



By Edie Schwager

There is no such thing as a simple explanation.

Edie has been in a rehabilitation facility since having a stroke earlier this year. She does not have her valuable resources on hand, but she is thrilled to continue helping members solve their grammar and usage questions through her column, even though it means her answers may be more concise than usual.

DEAR EDIE: I prefer to rewrite “There was a significant difference ($p < .01$)” but that alternative uses the passive voice. Is the passive voice OK in this circumstance?

MELISSA BOGEN
Chester, NY

DEAR MELISSA: Yes, the passive voice is acceptable in the situation you describe. In your example, it does not make a difference who determined the probability. Similarly, the passive voice is perfectly fine in other situations in which it is not necessary to know who performed any type of testing.



DEAR EDIE: How many medical terms refer to a lump? I came up with the following: tumor, mass, neoplasm, growth, wart, hamartoma, cancer, torus, density, cyst, swelling, knot, exophyte. Can't you come up with another?

BILL KOSLOSKY, MD
Ozark, MO

DEAR BILL: The only other term I can think of to add to your list of lumps and masses is “lesion.” All of these terms are not synonymous by a long shot, and of course they are also well differentiated in the diagnosis and treatment.



DEAR EDIE: In the following sentence, is “appropriate-sized” used correctly?

Select a lancet with an appropriate-sized blade.

If I turned the sentence around, I would say, “Select a lancet with a blade of appropriate size.” So perhaps the hyphen is correct in the sample sentence, but is the “d” on the end of “size” correct?

JENNIFER MAYBIN, MA, ELS
Branchburg, NJ

DEAR JENNIFER: Your sentence is correct. Appropriately sized (without the hyphen) would also be correct. The rule in grammar is that when there is a compound adjective, you do not hyphenate if the adverb ends in *-ly*.



DEAR EDIE: Here is a quick (and, I hope, useful) addendum to a recent column [Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 86] regarding the common confusion of homophones like “mucus” and “mucous” as well as “phosphorus” and “phosphorous.”

I'd just like to point out that, although the *-ous* form of both those pairs is always an adjective (as in “mucous membranes” and “phosphorous acid”), the *-us* form, albeit typically a noun, can also function as an adjective in front of another noun (as in “a mucus plug,” meaning a plug of mucus, and “phosphorus depletion,” meaning depletion of phosphorus).

Similarly vexatious *-us* and *-ous* pairs that I stay on the lookout for because the putative noun often acts as an adjective include “calculus” and “calculous” (as in “calculus class” and “calculous cholecystitis”); “erythematous” and “erythematous” (as in “systemic lupus erythematous patients” and “erythematous plaques”); “nodule” and “nodulous” (as in “nodule infarction” and “nodulous corpuscles”); and “viscus” and “viscous” (as in “hollow viscus injuries” and “viscous media”).

Given this confusion between *-us* and *-ous* pairs, a supposed adjective that isn't even a word—“volvulous”—even made it into print, per my PubMed search, which uncovered a “sigmoid volvulous” in a 1979 *Annals of Surgery* title; it should have read, of course, “sigmoid volvulus.” (In fairness, I must point out that all 43 other citations of PubMed titles for that journal, from 1893 on, accurately spelled the noun as “volvulus.”)

As a longtime fan of your copious corpus, I thank you for all of your fun-to-read wisdom.

MARY KNATTERUD
St. Paul, Minn.

DEAR MARY: It is well-known that nouns can be used to modify nouns. This has long been a part of the English language and is accepted and acceptable. So your examples (mucus plug, phosphorous depletion) are correct. AMWA was originally called the American Medical Writer's Association, but with the knowledge that nouns can modify nouns, we dropped the apostrophe in Writers a long time ago.

Your points regarding *-us* and *-ous* pairs are well-taken, but they presuppose an intimate knowledge of anatomy. This reminds me of something that I teach in my workshops—that not all *-itis* words end in *itis* (eg, erythmatosis).



DEAR EDIE: While reviewing some background information for a new project, I came upon the phrase “gastrointestinal well-being.” Is this correct? It seems to me that well-being should refer to the entire body and does not apply to its individual parts. Would “gastrointestinal health” be better?

JANET MANFRE
Ewing, NJ

DEAR JANET: I agree that “well-being” encompasses the entire perception of the person and would not be limited to one body part. Using “gastrointestinal health” would be a better way to express this idea.



DEAR EDIE: This is a very old question but it sprang to mind recently. The original *Strunk & White Manual of Style* suggests that the following phrase be punctuated so: “He gave him an apple, an orange, and a banana.” However, I see in many places that the last comma is omitted, as so: “He gave him an apple, an orange and a banana.” I grew up with the former convention, but it behooves me to vote with the majority in writing tasks, so I am looking for guidance in this regard.

THOMAS LAAGE, MD
Concord, Mass.

DEAR EDIE: I'm a new AMWA member and am still reading your book. My question is about serial commas. I have been told that it is old school to write this: “The patient has a history of breast cancer, diverticulosis, and chronic DVT.” The preferred way to write it is said to be “... history of breast cancer, diverticulosis and chronic DVT.” I disagree completely, because with medical entities, it is extremely important to avoid conflation or confusion—in other words, the punctuation in the second sentence

seems to imply an association between diverticulosis and chronic DVT. With the commas, each disease state has equal emphasis. Which way is correct, and why?

KATHLEEN COMALLI DILLON, BA, RDMS
Petaluma, Calif.

DEAR THOMAS AND KATHLEEN: I quote from my “red book”: The serial comma—a comma after the penultimate item in an enumeration—is optional. Follow the house style of the publication you're writing for.

Although there is much to be said for the serial comma, its use sometimes causes some head-scratching:

The two suspects have been charged with robbery, aggravated and simple assault, recklessly endangering others, a weapons offense, and conspiracy.

Does this mean that “recklessly endangering others” is a weapons offense (in apposition) (four charges) or does this mean that “weapons offense” is still another charge (five charges)? If the latter, this phrase could have been enclosed in parentheses to avoid ambiguity. Another device is to use semicolons to set off each item, with necessary commas with the item.

As another example, consider the following: Please state name, age, sex and housing requirements. That sentence is a good argument for the serial comma.



► *I thank Janet Manfre, a fellow member of the Delaware Valley Chapter, for her invaluable assistance with this column.*

Eddie Schwager, a freelance writer, medical editor, and workshop teacher, lives in Philadelphia. She is the author of *Medical English Usage and Abuse* and of *Better Vocabulary in 30 Minutes a Day*. She welcomes queries and comments by e-mail, and in publishable form. Eddie's e-mail address, not surprisingly, is dearedie@verizon.net. Questions may also be sent to the *AMWA Journal* Editor at amwajournaleditor@editorialrx.com. Answers to Dear Edie questions will be published in the *Journal* but will not be sent in e-mails to correspondents at this time.

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