

## Which Language Do You Speak?

Writers and editors on medical or health topics must speak three languages to practice their craft. Obviously, in the United States and other countries, English is the first and main one. But there are two others.

Our second language is medical terminology, often corrupted by jargon or medicalese, a conversational convenience but not appropriate for serious writing. Regardless of our varied backgrounds, we have to know what *retinal hemorrhage*, *scoliosis*, and myriad other terms mean.

Our third language, not always necessary but helpful if the writer or editor engages in any volume of work, is that of communication—printing, publishing, journalism—for example, *copyfit*, *color separation*, and *blueline*.

Ah, there's the rub. In a great number of instances, a word we use means something different in medicine and in media language, and maybe occasionally something different from the straight English meaning. So, a "cut" is not always a "cut" or at least does not always have the same meaning. Richard Weiner, author of *Webster's New World Dictionary of Media and Communications*,<sup>1</sup> called this to my attention a few years ago.<sup>2</sup>

The number of these homonyms may be great, but I have isolated some interesting ones from Weiner's work and a number of other sources.<sup>3-5</sup>

First, let's deal with *cut*:

As common a medical term as *cut* is, generally it does not appear in medical dictionaries, but everyone (including children) knows what a medical *cut* is. In standard dictionaries, *cut*, as a noun or verb, may have 30 or 40 definitions, anywhere from a baseball swing to a division into parts to dividing a pack of cards. Weiner lists 14 media meanings, including a printed picture, a single song on a record, a photo illustration, and an engraving.

### Other homonyms

I have listed below in alphabetical order a number of medical terms with descriptions of their media homonyms. The medical meanings are obvious and differ from the communication definitions, so I have not included the medical ones. I have limited the media descriptions and may even have

reduced or modified them for illustrative purposes. For example, mostly printing and journalistic terms are used—just a few from radio or television or the theater.

*Air*. White space in printing. The waves that carry broadcasting.

*Angle of vision*. The angle from which an audience views a film.

*Aura*. An unusual atmosphere that surrounds an object, usually a person.

*Baby*. Jargon for any small device or object, for example, a baby spotlight.

*Back*. Spine of a book. Reverse side of a sheet of printed page. Used as a verb, to financially support a show.

*Backbone*. The spine of a book.

*Beard*. On metal type, a projection that separates it from other type.

*Big head*. A closeup view of the head of a performer.

*Binaural*. A listening device with two earpieces.

*Bite*. The etching action on a metal engraving plate. A particular characteristic of paper's ability to absorb ink. Brief segment of sound. Pickup of publicity by media.

*Blackout*. In printing, a masking tape. Suppression of news or information.

*Bleed*. Material running over the edge of a page. Old sound remaining when one records over a used tape.

*Blind*. Printing without ink.

*Body*. Predominant portion of an article. Major portion of a piece of type or of an advertisement.

*Body type*. Predominant portion of a text.

*Boil*. Journalistic term for reducing the size of a text.

*Bone*. A flat piece of ivory for hand-folding of paper.

*Braces*. In printing, symbols used to enclose material, for example, brackets.

*Break*. The place for ending a line of type. A journalistic scoop. Release of a news story.

*Break a leg*. A good-luck greeting extended to show-business folks before a performance—but not to dancers.

*Bromide*. A trite statement.

*Burn*. In printing, same as burnish.

*Bust*. A command to stop writing or broad-

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casting.

*Cell.* A small sample, as in market research.

*Choke.* In printing, a cutoff device.

*Cold.* With little or no preparation. Colors may be warm or cold.

*Crib.* To cheat or plagiarize.

*Crotch.* Portion of a typographic figure inside an apex or a vortex, such as in the letters A and W.

*Dead.* Old news, type, engravings—no longer in use.

*Diaper.* A repeated pattern of small figures, used as a design in bookbinding.

*Dope.* Information, especially in advance. In printing, a substance added to modify ink.

*Ear.* A box in the top corner of a newspaper page.

*Eyeball.* To examine superficially with the natural eye.

*Eyebrow.* A line of type over a newspaper headline.

*Face.* The general appearance of a publication. The surface of a piece of type.

*Fat.* Having too many letters to fit in a headline. Of a table or page with less text than expected.

*Foley.* A sound-effects term, especially for adding or replacing sound.

*Foot.* The bottom of a printed page.

*Hairline.* In printing, a very thin rule or an undesired line.

*Head.* A headline. The beginning of a work. The main part. The top of a book or page.

*Kill.* To eliminate copy. To succeed in show business. A cancellation.

*Leg.* In type, part of a mass, such as a single lone column.

*Lip.* An edge in printing. Also a bookbinding term.

*Parasite.* In marketing, a small display in a crowded area.

*Skull.* In the theater, an admission pass.

*Spine.* The backbone of a hardcover book. In typography, the main arcs of the letter S.

*Thumbsucker.* Speculative or overbearing article.

*Toenails.* Used by some printers to mean parentheses.

*Tooth.* The roughness of the surface of paper, affecting its ink absorption.

*Treatment.* A story outline. Method by which a story is turned into a script.

In many of these instances, even though the meanings are different between media and medicine, it is easy to see how the derivation arose. But without some knowledge of journalism or printing or publishing, the exact connection may be inapparent.

I have not included some terms of radio, television, photography, and theater that sound like medical terms, such as *blink*, *breathing*, *corpse*, *cradle*, *crutch tip*, *die*, *eat*, *fascia*, *floater*, *gag*, *gurney*, *knee*, *optical*, and *stress marks*.

Then there are media terms that are not exactly medical but sound medical to the average person, such as *adhesive binding*, *alum*, *bad break*, *bump*, and *busted head*.

Fortunately, those of us involved in things medical and in writing (or related fields) are usually able to make a clear distinction between the two genera. We certainly do not want to have unsophisticated listeners hear us say

“The *body* was OK, but I wanted to have more *bleed* and less *air*.”

“I sneaked a *parasite* into his marketing plan.”

“We put a lot of *air* in his *ears*.”

“I told her to *break a leg*, but she produced a *thumbsucker*.”

“He knows better than to put his *head* in *toenails*.”

Oh, well, thank goodness you and I are trilingual.

## References

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