

Dating made easy...

by Alistair Reeves

Writers often ask me: ‘What is the correct way to write the date?’, or say ‘...so that’s the right way to write the date in British English, then’. Like many things in English, there are plenty of ways to do it wrong, but there is no one way to do it right. On top of this, there is the well-known US-UK difference of transposition of the days and months, with other countries following one or the other. There are also myriad formats in Microsoft Word in the date field options.

When I was at school in England, we were taught the following formats:

- July 23rd, 1965.
- 23/7/65.

These are still correct. The slash is still the correct separator in US and UK English and not the full stop or period (but the slash is not sacred). 23rd July 1965 and 23rd July, 1965 are also acceptable, but there is no need to write 23rd **of** July 1965, even if you always say it when speaking.

Now I write:

- 23 July 1965.
- 23/07/65 (very rarely).

Sometimes even 23JUL(19)65 or 23 JUL (19)65 (or sometimes Jul).

And we also see

- 23-JUL-(19)65 (sometimes Jul).
- 23.07.65.

Why?

Ordinal suffixes ‘st’, ‘nd’, ‘rd’ and ‘th’: I have entirely dispensed with these in the date, in both private and professional writing. This is perfectly acceptable and is gaining widespread acceptance because it cannot be misunderstood when numbers are part of a date, and it makes it very easy to be consistent. When speaking, you still say ‘first of’ for ‘1’, ‘second of’ for ‘2’ etc. Even if clients want me to use the ordinal suffix, I have turned off the Microsoft Word default rule that makes superscripts out of them, because it is unnecessary, adds nothing, and looks messy. I have clients who assume that because Microsoft Word does something, it must be right. This is not the case. Non-native speakers of English and native speakers living abroad please note: 23 July 1965 (with a full stop or period) does not exist!

23 July 1965 instead of July 23rd, 1965: I now write the number of the day before the month because this avoids the comma between the number of the day and the number of the year. Avoiding superfluous punctuation is always good in English, and makes it much easier to remain consistent. In scientific texts, I always write the month out and do not use a number. If the day written out precedes the number of the day, as in Friday 23 July 1965, I have also dispensed with the comma. Leading zero (07 or just 7 February) or not? I don’t like the leading zero, but I use it because it has come into common usage and I am flexible! The 15th Edition of the Chicago Manual of Style [1] was published in 2003. Previous editions recommended the ‘British style’ which it stated is as follows: 1 July 2003 (!). The 15th Edition, however, recommends writing: July 1, 2003 (“the way everybody does it in real life” in the words of Anita Samen, an editor of the 15th edition [2]). ‘Real life’, however, is that there are different ‘everybodies’, so we don’t have to agree with this.

23/07/65 instead of 23/7/65: I actually think the zero is also superfluous here for the day or the month, but have suppressed my preference here too, deferred to common usage, and now add a leading zero for the day and month. Apart from anything else, if you have lists of dates in a column, they are all the same width with the zeros there. I do not use this format in formal writing because of the potential for confusion between the day and month, e.g. 07/02/53: 7 Feb 53 or 2 July 53? If there is any chance of confusion with the year, then I use a 4-digit number and remain consistent with this within the same text.

23JUL(19)65, 23 JUL (19)65 or 23-JUL-(19)65 (sometimes Jul): with or without the spaces or hyphens, just be consistent—and also be consistent with the use of upper and lower case. If texts have a lot of dates in them, it is very wearing on the reader to have the month written out all the time, and the slash format cannot be used because of the potential day-month confusion. If you have been used to seeing the day followed by the month for most of your life or vice versa, it is extremely difficult to change this in your mind, even if you are told at the beginning of a text which order is used. Abbreviating the month to 3 letters leaves no room for confusion, but this format is only suitable for study reports, tables, case narratives and summary documentation, not for publications and other text seen by the professional and lay public, where the date should always be written out in full (preferably: 23 July 1965). Each month is abbreviated to its first 3 letters and no full stop/period is needed. Dates generated programmatically

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are often supplied in one of these formats and often have a 4-digit format for the year as a result of the '2000 problem'. There is no need to go through and change them all by writing out the month! An interesting aside here: according to the Chicago Manual of Style [1], 'JUL' is called 'army style' and 'Jul' is called 'navy style'. So obviously the US Army and US Navy agreed to differ on this one. I don't know if we should learn anything from this or not!

23.07.(19)65: dots instead of slashes is the continental European way of writing the date in this format in many countries, but this is cropping up more and more in English texts I see from native speakers living outside the UK. As long as the writer is consistent, I don't think it really matters because no-one is going to think that 23.07.1965 is not a date (but this does not solve the day-month confusion issue).

Roman numerals: sometimes I still see 23/(.)VII/(.)65 or variants (e.g. vii). If you like date styles of this sort, reserve them for private correspondence.

ISO date format: an ISO date format exists (ISO 8601): YYYY-MM-DD = 1965-07-23 (always 10 keystrokes) for 23 July 1965. It would be great if we could all agree, and on the following website there are good arguments for using this format: <http://www.saqqara.demon.co.uk/datefmt.htm> ('Campaign to get the Internet world to use the international date format'), the main ones being consistency and avoidance of confusion, which are always worth supporting. However: standardization usually only works if it saves lives, makes life very much easier, becomes law, or is likely to increase income, so I don't think we'll be seeing this format establish itself for a long time to come.

By the way: standard abbreviations for days of the week in English do not exist. Look on the following website: <http://www.ego4u.com/en/cram-up/vocabulary/date->

[/month-day](#), and it tells you that the abbreviations are **Mon, Tue, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sat, Sun**. These are the abbreviations I use. But **Tues, Thur** and **Thurs** are also common. The days are rarely abbreviated down to 2 letters; this looks strange. Whatever, no full stop is needed.

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References:

1. *Chicago Manual of Style - 15th Edition* (2003). University of Chicago Press. Chicago.
2. Fine Points of Dashes Set Heads Spinning. *New York Times*. 7 August 2003: pp 1, 5.

A cute problem

When I was a managing editor of a diabetes journal I often encountered the phrase 'acute insulin response'. In its instructions to authors my journal specified that Oxford English was to be used in articles. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD)* defines 'acute' as

- (of sensation or senses) keen, sharp
- Shrewd, perceptive (an acute critic)
- (of a disease) coming sharply to a crisis, severe, not chronic
- (of a difficulty or controversy) critical, serious

and otherwise as something to do with geometrical angles and sounds.

None of these definitions cover what is intended in the phrase 'acute insulin response'. I was able to trace the phrase back to Professor Daniel Porte who coined it in about 1969 to describe the sudden beta-cell secretion of insulin following a sharp and short stimulation. But an earlier description in 1965 by another researcher used the phrase 'dynamic insulin response' for the same phenomenon.

You might conclude that as Porte was American he looked up 'acute' in *Webster's*. Here he would have found a wider definition than that in the *COD*, e.g. it includes lasting a short time in relation to experiments. If he actually did look up 'acute' he would have found the exact definition to describe his phenomena 'having a sudden onset, sharp rise and short course'. I suppose it would be picky to point out that this definition too only relates to disease. Having established that acute is not appropriate to describe a physiological process but accepting that it may be taking on this new meaning is it ok for a professor to excuse his absence from a meeting with "My 90 year old father has acutely been taken into hospital"? Do we also have to accept the 'acutely dead rats' I recently found in a study report? Perhaps I am being unfair. Maybe this is an early sign of reports taking on a more zany flavour, a leaf out of the leaflet slipped through my letterbox by the charity Cats Protection. The charity asked for donations for their Kitten Crisis Appeal, which they describe as an acute (or A cute) problem.

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Excessive advertising in peer-reviewed journals

In their interesting article, "Excessive and Disproportionate Advertising in Peer-reviewed Journals" Freidman and Richter investigate the ratios of advertisements to editorial content in two general medicine journals and compare these ratios to those in speciality science journals. The results point to a discord between the advertising practices of the two journals, who are important member journals of The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (icmje), and the ethics guidelines produced by that committee. Recognising that journals need to make a profit to survive, the authors conclude that the icmje guidelines should define standards for excessive and disproportionate advertising¹. The authors also repeat a recommendation they made in a previous article on the relation between conflicts of interest and research results, "Scientists, physicians and editors need to facilitate greater discourse concerning the ethical dilemma of an increasingly commercialized scientific community".

¹http://www.ijoh.com/pfds/IJOEH_1201_Friedman.pdf