

Editorial

Precision, Accuracy, and the English Language

Languages are wonderful, and we who communicate in English have a most astounding number of words at our disposal. Origins are as old and further untraceable as Sanscrit, and as new and further undefinable as slang; and of course, there is a treasure trove in between. Our language is also well supplied with rules of usage that make excellent sense, even those few that are burdened with descriptives that may themselves confound. I have always contended that unless one knows the words and understands their usage, ineluctably one will be unable to articulate mentally thoughts and feelings to oneself, much less convey them to others. Precision is the requisite.

That is why I am an editor. In the critical and complex fields covered by *Pharmacotherapy*, without exact language, clarity of meaning is compromised. In his gracious editorial introducing my name to the masthead, Russ Miller said, "She is just as picky as I am"; humorous, but high praise, and it explains my function.

My job as assistant editor is to make sure that facts and findings are presented as clearly as possible while preserving each author's "voice." Some articles require only tightening. Others must undergo significant rewriting and reorganization, shifting the positions of sentences and even sections to ensure that data appear in logical order and thus are quickly available to the greatest number of readers. To this end, I especially keep my eyes peeled for three types of language abuse.

First (not firstly), solecisms are absolutely forbidden. Subject and verb must agree, split infinitives are intolerable, "that" and "which" must be used in their respective restrictive and nonrestrictive contexts.

Second, jargon is anathema. For one thing, it is exclusive rather than inclusive; for another, it generally employs incorrect usage. Fustian falls in this category, too. Many years ago I edited a book on cancer therapy in which a surgeon wrote of his "attack on the breast." If you please, he was not doing battle against an Amazon, he was trying to save lives. The phrase was deleted.

Third, unnecessary repetition is occlusive. The finest study results are meaningless if readers, benumbed by all those extra words, close the journal at the Materials and Methods section. Furthermore, long outlines reiterating textual material (often incorrectly called tables) lengthen an article but they usually do not enhance it.

The mechanics of publishing also must be attended to. These include such tasks as typemarking, sizing figures, and checking reference list format, as well as watching for typographic errors, sentences beginning with abbreviations, use of serial commas, and so on. In addition, decisions must be made about the consistent treatment of certain elements for which two or even more available choices are correct; for example, whether the plural of index is to be spelled indexes or indices. I must pay scrupulous attention to all of these features plus ask authors questions regarding meaning that arise in individual articles. The end results, I hope, are concise facts, offered in the simplest yet most precise language that maintains the personal style of the author or authors.

Finally to prove that I can wear the shoe as well as use it to bludgeon others: after I had edited my first six to eight articles for *Pharmacotherapy*, Russ called to discuss several things. One was the fact that it is incorrect to use the word incidence when what is meant is frequency or prevalence. If I have let that slip by me more than twice since then, I'll be a monkey's unc . . . aunt.

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