

Editor's Craft

Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails

When I began in the editing profession, one of my first tasks was to proofread — match edited manuscript with galleys. As an arrogant lagniappe, I inserted my own editorial changes on the galleys; most notably, I unsplit split infinitives. When she recognized the persistence with which I made this correction, the editor whose work I was marking up became understandably annoyed. To my firm proclamations that I was right, she responded, “But nobody talks that way.” Some chink in my hubris kept me from retorting, “I do.”

Whether or not my conversation is flawless in this regard (it isn't), the fact remains that the written word is not the same as the spoken language. It is my stance that such is the case especially with professional literature, including, of course, the articles that appear in **Pharmacotherapy**. In these works, formality of expression dignifies the material and clarifies it. Both characteristics — dignity and clarity — are necessary if a scientific report is to serve its quintessential purpose; that is, to encourage others in the field to continue expanding their knowledge, reporting their results, and enhancing the care of the ill.

I would be surprised, however, if authors did not feel perplexed sometimes over how I edit their papers. For example, why are not words such as intramuscular, intravenous, and subcutaneous (with their ~ly suffixes) abbreviated? An ice-cold frisson

warns me that such usage is out of the question, too “loose,” as it were. The meaning of these terms must be unmistakable, and who knows what i.m., i.v., and s.c. mean to scientists in different parts of the country and of the world.

In addition, to split a quirky hair, intravenous(ly) is often abbreviated in upper-case letters: IV. That is also the Roman numeral for 4. I remember the statement in a seventh-grade English history book, “Charles I was beheaded.” Reading the Roman numeral for 1 as the first-person singular pronoun caused me no end of consternation, but once the penny dropped I never forgot how that particular monarch met his end. To allow such confusion, even potentially, in an article on drug therapy would be unconscionable.

In other words, the language must be precise. Thus q4h becomes every 4 hours, except in tables, and a P&T Committee is referred to as a Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee regardless of the space it takes to spell out the name.

Where is the line drawn? Basically, it is at short cuts (e.g., i.v., q4h, etc.) and at solecisms (e.g., split infinitives) that are second nature in conversation. The aim to impart knowledge is lofty and laudable, and it deserves the finest, truest expression that words can give it. The language of science may not glide with the grace of Fred Astaire, but in this journal at any rate, it will be dressed for the very best company.

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