

Syllabication of Medical and Scientific Terms

The Department of Scientific Editing at St Jude Children's Research Hospital edits the institution's annual *Scientific Report*, a collection of summaries by St Jude investigators that outline the progress of their research over the preceding calendar year. The summaries are typeset in a two-column format with PageMaker software. Those of you who have worked with this program know that it occasionally inserts end-of-line hyphens in unacceptable places; for example, the word *endothelial* breaks as *endot-helial*.

After our recently hired editor had proofread a laser print of the book, I noticed that she had moved several end-of-line hyphens to points that seemed unfamiliar to me; she told me that she had used *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*¹ as her guide for word breaks. I checked these words against my old standby, *Webster's Third*,² and found that the two sources differed greatly in their syllabication styles. For example, *Webster's Third* indicates such line breaks as *phospho-rylate* and *tran-scription*, whereas *Dorland's* prefers *phosphor-ylate* and *trans-cription*. Unsure which of these guides to follow, I sent an e-mail message requesting advice from the members of the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences. That advice was summarized for publication in issue 22 (fall 2000) of the *BELS Letter*. With the goal of reaching a wider audience, Barbara Gastel asked me to present the topic in more detail in *Science Editor*.

BELS members' responses to my query were mixed. Of those who replied, 19 preferred *Webster's* system, six preferred *Dorland's*, three preferred each system in particular cases, four suggested choosing one system and sticking with it, and one suggested avoiding hyphenation altogether—which would have been my choice, had it been possible! As Diana Mathis pointed out, the editors of the Webster's family of dictionaries chose their syllabication style on the basis of typesetting customs. *Webster's Third* states (p 19a): "The centered periods in boldface main entries indicate places at which a hyphen may be put as the last character in a line of print or writing when the rest of the word must be put at the beginning of the following line. We have made an effort to insert the

periods only at places where hyphens would actually be used by publishing houses whose publications show a conscientious regard for end-of-the-line division. Such publishers probably never divide *oleo* between the e and the o (if there is room for a hyphen, there is room for the o). They avoid dividing between the o and the l except in extremely narrow measure (as when an illustration narrows a column). They avoid divisions like *prea-damic* and *cardi-ovascular*, in which a letter from one element of a compound containing an English word is placed with the other element."

Dorland's, which began indicating syllabication in its 28th edition, contains a section called "Notes on the Use of This Dictionary", which states that the dictionary's syllabication system is based on pronunciation (p ix) and that some words may be divided in more than one way if more than one acceptable pronunciation exists. For example, *melanocyte* may be accented on the first or second syllable and is syllabicated differently in each instance. *Stedman's Medical Dictionary*³ indicates syllabication; however, although I may have overlooked it, I could find no explanation of the system used. I did note that *Stedman's*, like *Webster's* but unlike *Dorland's*, indicates such breaks as *phospho-rylation* and *tran-scription*. None of the other medical or scientific dictionaries available to me, either in our department or in St Jude's biomedical library, indicate syllabication.

Heatherbell Fong and Marie Morgan pointed out the differences between the American and British systems of syllabication: the American system breaks according to pronunciation, whereas the British system breaks according to etymology. This left me wondering about the difference between *Webster's* and *Dorland's*, both of which are American dictionaries. *Scientific Style and Format*⁴ (p 84) suggests using "the divisions indicated in a standard dictionary". But which dictionary? The *AMA Manual of Style*⁵ (p 211), in true diplomatic fashion, states that end-of-line hyphenation should "follow the latest edition of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* or of *Stedman's* or *Dorland's* medical dictionary".

Faced with this maddeningly conflicting information and with a looming deadline, I decided that our publication would use *Webster's* syllabication scheme because of its basis in typesetting. I am grateful to the BELS members who responded to my query; others who offered helpful advice were Grace Darling and Bob Bellandi. I would be happy to hear from other CSE members who have made decisions of this sort.

References

1. Dorland's illustrated medical dictionary. 29th ed. Philadelphia: Saunders, 2000.
2. Gove PD, ed. Webster's third new international dictionary of the English language, unabridged. Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster; 1981.
3. Stedman's medical dictionary. 27th ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins; 2000.
4. Council of Biology Editors, CBE Style Manual Committee. Scientific style and format: the CBE manual for authors, editors, and publishers. 6th ed. New York: Cambridge University Press; 1994.
5. 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.

FLO WITTE was director of the Department of Scientific Editing, St Jude Children's Research Hospital, when this column was written. She is now Program Coordinator, Office for Research and Leadership Development, University of Kentucky College of Medicine. She insists that issues of syllabication did not drive her to seek a new job.

Responsibilities of Authorship: A Workshop on Community Standards for Sharing Data and Materials

***14 September 2001
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