



## 4-letter words and others (7)

by Alistair Reeves

5 real 4-letter words this time. *Last*, *past* and *next* form a sort of group, and have important nuances in time phrases in English. *Plus* and *over* have interesting uses—and limitations in formal writing. And I have sneaked in *QCed* as an honorary 4-letter word. These are followed by 3-letter words, of which there are 2. The second signals that this is the last contribution to this column because it is *end*; you will see what the other one is.

### Last, past, next

A few simple things should be observed when using *last*, *past* and *next* as modifiers in time phrases.

It is very unusual, if not impossible, to say *During the last years, we have been investigating this issue ...*, and it is a typical error that I often correct in texts. Without further modification with, for example, a prepositional phrase (see below), *the last years* needs to be made more precise in some way in English: either by adding an actual number, *the last 10 years*, if you can, or most frequently by adding the word *few*. *Over the last few years, we have received several reports of ...* sounds correct. Of course, it is always better to be precise if you can, so if you can use an actual number, so much the better. Whether you use a number or *few*, this means that you are referring to a continuous period up to the time of writing. Ah yes, you say: but how many is *a few*? The pragmatic amongst us stopped asking this question years ago, and are happy in assuming that here the word *few* will generally be understood to mean 3–5 years. Those who cannot live with this condemn themselves to being more precise, where it is probably not that important.

If *the last years* is modified by a subsequent prepositional phrase, *During the last years of her presidency, she often tackled controversial issues*, then the word *few* is understood and is not needed. It can be there for emphasis, and if you could specify an actual number, you might. But I suspect that it would not be important whether the controversial issues were tackled in the last 2, 3 or 4 years of the presidency; the important thing is that this president had the courage to do it often. *Last* used in this way coupled with the simple past always indicates that the person is **no longer** president.

So far, so good. Things are both a little simpler and a little more complex with *past*, however. Let us substitute *past* for *last* in the first example above, *During the past years, we have been investigating this issue ...*. Unlike the use

of *last*, this is quite acceptable without being modified by *few* or a number. *Few* or a number can be added, as with *last*. But whereas *during the last years* sounds incorrect, *during the past years* sounds correct and is the formulation chosen by speakers and writers to express this idea. *Past* used this way refers to a continuous period up to the time of writing.

If *the past years* is modified by a subsequent prepositional phrase, *During the past years of her presidency, she has often tackled controversial issues*, then the word *few* is understood and is not needed. It can be there for emphasis, and if you could specify an actual number, you might. *Past* used this way coupled with the present perfect always indicates that the person is **still** president.

It is not possible to say *In last years, we have held the meeting in June*, but it is possible to say *In past years, we have held the meeting in June*. However, this does not mean the same as *In the past years*. The latter means that since you started holding meetings they have been in June each year up to the time of writing. Without *the*, it means that you have been holding meetings for the past 15 years, for example, and that in some of those years, the meetings were held in June. This is a good illustration of the weight the definite article can carry in English—and often does!

*Next* is used in the same way as *last* in time phrases like those above. *We will contact you for further details in the next days* therefore does not sound correct. Add *few* or a number and it does sound correct.

### Plus

*Plus* is one of those multitasking words that can be a preposition, an adjective, a noun or a conjunction. Most ways it is used are informal.

**Preposition.** The most obvious accepted use here is 5 *plus* 5 equals 10. Except you don't normally write *plus* but +, and just say *plus* when speaking something out. Using the plus symbol in this way is acceptable when writing formally in our context. + 2°C is the same—quite acceptable. Not acceptable in formal writing but definitely otherwise is its use as a preposition in the following way, meaning *with* or having some sort of addition: infusion bottles *plus* a free holder. This is frequently used in advertising or marketing, often when the suggestion is that you are getting something for nothing. ➤

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➤ **Adjective.** An informal adjectival use is to say: *The patient was 40 plus*, or *We saw 50 plus cases of interstitial lung disease in our 6,364 patients*. One of those rare—and interesting because inexplicable—occasions when we put the adjective after the noun in English. *Plus* is also generally used adjectivally in mathematics to mean the opposite of negative, so this is also acceptable when written. The *plus pole* (positive electrical charge) is also acceptable.

**Noun.** When used as a noun, the word *plus* definitely has a spoken ring or an informal feel, for example, in an email or on a presentation slide, where it may well be appropriate for brevity: *A definite plus is ...*. This also applies to its use in the plural: *The plusses are that we will save on paper and ink*. *Plusses* has not established itself in formal writing. *Plus points*, using *plus* as an adjective is, however, better established and can fairly safely be written.

**Conjunction.** *Plus* is very often used as a conjunction when speaking or in emails: *If we buy the new device, we will have to rearrange the laboratory furniture, plus we will have to have window blinds fitted*. The *plus* here sounds as if it were chosen instead of *and* because it was perhaps an afterthought, or maybe even to underline the fact that buying the new device would have more far-reaching consequences than just rearranging the furniture. So it may be used by a speaker to stress what follows the *plus*, or may just be used as an alternative to *and*. I more than sometimes see a comma after *plus* when used this way, which suggests to me that it is used when the user wants to add some stress and thinks that the comma underlines this. As usual, when writing formally you should try to be as precise as possible, so if you wanted to indicate that having the window blinds fitted would be an additional, possibly unexpected expense, then when writing formally you would have to say something like: *If we buy the new device, we will not only have to rearrange the laboratory furniture, but also have to have window blinds fitted* or *If we buy the new device, we will have to rearrange the laboratory furniture, and on top of this we will have to have window blinds fitted*.

**Over**

Whilst you improve *on* something, something new that is better is an improvement *over* or *on* the older something. It is not necessarily an improvement *of* the older something. If you improve a device, for example, but it is basically the same device and just does its job more quickly, you might say *Device X is an improvement of Device Y*. For an indefinable reason, possibly just frequency of usage, I still prefer to say *Device X is an improvement on Device Y*. It has been suggested to me that saying *Device X is an improvement over Device Y* implies that Device Y completely replaced Device X because of different technology, for example. Rather in the way that the iPod replaced the Walkman. A change of preposition can often change meaning entirely, but this looks very much to me like trying to find a difference where there is actually none.

A slight digression: you can make improvements *to* something, but unless you are further qualifying the improvements in some way (*We made the first improvements to the device in February and further improvements in June*), it is best just to stick to simple improve. *We first improved the device in February and then in June* is probably still better, however.

*Over* is also used in the following way: *amoxicillin was given over 5 days*. Some claim that this formulation should be avoided because of the possibility of confusing *over* with *more* or *longer than*. This is looking for a problem where this is none: without *for* before *over*, there is no possibility of confusion. If you wish to express the idea that ampicillin was given for *longer* than 5 days, that is exactly what you should say. When speaking, you might say *for over 5 days*, but, for me at least, this formulation should remain in the realms of the informal.

**QCed**

*QCed* and *QCing* have come to stay in emails and when we are speaking. And it really is the best way to describe this activity. It sounds a bit strange to say: *Have these documents been quality-controlled?* And on top of that, you are not sure whether to write it with a hyphen or not! *To do QC on something* is a possibility, as are *to put something through QC* and *to go through QC* (*Have these documents been through quality control*), but in the face of simple *to QC*, they are all something of a mouthful and sound as if you are trying to avoid saying *QCed*. The big question is: can we use it in formal writing? I have to admit I have started to, and no-one has complained yet! I draw the line at writing *QC'd* though. And *qced* still looks like a typing error.

**Die**

Do you die *of* or *from* something? I have come to the conclusion that it is useless to try to make a distinction. I have seen claims that you use one for diseases and the other for accidents, or one for causes of death which you can do nothing about (from outside agents) and the other for things that might have been preventable, or one for abstract terms (injuries, causes) and the other for non-abstract terms (sepsis, haemorrhage). Tracking this sort of thing used to be a laborious process, sifting through all sorts of documents for years. Now all you need to do is spend 30 minutes searching around Google (which I agree is not validated, nor does it hold any absolute truths, but it does turn up a vast number of scientific articles) and you will also come to the conclusion that it doesn't matter whether you die *of* or *from* something. Let's face it, when it actually happens, the very last thing of any importance are a couple of prepositions that are not worth arguing about. One thing is certain though: if you die *by* the sword, this will usually have happened in a swash-buckling movie, a romantic novel, or a poem, and not in our type of text.

**End**

I am usually for brevity. I have discussed the merits of the word *stop* and its interchangeability with the word *end* as a

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noun and a verb in an earlier issue in this column. So what I am about to say should be seen in the context of those comments. Which is preferable: *at study end*, or *at the end of the study*? This is a matter of personal preference; I still go for *at the end of the study* even though it goes against my basic principle of always choosing the shorter version. *Study end* looks like a deliberately abbreviated table or CRF column header where there was too little space to say *End of the study*. But bear in mind that I have no problem with *at study entry* and much prefer this to *at entry to the study*, which just goes to show that as much as I may plead for consistency, I can be inconsistent myself.

*End* is problematic because of the many possibilities of putting a hyphen between it and other words that it is

linked with. I found myself correcting endphase to end-phase the other day—and then thought, why shouldn't it be endphase? Nobody will misunderstand it. I have got to the point where I can write endstage without even thinking of the possible hyphen everyone used to insist on. Now I write enddiastolic and endsystolic without hesitation, and the hyphen in endpoint was jettisoned years ago. Somehow, however, I don't think I will ever feel tempted to hyphenate end product, and certainly never to write it together.

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## Ig Nobel Prizes 2009: Cows, bras, knuckles and beer bottles

It leaves a warm feeling when a piece of research finds out what you already knew in your heart, especially when it is something close to your heart and the discovery was made at the university where you graduated. So, it is a great pleasure to report that Catherine Douglas and Peter Rowlinson of Newcastle University, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK, were awarded this year's Ig Nobel Veterinary Prize for showing that cows who have names give more milk than anonymous cows. I have always adored cows and my youth, much of which was spent naming cows, was clearly not misspent.

The Ig Nobel Prize theme this year was risk, chosen in honour of the world's financial crisis and as a symbol of risk the prize winners each received a pair of dice. Alas, one prize went missing and there is a call on the website hosted by Improbable Research, which awards the prizes, for the thief to return the trophy. No questions will be asked. The ceremony took place on 1 October at Harvard University and for all those who were unable to attend a webcast can be viewed at <http://improbable.com/ig/2009/>

The risk element of whether a cow has a name or not might not was a little lost on me but the explanation according to the website is that the risk relates to the goings on at the ceremony and not necessarily to any of the prize-winning achievements. Nevertheless, it is certainly risky to be hit over the head with a beer-bottle and, as a Swiss team from Bern University found, more so if the bottle is empty than if it is full. For this research they received the Ig Nobel Peace Prize.

Donald Unger, an immunologist from California, also took a risk by cracking his knuckles on his left, but not



“Josephine, I must say you look quite Ignoble with that piece of grass hanging out of your mouth”.  
“And there are no prizes for guessing which of us gave the most milk today, number 6000”.

on his right, hand twice a day for 60 years. His reward was the Ig Nobel Prize for Medicine and to disprove his mother's prediction that knuckle cracking causes arthritis. It seems a lot of effort to expend on proving one's mother wrong. The literature prize went to Ireland's police service (An Garda Siochana) for writing out more than fifty traffic-offence tickets for the most frequent driving offender in the country; his name was Prawo Jazdy, which is Polish for 'Driving License'.

But perhaps the riskiest of all was the Public Health Prize awarded to Elena Bodnar and colleagues for inventing a brassiere that doubles as a protective face mask—well, two actually. Elena Bodnar demonstrated the invention by pulling her bra out from her dress, separating the two sides and attaching them to the Nobel laureates who were in attendance. It sounds like a good Christmas present for a wife or girl-friend to me—provided relations are sufficiently amicable at the time the emergency pops up for you to be able to rely on the second cup.

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