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TOO FANCY FOR YOUR OWN GOOD

We've all probably had the impulse to sound formal or sophisticated, and likely we've tried to accomplish that with fancy-sounding words. But in doing so, we may overlook subtle differences that would make a 10-cent word far more appropriate than a 10-dollar word.

Last month we discussed *utilize*, which should be reserved for things used in ways that weren't originally intended (such as a shoelace for a tourniquet); *use* should be used everywhere else. *Comprise* also sounds fancier than more everyday options that work just as well or better, such as *composed of* or *made up of*:

The healthcare team is composed of a doctor, 2 nurses, and a social worker.

A doctor, 2 nurses, and a social worker *make up* the core of the healthcare team.

But if you really want to use *comprise*, know that (1) using *comprised of* is frowned on by many grammarians (despite being used since the late 1800s) and (2) the whole *comprises* the parts, not vice versa. So, you can say:

The healthcare team *comprises* a doctor, 2 nurses, and a social worker.

But not:

The healthcare team is *comprised of* a doctor, 2 nurses, and a social worker.

A doctor, 2 nurses, and a social worker *comprise* the healthcare team.

Similarly, as and since may just sound like highbrow versions of because, but because is preferable because it's more direct and doesn't have the potentially confusing secondary temporal meanings of as (while) and since (from the time of and from the time).

TO HYPHEN OR TO TO

In running text in a manuscript, do not use hyphens to express ranges. For example:

AEs were reported in 5% to 10% of patients.

The exceptions to this rule are (1) ranges expressing fiscal years, academic years, or life and study spans and (2) ranges in parentheses:

Results were from the 2002-2004 study.

The patients' median age was 56 years (range, 31-92 years).

MORE ON DASTARDLY DASHES

One of the questions we field most often is "What's the difference between the dashes?"

The *hyphen* is the shortest and most commonly used dash. Hyphens are used as connectors between words and to express certain ranges (eg, long-term therapy; anti-inflammatory; false-positive; two-thirds; 5- to 10-mg dose; [range, 28-87 years]; pages 245-252).

The *en dash* is the next longest dash, so named because it is the width of the letter n. It is used when one of the elements contains ≥ 2 words or is hyphenated (eg, non–taxane-based regimen; G protein–coupled receptor; Philadelphia

chromosome—positive chronic myeloid leukemia).

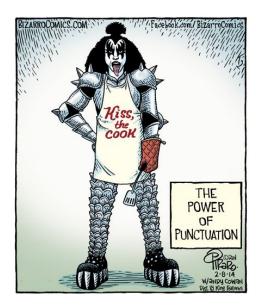
The *em dash* is the longest dash, also named for its width (of the letter *m*). It is used to indicate an interruption in thought (eg, All of these factors—age, severity of symptoms, and choice of anesthetic agent—determined the patient's reaction). Note: There should be no space on either side of an em dash (per the *AMA Manual of Style* and convention), despite *The New York Times* having decided to use spaces.

AS A REMINDER

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