



GRAMMAR MISTAKES TO AVOID IN HEALTHCARE COMMUNICATIONS



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Even the most experienced writers need a second pair of eyes to review their work before sending it out into the world. A keen editorial eye will ensure that all written communications are copy-edited and proofread to catch mistakes before they undermine the impact of high-quality scientific materials. With this in mind, we thought it would be helpful to share some examples of errors that can creep in. Some may seem obvious, but you'd be surprised at how many of these fall off the radars of even the most diligent writers.

Homophones

Homophones are words that have the same pronunciation but different meanings, origins or spelling – take, for example, there/they're/their. 'There' is an adverb used to indicate a place or position (e.g. the article is there on the website), to attract attention (e.g. ahoy there!) or to indicate the fact or existence of something (e.g. there is a healthcare communications agency that can help

with this). 'They're' is a contraction of 'they are' (e.g. they're very experienced), while 'their' is a possessive determiner (e.g. their article is very informative).

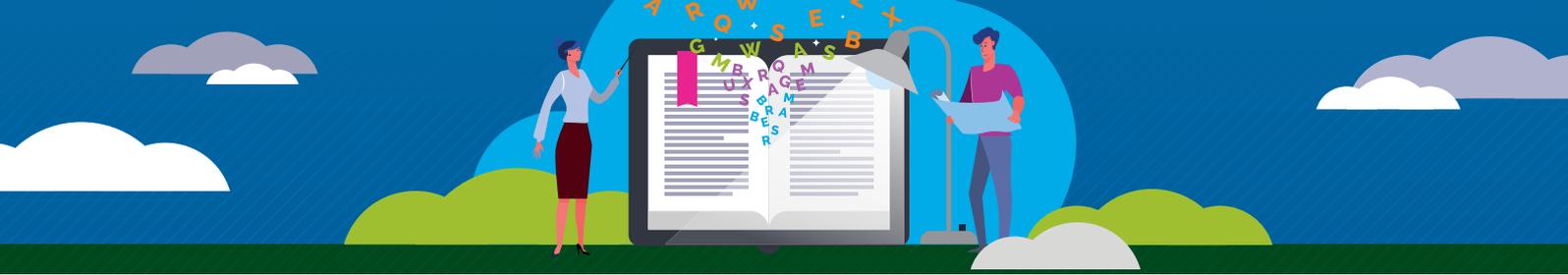
Professional writers understand the differences and use the words correctly in their writing. However, being complacent can lead to blind spots, and it's important to check that your intended meaning has been transferred into the text. The same applies to 'your' and 'you're'; even when you know the rules, it's easy for the wrong words to slip into your writing.

Danglers

Beware of danglers! A dangler (also known as a dangling participle or dangling modifier, to use its proper title) is a participle intended to modify a noun that is ambiguous or not present in the text. If that sounds a bit intimidating, then let's look at it a different way. Consider the following sentence:

- Writing this article, explaining the rules of grammar is quite complex.

'Writing this article' is the dangling participle.



So, where is the noun that the participle modifies? It's not modifying 'rules of grammar' – that wouldn't make sense! The reason this sentence doesn't work is because the noun that it's modifying isn't actually in the sentence. The statement would be correctly expressed as follows:

- Writing this article, I realised that explaining the rules of grammar is quite complex.

This kind of error can easily be introduced when you separate a participle and a noun with a comma. It's always worth double-checking that you're not making an error that could potentially lessen the credibility of your work.

Subject-verb agreement

Matching subjects and verbs, so that they agree, is easy in principle. For example, it's easy to spot that the first of the following sentences is correct, and the second is incorrect:

- The patient was on his way to the hospital.
- The patient were on his way to the hospital.

Since 'patient' is a singular noun, it needs to be followed by 'was', a singular verb. So far, so good. However, things get complicated when the simple subject ('the patient') is replaced with a compound subject ('the patient and his wife'):

- The patient and his wife were on the way to the hospital.

In this instance, 'the patient and his wife' take a plural verb. However, if we were to keep the patient as the singular subject and add another element with a phrase such as 'accompanied by', then the verb would still be singular. For instance:

- The patient, accompanied by his wife, was on his way to the hospital.

This is a very simple example. However, as

sentences increase in complexity – particularly in the field of healthcare communications, where clarity is crucial – it's important to keep track of whether subjects and verbs agree to ensure the quality and accuracy of our messages.

While we're on this topic, it's a good time to mention the word 'data'. Data is a Latin word, and despite sounding like a singular noun, it's actually the plural of 'datum'. Used in non-scientific text, you may see 'data' tolerated as a singular noun (e.g. social media data is a great tool for marketing small businesses); however, used in scientific literature such as healthcare communications, where readers are likely to have backgrounds in specialised, scientific fields, you'll be expected to use the grammatically correct plural verb (i.e. these data are statistically significant).

Less/fewer

Another error that grinds the gears of grammar sticklers everywhere is when the words 'less' and 'fewer' are used incorrectly. 'Fewer' should be used with countable nouns, and 'less' should be used with uncountable nouns. With that in mind, which of the following is correct?

- Fewer than fifty patients have been treated for the disease.
- Less than fifty patients have been treated for the disease.

If you thought it was the first example, you're right! This is because people are individuals that can be counted; they are not amounts in the same way that percentages are, for example.

Another way to think of it is that 'fewer' should be used when referring to people or things in the plural (e.g. hospitals, books, cats, doctors), while 'less' should be used for things that don't have plurals (e.g. money, time, music). For example:

- Fewer visitors are now allowed on the ward.
- Less time was spent in the hospital.



Some of the rules discussed in this article are subtle. The good news is that it only takes occasional refreshers to become more attuned to spotting these common grammatical errors when copy-editing and proofreading. We hope that these insights have been helpful and that you're now ready to start applying these learnings to your own impactful healthcare communications – and perhaps even those of others!

Glossary

More information regarding these terms can be found at www.lexico.com.

Adjective: a word that describes a noun or pronoun.

Adverb: a word that modifies a verb, adjective or another adverb.

Compound subject: two or more simple subjects that share a verb or verb phrase.

Contraction: a shortened form of more than one word that omits certain letters or sounds.

Countable noun: a word that refers to something that can be counted; it can be singular or plural and preceded by 'a' or 'an'.

Dangling participle or dangling modifier:

a participle intended to modify a noun that is ambiguous or not present in the text.

Homophone: a word that has the same pronunciation but a different meaning and/or spelling to another.

Noun: a word that refers to a person, place or thing.

Participle: a word formed from a verb and used as an adjective, usually ending in -d, -ed, -t, -en, -n or -ing.

Plural: a word or form denoting more than one.

Possessive determiner: a word used before a noun to express possession or belonging.

Pronoun: a word that can be substituted for other nouns.

Subject: the person, place, thing or idea that is doing or being something within a sentence.

Uncountable noun: a word that refers to something that can't be counted; it can't be plural or preceded by 'a' or 'an'.

Verb: a word used to describe an action, state or occurrence.

Alpharmaxim Healthcare Communications has extensive experience in helping healthcare companies across the world communicate with physicians and patients about a number of subject areas, including rare diseases, neurodegenerative diseases and vaccines.



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