

Leaking Breeches: How to Avoid – Uh, Avert – Them

The writer, a former high official in the health bureaucracy, was describing his role with respect to a certain agency: “My involvement with this office”, he wrote, “was limited . . . to . . . such issues as . . . breeches of confidentiality and inexplicable leaks of confidential material . . .”

The errors of word choice we see in manuscripts are usually less, shall we say, thought-provoking than that. But the confusion often arises when 2 words sound the same, as here, or merely similar. There are dozens of such confusing word pairs; a few crop up in manuscripts with some regularity.

“Our results demonstrate that the drug has the potential to avoid unwanted and unplanned pregnancy.”

To avoid is to steer clear of or shun. You can avoid potholes, bores (if you’re lucky), and responsibility. But a drug can’t be said to avoid pregnancy. When the desired meaning is to prevent—to keep something, usually unpleasant or dangerous, from happening—the word is avert.

“The long-term effectiveness of hepatitis B vaccine mitigates against routine monitoring of anti-HBs titers.”

Mitigate and militate, so similar in look and sound, are frequently confused. To mitigate is to lessen the harsh effect of something or make it less severe. To militate

(from the Latin *militare*, “to serve as a soldier”) means to have force or influence and is almost always used with against. “By mitigating the dangers of surgery, this approach militates against a conservative strategy of watchful waiting.”

“Each chapter of this textbook is a masterful review of its subject.”

The use of masterful for masterly is a malapropism so common as to be almost the rule rather than the exception. “Masterful” means overbearing, arrogant, or domineering. Picture Clark Gable as Rhett Butler, carrying a protesting Scarlett O’Hara upstairs to the bedroom in the movie *Gone with the Wind*. Masterly, by contrast, means “done in the manner of a master, or artist, indicating thorough knowledge or superior skill”. Authors sophisticated enough to know the difference and careful enough to preserve it might be said to have a masterly command of the language.

“Once the parameters of the project have been defined, work can begin.”

Parameter is a mathematical term with a particular meaning, unsuspected by 90% of those who use it. (A parameter, I’m told, can be an arbitrary constant or an independent variable, but don’t ask me anything more about it.) Because of its delightfully technical sound, the word has been widely

appropriated to mean boundary, limit, or framework—in short, to mean perimeter. Admittedly, authors of scientific papers are more apt to use the word correctly, in a statistical context, than the public at large. Still, it’s a word that bears watching.

“Patients should be given written instead of verbal explanations of their treatment options.”

Preserving the distinction between verbal and oral may be the most hopeless of Lost Causes. Verbal, from the Latin *verbum*, “word”, means having to do with words, written OR spoken. It isn’t very helpful to speak of verbal explanations (or agreements or messages), since these are generally assumed to be in words, not semaphore or smoke signals. The word in the example above should, of course, have been oral, from the Latin *for* mouth.

The Word Watcher welcomes your comments and suggestions. Now retired from the *New England Journal of Medicine*, she can be reached by mail: Lorraine Loviglio, The Word Watcher, 1347 Sudbury Road, Concord, MA 01742; or e-mail: loviglio@ma.ultranet.com.