

# Copy Talk



## Monthly tips on style and quality

July 2017

### Gaffe of the Month



Best to restrict that to a church setting...

#### 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 high-brow 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  $\geq 2$  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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### And finally...

### JUST FOR LAUGHS



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