery to Berlin, and I had to clamber around pallettes in a bitterly cold lorry replacing pages with the correct header in all copies. Why do we always learn the hard way?

Over the years, I have trained myself to do these checks systematically as a last step, using a list. Force yourself to read slowly over the title page (even out loud), check all page headers (don't assume they are the same: the document probably has different sections), check all section numbering and headings in one go, then all table headers, then all first and last lines on pages, and so on. This is also very good for maintaining consistency across a document and not only detecting spelling errors because you cannot assume that your client's template is consistent. But my strategy obviously failed in the case of the error that led to my writing this cautionary note!

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### Erratum

Erratum to Reeves A. Tense matters: The preterite and present perfect in scientific texts *The Write Stuff* 2009:18(2):99-101

On page 99, column 2, line 2 'regardless of text' is incorrect. The correct phrase is 'regardless of context'.