

# Copy Talk



## Monthly tips on style and quality

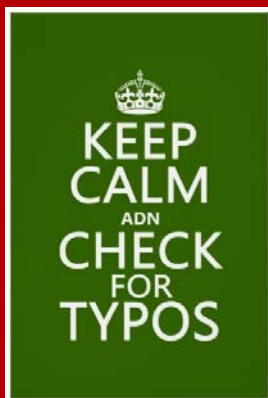
January 2014

### Gaffe of the Month

It's just painful when a typo is on a billboard, bigger than life.



And this is why we...



(Top image from MoJoSail.com;  
bottom image by keepcalmbaX.)

### **DEMONSTRATE VS SHOW**

You may have noticed that medical editors tend to keep a copy of *The AMA Manual of Style* close by; we're a careful bunch and we refer to the *AMA* regularly to ensure that we're remembering a rule correctly and not merely flogging some former colleague's pet peeve. And so turn to *AMA* we did when the matter of *demonstrate* versus *show* arose the other day.

Some editors twitch a bit when *demonstrate* is used where *show* would do nicely. It conjures notions of, well, a magician or other performer putting on a show, lending an air of the rehearsed or expected to an arena where it doesn't belong, the scientific process. But we were temporarily stymied when we couldn't find a discussion of this somewhat fine shading in *AMA*. Eventually reassurance came from Brenda Milot, who recalled the proper source, *The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers* from The Council of Science Editors.

On this topic *CSE* states, "demonstrate should be reserved for a deliberate action intended to illustrate an action or procedure, as in 'The technician demonstrated how to operate the pH meter.'"

So, although constructions such as “the study demonstrated that Drug X had a longer half-life than Drug Y” and “we demonstrated that patients treated with Drug X had fewer adverse events” are quite common, the next time you’re writing up results, consider using clear and simple *show* or *observed* instead.

### **P VALUES AND THE QUESTION OF THE ZERO**

This question comes up frequently: Why, when it’s appropriate to use zeros almost everywhere else, like in doses, do you persist in deleting the zero before the *P* value?

Sometimes it’s easiest to just quote *AMA*:

Place a zero before the decimal point in numbers less than 1, except when expressing the 3 values related to probability: *P*,  $\alpha$ , and  $\beta$ . These values cannot equal 1, except when rounding. Because they appear frequently, eliminating the zero can save substantial space in tables and text. (Although other statistical values also may never equal 1, their use is less frequent, and to simplify usage, the zero before the decimal point is included.)

$P = .16$

$1 - \beta = .80$

Our predetermined  $\alpha$  level was .05.

*But:*  $\kappa = 0.87$

Note, however, that  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  may sometimes be used to indicate other statistics, and in some of these cases their values may be 1 or greater.

Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.78$

standardized  $\beta$  coefficient = 2.34

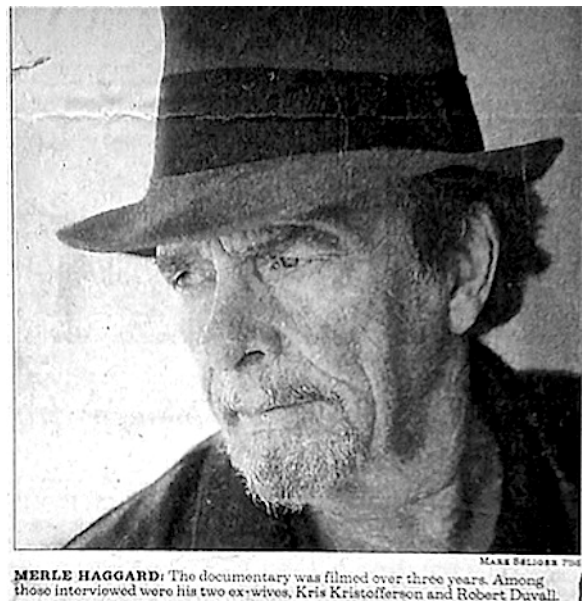
Of course, there are always other interesting little exceptions. In case you wind up working

on a wound-healing treatment used for, say, gunshot wounds, *AMA* helpfully notes that, “By convention, a zero is not used in front of the decimal point of the measure of the bore of a firearm.” So be sure to say it’s a .22-caliber rifle, not a 0.22-caliber rifle!

**And finally...**

### **WHY BOTHER WITH THE SERIAL COMMA?**

The serial comma, sometimes referred to as the Oxford comma, is the comma that appears before the *and* in a list of three or more items. Its use is not always necessary and most newspapers eschew it because an extra comma requires both more ink and more space, but *AMA* recommends using them *all the time* and so do we, because it often prevents misunderstandings and the rest of the time the consistency is nice. Don’t believe us? Look here:



The caption reads “MERLE HAGGARD: The documentary was filmed over three years. Among those interviewed were his two ex-wives, Kris Kristofferson and Robert Duvall.”

**Hope you’re enjoying *Copy Talk*. Let us know: [sue.landry@nucleuscentral.com](mailto:sue.landry@nucleuscentral.com)**