Author's Toolkit

Writing Better Technical Papers

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It has been said that the American and the British are “two peoples separated by a common language” (this is variously attributed to George Bernard Shaw, Winston Churchill, and Oscar Wilde). In this issue we take up the matter of “American English” and “British English.”

Red Coats, Blue Coats

Over the years, many of my clients and writing students have asked me about the differences between British and American styles of English. My short answer is “It’s *not* a big deal,” but this is usually not satisfactory to the person asking me.

The issue is not so simple. *Within* each English-speaking country there are major variations in dialect and there are big differences everywhere between *spoken* and *written* English. So let’s restrict ourselves to technical writing for publication

A somewhat significant difference is the relative pronoun used for a thing in a ‘restrictive’ clause. OK, let me simplify:

Br/AmE: The interface, which was designed for the elderly, features a simpler layout and...

BrE: The interface which was designed for the elderly features a simpler layout and...

AmE: The interface that was designed for the elderly features a simpler layout and...

The first example is *non-restrictive*, where the relative clause (“, which was...”) simply *gives added information* about the interface; the second and third examples are *restrictive*, where the relative clause (“which/that was...”) *identifies* the particular interface under discussion.

However, even this relatively clear difference is not black and white (it’s gray, or grey): Americans often speak with “restrictive which” and some British writers use “restrictive that.”

This brings us to the matter of punctuation

with quotation marks. US publishers place commas and periods within quotation marks while UK publishers place them outside quotation marks, and there’s a tendency for British to use single (‘) rather than double (“):

BrE: ... writers use ‘restrictive that’.

AmE: ... writers use “restrictive that.”

Another difference that sometimes arises is the verb agreement of collective nouns representing groups of people:

BrE: The committee are considering a new...

AmE: The committee is considering a new...

Some spelling differences also come up:

BrE: labour, centre, analyse, defence...

AmE: labor, center, analyze, defense...

However, I return to my original point: It ain’t a big deal. A skilled, considerate editor will guide you to the preferences of his/her publication. You, dear reader, have much more important matters to consider: writing sentences that are short, clear, direct, correct, and interesting, regardless of ‘national style.’

Intros Mirroring Abstracts

Authors frequently write exactly the same text for the abstract (“Summary”) as for the introduction. This is not absolutely wrong, since typically the same key information is expressed early and the abstract is published separately from the rest of the paper, particularly online.

But to make a stronger, well-balanced paper, try to even slightly vary the writing. An abstract will use a more compact and direct style; the intro will flow at a more relaxed pace.

A little effort here provides great impact!

English Usage Questions? read@kurdyla.com

Mini Quiz: What’s Wrong?

- 1) This problem concerns with the new...
 - 2) This problem involves in the new...
 - 3) Mr. Tate is involved in our project to...
- (Answers: 1) delete “with”; 2) delete “in”; 3) OK)