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## EASE-Forum Digest: March to June 2008

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*You can join the forum by sending the one-line message "subscribe ease-forum" (without the quotation marks) to majordomo@helsinki.fi. Be sure to send commands in plain text format because only plain text is accepted by the forum software – HTML-formatted messages are not recognised. More information can be found on the EASE web site (www.ease.org.uk). When you first subscribe, you will be able to receive messages, but you won't be able to post messages until your address has been added manually to the file. This prevents spam being sent by outsiders, so please be patient.*

The exchanges on the forum between March and June have covered an interesting range of topics and should give editors some food for thought.

### Three cheers for the serial comma

Ed Hull asked which of the following sentences 'flowed' better:

A: The book "How to report statistics in medicine" is intended for editors, peer reviewers, and readers of science, and it goes a long way toward improving the credibility of statistically-based scientific reporting.

B: The book "How to report statistics in medicine" is intended for editors, peer reviewers and readers of science, and it goes a long way toward improving the credibility of statistically-based scientific reporting.

The two sentences only differ in that sentence A has a comma after "reviewers" and sentence B does not.

Stuart Handysides and Rhana Pike suggested other constructions but they were not very different from Ed's sentences and the forum discussion centred on the "Oxford" serial comma; the comma that, if you follow the rule, always appears before the "and" at the end of a list. Otherwise the comma would only be used to avoid ambiguity where there are other "ands" earlier in the list.

This is not the best sentence for a discussion about the serial comma because the second "and" after the list would tend to push most opinion (as was the case on the forum) towards using a comma after "reviewers"—ie, inserting the serial comma for clarity here. Not surprisingly, therefore, no one argued against its use for this sentence.

But we did hear from a few Oxford serial comma crusaders. Norman Grossblatt, supported by David Mason, pointed out that it is easy to forget that writers and editors are working to benefit readers and certainly not to be "grammatically correct". Therefore he supported always using the Oxford serial comma on the basis that it avoids those smallest of moments in the reader's mind when careful thinking has not kicked in yet, and instantaneous perception governs. It also avoids the writer having to think—whether to use it or not—of course.

The Oxford serial comma is often thought to be American style. Mary Ellen Kerans was quick to point out that this is a misconception, stating that most American writers use it no more than British writers. On the other hand Carol Norris was raised in the US on the "American list-comma". Maybe it depends on the part of the US you are brought up in.

### Non-systematic reviews: terminology and method

Non-systematic literature reviews, there's no doubt about it, have a bad name. They have been defined as reviews that do not use systematic procedures to search for, select, and appraise studies, which are therefore not replicable. Furthermore, often they do not state how literature was retrieved and selected for inclusion in the review. Their conclusions are generally considered more subjective and less valid than those of systematic reviews even though they do not necessarily search less widely than systematic reviews.<sup>1</sup>

I passed a query on to the forum from a colleague who had noticed that the term "non-systematic review" often came up in abstracts. She did not like the term because it sounded as if the author selected articles from a pile on his or her desk or chose the ones in PubMed that supported the author's view. She felt the author of an article that aspires to have some scientific air should be able to state why the literature reviewed in the article was chosen.

Jim Hartley thought of a non-systematic review as one in which no particular method for doing the review was used, whereas systematic reviews involve assembling all papers possible on the topic and then sifting those that do not follow a certain methodology, eg those that did not use random allocation of patients to treatments. He preferred the term "narrative" review to "non-systematic review" to avoid use of a pejorative tone. Jim discusses what authors are trying to do in an introduction/literature review and distinguishes between different kinds of review in his new book.<sup>2</sup>

Marge Berer did not like the term "non-systematic review" either, as there may well have been a system or methodology involved, although the review might not have been "exhaustive", which was the description she preferred. She gave an example of one review she had done that brought up 20 pages of citations on PubMed, many of which sounded irrelevant, were old or short, had no abstract, or were in publications to which she could not obtain access. She went through the main journals that were likely to cover the subject. Most of what she read pointed in the same direction, so felt she had enough basis for drawing her conclusions. She agreed that an author should be expected to describe her or his methods in choosing to review some—but not all—articles.

For more reading on non-systematic reviews see these websites

<http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/318/7176/135>

<http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/287/21/2853>

### **Publisher's vocabulary: typesetter and "proof collation"**

Bearing in mind that all manuscripts are now digital and publishers no longer need to type, is the word "typesetter" still useful or has it been engulfed by "pagemaker"? Mary Ellen Kerans posed this question to the forum and received answers supporting the continuing use of "typesetter". Publishers, including Elsevier, still have employees/contractors who are called "typesetters". Although their task is primarily to "set" the page, they do still need to type to make changes in the electronic version of hand copyedited manuscripts that are still sometimes sent to them.

Mary Ellen also sought help from the forum on another word. She explained that the combined results of several people marking proofs at once (author, editor, copyeditor) was called "fusión" in Spanish. What would this be called in English? The answer "proof collation" was provided by Lionel Browne and Kersti Wagstaff.

### **Science writing is abysmal**

In a posting from Ed Hull he said, "We are in this strange situation where everyone has to write and publish, but no one has time to read." The context in which Ed wrote these words was his quest to find out how to teach researchers, whether native or non-native English writers, to write for the "real world". He argued that many problems with science writing stemmed from high school and university education, where style rules are learnt that apply to fiction: never use the same word twice in a sentence, use synonyms to bring your work to life, paint pictures with your words. Ed argued that busy real-world readers have to immediately see that an article offers them something they can use in their own work. Interestingly, he used a metaphor himself to argue his point and compared journal readers to gold diggers searching for easy-to-grab "nuggets" that give them something of value. He called for all universities to offer courses in academic writing for science students. Journals could also help by giving tips in their instructions to authors that go beyond cursory advice to use the active voice.

I agree with Ed that science writing is abysmal. You wonder how confused the author's mind itself must be to write in such convoluted heavy sentences, or what hope there is for science if all writers like sheep follow the norm rather than showing ingenuity in their writing style. Science writing often lacks the obvious prerequisites of clarity: simplicity, consistent word use, and parallel sentence structure. In the forum I pointed out that even though "throw-away" journals have lower methodological and reporting quality than peer-reviewed journals they are more popular with doctors because they are more readable.<sup>3</sup> Where I differ from Ed is that I believe science

writing should take more—not less—from non-academic writing. Science can be written with colour and joy by using metaphor and glimpses into the human emotions of the author. This is why I suggested that Richard Dawkins' *Oxford Book of Modern Science Writing* should be prerequisite reading for authors who are submitting papers to peer-reviewed journals. I will be reviewing this book for *ESE*.

Disappointingly, Ed's posting did not elicit the debate it deserved on a forum for governors of the scientific literature. I commented that if it were not for the need for authors to publish to promote their careers, peer-reviewed journals would probably die out because it is the authors' needs rather than those of the readers that keeps them going. This prompted Margaret Cooter to ask whether, if authors need to publish, are they willing to "put their money where their mouth is" and pay to do so? This was met with a retort by Andrew Davis that the real reason for publishing is to disseminate information and ideas. He added that this is a social benefit and there needs, in fact, to be an element of direct social support for such outlets.

Many will agree that this is a laudable stance but might question whether there is a chance of it regaining ground against the use of journals as a vehicle for authors to get points for their CVs and against the pharmaceutical industry's use of medical journals to market their products. Read Moira Johnson-Vekony's report<sup>4</sup> on a seminar given by Elsevier that focused on how publishers can work in cahoots with pharmaceutical companies to ensure the pharmas get the best out of medical journals and returns on their planning publication investment.

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