By Edie Schwager

In medical writing, there is no danger in being too precise—only in being imprecise.

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DEAR EDIE: My client made a correction to an Executive Summary that I had written. I wrote: “For this section of the talk, Dr Smith stepped away from the podium and stood close to the participants.” My client changed “podium” to “lectern.” I thought she was wrong, but when I looked it up, I found that I was wrong. It was indeed a lectern that the speaker stepped away from!

Apparently you stand on a podium but behind a lectern. And upon further investigation, I find that a pulpit contains both the preacher and a lectern. And then there is also a dais. I think many of us are using these terms incorrectly. Are we? And how much does it matter?

CHERYL LATHROP
Walpole, Mass.

DEAR CHERYL: It’s possible that both you and your client were right, but only if the speaker had stepped away from the lectern and down off the podium or dais (also a platform). Just stepping away from the lectern doesn’t carry the same meaning. Leaving the podium (not just the lectern) would indeed bring the speaker closer to the participants.

For people who know Latin, there is no possibility of confusion. And preserving the difference does matter, especially to the technicians and electricians who set up the podium and the lectern. Besides, one could conceivably knock over a lectern, but I doubt that an average person (if such there be) could do that to a podium. Likewise, no one but an acrobat would jump off a lectern.

The lectern doesn’t have to be on the podium at all. It could be below the podium. (I never use either lectern or podium in my workshops, mostly because I like to walk among my students and be closer to them, but also because I fear becoming entangled in the electric cables.)

This is the Latin connection: “Lectern” comes from lectus, the past participle of legere, to read; a lector (reader) is one who presides at a lectern, a reading desk with a lamp. “Podium” (plural, podiums or podia), spelled exactly the same in English and Latin, is a raised platform on which you place your feet. The root, pes (plural, pedes; combining form, pod-), from both Latin and Greek, is the word for foot. Thus we have bipedal, podiatry, pedestrian, pedestal, pedicure and pedigree. By the way, if you’re wondering how “pedigree” got into this group, here’s the answer: It’s from the Middle English pedegru, from the Middle French pie de grue, “crane’s foot; from the shape made by the lines of a genealogical chart” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary).

These elements are not to be confused, however, in folk (fake) etymology with other words having different meanings but with similar element: pedagogue, pediatrics (ped, child; iatrics, physician or medicine, from Greek iatrikos), which have to do with the teaching of children and the study of childhood diseases.

Latin may be a dead language because no one now speaks it (except the pope and other Vatican inhabitants), but where would English be without it?

DEAR EDIE: Your column about the pronunciation of “the” struck a chord with me. I particularly notice the mispronunciation among young people. It sounds defiant to me. I was taught that the correct way to pronounce it is as “thee” when there’s a vowel sound beginning the next word, a noun. For some reason, pronunciation things tend to get me even more worked up than grammatical mistakes!

Now, about another peeve. Isn’t this a weird use of the preposition “to”? This is from The New York Times: “The Ritz-Carlton has arrived to Paradise Valley, Arizona.”

BARBARA C. GOOD, PhD
Director, Scientific Publications
National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project
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DEAR BARBARA THE GOOD: No doubt, you will have read my previous correspondence with David Wood [AMWA J. 2008;23(2):88] about the unlovely pronunciation of “the” before a word beginning with a vowel sound.

I’m with you. To me, “to” in this advertisement, if that’s what it is, is an affectation, although it may be grammatically correct. Are “we” trying to be so, so Continental? But you have to remember that such ads are, after all, rococo pitches for (to?) upper class, moneyed people. The language isn’t weird, it’s just SOP for ad agencies, and it’s so, so ordinary to say that this Eden has arrived in Paradise Valley, Arizona. The copywriter could have said that this Eden has come to Paradise. Perhaps the Ritz-Carlton corporation should employ another advertising agency, whose writers are not coerced into being pandering or supercilious. Are there such? (Sigh)

This usage reminds me of lines in death notices, in which he was “brother to” so and so. One can be a good brother to a so and so, but what’s wrong with being just a brother of? I must confess that I am pettily annoyed at (by?) that usage especially translators] for conveying niceties of relations-

Dearest Barbara, am I just one of those who love to read the funeral notices and obituaries every day. Out of morbid curiosity, grateful that my name isn’t in them? Definitely not. In my first career, I was a legal secretary [as opposed to an illegal one!], and dutifully read all legal intelligence notices for any information relevant to our office. I can’t shake the habit, even after all these years. In addition, it has saved me from many a local faux pas. “And how is your husband?” “Oh, I thought you knew! He died last month.” Big oops.

I am not plagiarizing when I declare that there is more controversy over (about?) the use of prepositions than over any other part of speech in English. “[T]he preposition is the most idiom ridden part of speech in English grammar. It is also the part of speech that places probably the greatest demands upon speakers and writers [E.S. note: especially translators] for conveying niceties of relationships” (Harper’s English Grammar, by John B. Opdycke).

DEAR KELLY: There’s no question that mistakes in lists of references should not be perpetuated. I’d spell her name correctly. Do not use “[sic].” There are classic cases of such egregious mistakes; one of them involves a mistranslation, an unsophisticated rendering of a name in a German article. The “von” in the byline was thought by the translator to be part of the author’s name, but in that context that German word simply meant “by.” Unfortunately, the error appeared for many years in English-language medical literature, until corrected by a more experienced translator. There were many red faces.

Not so incidentally, there is no need to recite the names of all 12 authors. The AMA Manual of Style (known affectionately by me as AMAMS) says this on page 44 of the 10th edition:

In listed references, the names of all authors should be given unless there are more than 6, in which case the names of the first 3 authors are used, followed by “et al.” Note: The NLM [National Library of Medicine] guidelines do not limit the number of authors listed but, for space considerations, we have elected to depart from the NLM guidelines on this point.
Decades ago I read from an impeccable source that 75% of reference lists contain errors of one kind or another. After that, I insisted on getting actual reprints of the articles, which presumably are error-free since they emanate from the authors themselves. It paid off. Never mind what Medline or any other source does. You have the horse’s mouth. Medline has its own rules and style, most likely for history and full disclosure reasons. Go with it. I bet that if you examined the reprints of the other references in the list you’d find other errors. I speak from the experience of having edited more than a thousand articles.

You are not being picky, just careful, as you should be. Look at my quotation under the byline in the AMWA Journal: “In medical writing, there is no danger in being too precise—only in being imprecise.”

DEAR EDIE: First, on the subject of thin spaces [AMWA J. 2008;1:33], there’s no need to bother with the octothorp. We use Control-Shift-spacebar in Word for a space that is thin and nonbreaking, exactly what we need for mathematical signs and units.

Now, my questions. Is there a general name for the usage in which people attach an adjective to the wrong noun, for example, “This is a clausrophobic room”? And what do you say about “suspicious node,” a common phrase in text about cancer surgery? I’ve been changing it to “suspect node.” Am I overriding a standard usage?

RHANA PIKE
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DEAR RHANA: I wish I could say that I know such a word, but I don’t. Maybe an expert in rhetoric has the answer. I use AMAMS extensively for many reasons, although I don’t agree with many aspects of their style (“I don’t believe in slavish adherence to anything, much less style manuals”). My main reason for using it is that every knowledgeable medical editor or writer also has the current edition. Here’s what the AMA Manual of Style (10th ed., p. 402) has to say:

**suggestive, suspicious:** To be suggestive of is to give a suggestion or to evoke. To be suspicious is to tend to arouse suspicion. Thus, the 2 phrases are not synonymous, and care should be taken to avoid confusing them. A finding may be abnormal (ie, suspicious) but may not indicate a specific diagnosis (ie, suggestive). . . Incorrect: The chest film was suspicious for tuberculosis. Correct: The chest film was suggestive of tuberculosis. Also correct: The chest film showed abnormalities suggestive of tuberculosis. Also correct: The chest film showed a suspicious lesion, but its nature was unclear.

It’s OK to write a “suspicious node.” That meaning and style are ingrained in the medical literature.

Your query reminds me of a column I wrote years ago. A writer had questioned the use of “child psychiatrist,” believing it to be an oxymoron, an occasion for snide laughter. My reply was to emphasize that English is extremely idiomatic, and I quoted from *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* (1957, p. 15), by Bergen Evans and Cornelia Evans (brother and sister):

Nouns that have been formed from adjectives, such as criminal and juvenile, and adjectives that are being used as nouns . . . may also be used in this way without losing their noun meanings, as in criminal law, a juvenile court, a sick room, an insane asylum, condemned cells. This is a standard English construction. Occasionally someone notices that the first element in one of these compounds can be read as an adjective. This is all very well as a source of innocent merriment. But anyone who concludes that the compound is a grammatical mistake and solemnly goes about condemning it and those who use it, is being ridiculous. These words are part of the fabric of the language and anyone who hopes to get rid of them will have to remake the language.

I loved the Evanses’ sly interpolation of a phrase from Poe and Rod Serling. Maybe it would make a good book title for a mystery writer?

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To avoid back-and-forth, time-consuming messages, please include permission to publish (or instruction not to publish) with the questions or comments. For verification, correspondents must provide all addresses, especially the city and state, of the correspondent or the affiliate. The name of the affiliate and other data may be published unless Edie is otherwise directed (“Not for publication”). This column is essentially an open forum, a goldfish bowl in a glass house. Edie’s e-mail address, not surprisingly, is dearedie@verizon.net.