



Myths about English

by Alistair Reeves

Theodore Bernstein, well-known among writers for his entertaining and pragmatic publication ‘The Careful Writer’ [1], published ‘Miss Thistlebottom’s hobgoblins: the careful writer’s guide to the taboos, bugbears, and outmoded rules of English usage’ in 1971 [2]. Miss Thistlebottom was a school teacher who had rigidly taught the same for her entire professional life, had some outdated ideas, knew absolutely everything about the English language, and knew how to enforce this knowledge—assertively.

Most British (and, I think, American) people carry with them in the back of their minds the spectre of such a fearsome but caring, probably bespectacled, most likely not made up, sensible flat-shoe-wearing, impassioned and learned Miss Thistlebottom expounding on English grammar at the front of the classroom and rapping them on the knuckles with a blackboard duster for putting a comma before ‘and’, or some other unforgivable grammatical transgression. My Miss Thistlebottom was actually called Mrs Whitfield in York many years ago (she fulfilled all attributes, except she wore very high heels), and I fell in love with her when I was 8 because she taught us French and English and I was captivated from the word ‘Go’ by her enthusiasm for language. I have rejected or modified many of her rules since my primary school days, but if Mrs Whitfield hadn’t existed, I wouldn’t be writing this now. Mrs Whitfield ensured that these rules hovered over me like the sword of Damocles for many years—and it even still pricks me in the back of the neck now and again. But (Mrs Whitfield: “Alistair! **Never** start a sentence with but!”) she was also a splendid teacher and encouraged us even at that age to form our own opinions and defend them—not, however, about commas before ‘and’.

You enter the world of writing and find that many writers appear to have successfully shaken off the spectre of their Miss Thistlebottom (although that blackboard duster does still hover in the background), were never subject to ‘Close-Encounters-Of-The-Miss-Thistlebottom-Kind’, apparently learned rules that you never heard of from a ‘reliable’ source, or are just very laid back about the whole thing. Sometimes I think that the laid back attitude is the best as far as English is concerned: provided you remain consistent and true to your own convictions—although these may change (see Myth 2 below)—this is all right. One thing I can assure you of: ask native-English-speaking

writers, and they will tell you they are glad that they never had to learn English as a foreign language.

It’s all a matter of building the confidence within yourself to listen to the different possibilities, decide—if you have the choice—what you want to do, **remain consistent**, and retain the necessary flexibility to stay out of any time-wasting and ultimately frustrating discussions on whether, for example, ‘in vivo’ should be italicised or not—unless you win, which you probably won’t.

The 4 myths below are amongst the most common questions I receive about English in our context. Almost all are ‘agree-to-differ’ issues, where gaining consensus is practically impossible. It’s not worth making enemies or losing your job about any of them. I make no claims to being a Miss Thistlebottom and hope what I have to say helps you in your daily work.

The points are problematic because:

- It is often claimed that they are governed by rules, and they are not. Conventions do exist, but the thing about conventions is that they—like guidelines—are not rules, and depending on where you are in the world or which style guide you consult, different conventions prevail.
- Because they are not governed by rules, they are also subject to personal preference. Frequent usage of a formulation often makes it ‘sound right’.
- They are often not apparent when speaking. Many liberties with language can be taken when speaking, but there is a great gap between the spoken and written word, as reflected by Georges Louis Leclerc in his inaugural address on being received into the Académie Française in 1753 [3]: “...ceux qui écrivent comme ils parlent, quoiqu’ils parlent très bien, écrivent mal”.¹

My approach is always to pick the easiest option to make writing (and checking my texts) easier for me and, I hope, to make reading easier for the reader.

Myth 1: You should never start a sentence with digits

I would like to banish the myth entirely that this is governed by rules. There is no rule that states that numbers at the beginning of sentences have to be written out as words (e.g. ‘Fifteen subjects were enrolled’). Likewise, there is

¹ “...those who write as they speak—although they may speak very well—write badly”.

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no rule that elsewhere in text, numbers smaller than 10 (or 11 or 12) should be written out and that digits should be used for greater numbers. There are **conventions**. These vary according to company, style guide, publishing house, personal preference and—like many things as far as language is concerned—mood.

We all have our personal preferences, and this is one area where my preference is difficult to suppress, because I think that the choice I have made makes writing easier and helps maintain consistency. If I have my own choice, I always use only digits, whether at the beginning of a sentence or in text. There is absolutely no reason in medical and scientific writing why you should not, with two exceptions: ‘one’ often looks better than ‘1’ (but no other digits); and when digits immediately follow one another and there is potential for confusion.

Consider the following:

‘1 23-year-old man was withdrawn from the study because of ...’. Here you have the choice of saying ‘A 23-year-old man...’ if the reader has no previous knowledge of this man. If the statement ‘1 23-year-old man...’ is preceded, for example, by ‘3 subjects discontinued because of adverse events’, i.e. the reader knows that the man in question was 1 of 3, then you have to say ‘1’ because the indefinite article would not be appropriate because you are enumerating. In this case, it is clearly better to say ‘One 23-year-old man...’, to avoid the ‘1’ and the ‘23’ being read together, even if reaching the age of 123 years is still unlikely.

And consider the following:

‘... was poured into 2 5-mL tubes.’ Even despite the hyphen (which I think is unnecessary) and the space between the ‘2’ and the ‘5’, eyes scanning a page may read this as ‘25-mL’ tubes or ‘2.5-mL’ tubes, so it is clearly better to write ‘...two 5(-)mL tubes’.

It is possible to think of quite a few other rare situations where potential for misunderstandings may occur. This is always the case. Face those situations as you come to them and find a common-sense solution.

We are in the business of getting the message across, so consider the following:

Two hundred and twenty-seven subjects were enrolled.

OR

227 subjects were enrolled.

Which hits you in the eye better? And **don’t you dare** be tempted to put ‘A total of’ before ‘227’ (see below).

Message: if you are an employee, do what your company wants. Depending on your employer, you may be able to do what you want. If you are a freelancer, do what your client wants (one of mine wants everything below 13 written out—so what! At least I know what they want). If you have the choice, do what you want and follow the golden rule: **be consistent**. But be aware: if you write out digits up to

a certain number, you will have to do an awful lot of checking that you have done it consistently.

It is worth mentioning here that the misconception that a sentence should not start with digits has led to the widespread use of at least 3 of the greatest redundancies in writing in general to start sentences: ‘a total of’, ‘in total’ and ‘overall’. ‘A total of’ might be justifiable in the following sentence: ‘45 patients were enrolled in study 1, 43 in study 2, 41 in study 3, and 6 in study 4; thus, a total of 135 patients were treated’. But I would still far rather read: ‘135 patients were treated: 45 in study 1, 43 in study 2, 41 in study 3, and 6 in study 4’. **Get rid of ‘a total of’!**

Myth 2: There is never a comma before ‘and’ in lists with more than 2 elements

Oh yes, there is! In English, you almost always have choices. Here you have 4 (or more?) choices and good arguments can be presented for all. I do express a preference below—for my usual prime reason: to make writing easy and maintain consistency, without endless checking—but you should form your own opinion.

Choice 1. Never put a comma before ‘and’ in lists with more than 2 elements.

Choice 2. Always put a comma before ‘and’ in lists with more than 2 elements. This is called using the ‘serial comma’.

Choice 3. Put a comma before ‘and’ in lists with more than 2 long elements; do not put a comma before ‘and’ in lists with more than 2 short elements.

Choice 4. Use a semicolon like the serial comma in lists with more than 2 long elements, including before ‘and’; use the serial comma or do not put a comma before ‘and’ in lists with short elements.

After starting out in life with Choice 1, Choice 3 was my preference for a long time, but recently I have switched to Choice 2 and feel very happy about this. Why? First, because it took me a long time to shake off the spectre of Mrs Whitfield. Second, because now I never have to clutter my thoughts with this irksome question, it makes things dead easy, and it is much easier to remain consistent. The serial comma has its origins in American English. I think it’s great! Despite this, if you opt for Choice 1, you will also have an easy life remaining consistent. With Choice 4, you will create much work and decision-making for yourself as far as being consistent is concerned, but if you manage to be consistent, you deserve only praise.

Myth 3: Adding ‘in order’ before an infinitive sometimes adds meaning which would otherwise be lost

Forget it. Feel free to use ‘in order’ before an infinitive all the time when you are speaking or when you write emails. Scrutinise texts from others and texts you write, step back into objective mode, and see if you think that ‘in order’ adds any additional meaning. I am sure that you will decide that it does not.

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Does the first sentence here really tell you more?

- 1) In order to harmonise procedures across studies, a 90-day censoring rule was applied in all.
- 2) To harmonise procedures across studies, a 90-day censoring rule was applied in all.

Or the first here?

- 1) This review of the literature by Barnes and Mitchell gives an overview of important findings concerning sex differences in order to assist clinicians in treating women with bipolar disorder.
- 2) This review of the literature by Barnes and Mitchell gives an overview of important findings concerning sex differences to assist clinicians in treating women with bipolar disorder.

Eradicate it from your formal writing entirely. It adds nothing. Don't worry: you'll get used to it.

Myth 4: Plurals of Latin and Greek words should be retained as in the original language

The only difference between Latin and classical Greek and other languages is that they are amongst the languages that are still in use but are no longer spoken. When was the last time you used 'scenari' and 'fiaschi', the Italian plurals of 'scenario' and 'fiasco'? Chance has it that the plural of most of the French and Spanish words we use in English is the same as in English, except for those ending in 'eau', but these days 'gateaus' is just as acceptable as 'gateaux'. The uninflected plural of 'guru' in Hindi is 'guru', but I think most of us would choose to use 'gurus'.

I quote Edith Schwager from 'Medical English Usage and Abuse' [4]: "Most Latin words that have been thoroughly integrated into English can be pluralized perfectly legitimately by simply adding an 's' (or 'es' in my opinion) to the singular form: *stadiums*, *memorandums*, *curriculumms*. Using *stadia*, *memoranda*, *curricula* ... probably fulfils an honest human need—the need to appear learned". 'Addenda' is another example. For me, this also applies to Greek words, and my resolve to use the usual English plural was strengthened on seeing 'pig pancreata' in a report on the preparation of insulin. Times have changed, and most of us lack the solid grounding in Latin or Greek required to confidently use the correct plural, so one thing is certain: if you want to use the Latin or Greek plural, you should always look it up (you can't rely on the Internet for this) and not just assume that they all end in 'a' or 'ae': for example, the plural of 'locum tenens' is 'locum tenentes'. It's a jolly sight easier to use 's' or 'es'.

Formulas or formulae? For me, of course, always formulas. For some words, you will find that dictionaries allow different plurals depending on meaning. Specifically for formula, those I have consulted say 'either-or' or that the 'ae' ending is preferred for the mathematical or chemical use of the word, not that it is right and 's' is wrong.

I have no doubt that the above points and many more will remain controversial. Next time you are standing in awk-

ward silence looking for a good topic for small talk in the company of writers, pick any of the above points and innocently ask your companions: "What do you think about ...?". Make sure you have a firm opinion on the point chosen before you start and be prepared for vehement disagreement and a catalogue of conflicting 'rules', some of which will certainly make you scratch your head or sense that blackboard duster hovering above your knuckles. I guarantee that the silence will be broken and that 'big talk' will ensue: these actually trivial niceties of the English language cause more discussion, controversy and argument than they are worth!

Look out for more myths in the next issue!

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References:

1. Theodore M Bernstein (1985) *The Careful Writer: A Modern Guide to English Usage* Atheneum New York
2. Theodore M Bernstein (1971) *Miss Thistlebottom's hobgoblins; the careful writer's guide to the taboos, bugbears, and outmoded rules of English usage* Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York
3. Georges Louis Leclerc (Comte de Buffon) (1753) *Discours sur le style* (prononcé à l'Académie Française par M. de Buffon le jour de sa réception le 25 août 1753)
4. E Schwager (1991) *Medical English Usage and Abuse* Oryx Press.

Access to data

Medical writers might have been following Dr Aubrey Blumsohn's accusations of 'unethical' secrecy made against Procter and Gamble, in which he claimed that research was published by the company in his name when he had not been given full access to the data it was based on. The report had been written by a ghost writer employed by Procter and Gamble (see http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,6903,1657302,00.html).

This exemplifies a growing problem in relations between pharmaceutical companies and investigators in academia. It is a problem that the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors had already turned their attention to in 2003 when they updated The Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals (www.icmje.org). In the updated version the section "Project-Specific Industry Support for Research" became section "II.D.2 Potential Conflicts of Interest Related to Project Support". In it the stipulations for authors in academia working with industry were expanded from "scientists should not enter into agreements that interfere with their control over the decision to publish the papers they write" to "researchers should not enter into agreements that interfere with their access to the data and their ability to analyze it independently, to prepare manuscripts, and to publish them. Authors should describe the role of the study sponsor(s), if any, in study design; in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data; in the writing of the report; and in the decision to submit the report for publication". (This wording is retained in current icmje which were updated in February 2006.)