

Tilting Against Windy Suffixes

In her farewell Word Watcher column,¹ Lorraine Loviglio laments that she has “run out of windmills to tilt at and nits to pick” since her retirement from her day job 2 years ago. That delightfully disparate pair of metaphors (conjuring up both the lofty aims of Don Quixote and the more quotidian habits of his very likely louse-infested sidekick Sancho Panza) is painfully apt for all of us still-in-the-real-world editors, daily mangled by towering windmills, continually fraught with tenacious nits. I truly wish Loviglio well as she bids adios to her regular column and rides off on whatever Rosinante she fancies . . . in pursuit of all manner of dreams, impossible and possible, far beyond the editor’s desk.

Still tethered to that not-always-romantic desk, I am not normally the Editor of the Sorrowful Countenance. However, I just edited several versions of an article written by colleagues that appeared in a recent issue of a major medical journal and am baffled by its staff’s unchivalrous behavior. Our perfectly concise, idiomatic *transplant(s)* emerged from their editorial parapet as the embarrassingly puffed-up *transplantation(s)*. Ditto with our *pretransplant*, which in their hands morphed into the mouthful *pretransplantation*, and our *posttransplant*, which they diced into the awkward three-word phrase *after the transplantation*.

Here are some before-and-after examples (before, meaning as submitted in our manuscript; after, meaning as published):

In the examples in the table (and many others like them), the extra two syllables add nothing but wordiness. After 13 years as a manuscript editor in one of the world’s pioneering transplant centers, I know that the shorter and sweeter *transplants*, *pretransplant*, and *posttransplant* have been used, long and often, in umpteen reputable publications, in this specialty and beyond.

On the journal’s proofs, I *did* flag all those untoward changes. But at that late stage, it wasn’t worth fighting too gallantly to undo them all, given their pervasiveness, a tight turnaround deadline that precluded a second proof, and an army of more substantive errors and updates that cried for attention. One minor victory: I *was* able to reclaim *transplant coordinators* (since that is their official title) from *transplantation coordinators*.

Although the plural transplantations grates on me as a nonword, in the same league as *irregardless*, I do recognize that the singular noun *transplantation*—in the sense of the overall process or subfield, as opposed to an individual operation—has its rightful place in formal prose. Our article opens with “The transplantation of organs from living donors has always involved a balancing . . .”. Here, *transplantation* works fine.

Similarly, the very next sentence begins “Early in the history of transplantation”, which in fact sounds more elegant and perhaps even more logical than “Early in

BEFORE	AFTER
many transplant centers	many transplantation centers
more than 2500 such transplants	more than 2500 such transplantations
the transplant could be cancelled	the transplantation could be cancelled
the transplant itself	the transplantation itself
to undergo the transplant	to undergo the transplantation
our transplant program	our transplantation program
the pretransplant and admission charts	the pretransplantation and admission charts
third or fourth transplants	third or fourth transplantations
proceed with the transplant	proceed with the transplantation

the history of transplants”.

The remainder of that same second sentence reveals that the journal wasn't consistent in its zeal to convert *transplants* into *transplantations*. The full sentence reads “Early in the history of transplantation, the expectation was that the outcomes for recipients of transplants from living unrelated donors and for recipients of cadaveric transplants would be similar and that the risks to unrelated living donors would therefore not be justified.” Perhaps the combination of *transplantation* and *expectation* so close to each other gave the journal staff pause, mercifully inducing them to let the pleasant little *transplants* slide through safely, not once but twice. (Why they had to add the *-ic* tag to our *cadaver transplants*—the shorter and nowadays far more common phrase—is another column.)

The final paragraph also furnishes evidence of the journal's inconsistency: “Liver and lung transplantations are lifesaving; for patients with end-stage liver or lung failure, there is no alternative to a transplant.” Our manuscript originally read “Liver and lung transplants”, but at least we had the last word at the end of that sentence: “a transplant” rather than “a transplantation”.

In between those opening and ending paragraphs are numerous instances where *transplant(s)* as a noun managed to sneak by—as well as numerous instances where it was capriciously transformed into *transplantation(s)*.

Not to take all this *-ation* addition personally; it wasn't just the article I edited that the journal elongated so gratuitously. A neighboring article from another institution includes this figure legend: “The Number of Patients on Waiting Lists for Transplants and the Number of Transplantations Performed in the United States in 1998.” Why not simply *Transplants* in both places?

I am not quixotically alone in my campaign against the superfluous use of suffixes like *-ation*. In fact, I have noble company in the form of the sixth edition of CSE's own style manual: “The frequent use of nouns formed from verbs and ending in ‘ion’ produces unnecessarily long sentences

and dull, static prose.”² True, the manual's immediate examples are *production* and *interpretation*, rather than *transplantation*. And its focus is on liberating a more vigorous verb trapped within an abstract noun, rather than on liberating a more vigorous noun or adjective trapped within a bigger one. But the point is the same: Avoid long-winded clumsiness when a concise alternative is right there, begging to escape.

Further moral support hails from the ninth edition of the American Medical Association style manual. Under its usage entry for *transplant*, *transplantation*, it lists among seven “correct” examples “The patient received a transplant” and “A randomized trial in recipients of lung transplants yielded similar results”.³ Its other examples do feature the word *transplantation*, but thankfully, nothing akin to a *transplantation* or *transplantations*.

Cervantes sized up his main character as “a muddled fool, full of lucid intervals”. Bent over yet another surgery manuscript, red pen rather than sword in hand, I certainly feel like a “muddled fool” often enough. But I hope that my joust against *-ation* harbors at least a few “lucid intervals” of interest to fellow *Science Editor* readers, whose own windmills and nits I'd love to hear about in future issues.

References

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3. Iverson C, Flanagan A, Fontanarosa PB, Glass RM, Glitman P, Lantz JC, Meyer HS, Smith JM, Winker MA, Young RK. *American Medical Association manual of style: a guide for authors and editors*. 9th ed. Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins; 1998. p 259.

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