

Stop! You're Driving Me Crazy

Acronym: Annoying Condensed
Rendering whose Originator You'd like
to Murder.
— TWH

This column is the first of two on the subject of acronyms, initialisms, abbreviations, contractions, and other condensations of longer expressions.

First AIAD for Editors

Thomson Gale Research Inc publishes the *Acronyms, Initialisms, and Abbreviations Dictionary* (AIAD—oops! I did it), which in 1992—the most current print issue to which I have access—contained “more than 520,000 acronyms, initialisms, abbreviations, contractions, alphabetic symbols, and similar condensed appellations”. But how do these categories differ? And how should writers and editors treat them? It is worth taking some time to explore and understand the differences.

Condensed Appellations—“CAs”

“Condensed appellations” is a reasonable descriptor for the subject of this article, so I will use CAs as a convenient shorthand for the above collective terms. Tom McArthur, the author of the 1992 *Oxford Companion to the English Language* (OCEL), says they can also be called “protograms”. (The OCEL contains a good article on CAs.)

Differences among CAs (see below) are both phonetic and graphical. The AIAD breaks them down into three broad classes:

- *Acronyms* are spoken as a single word—*radar*, *NASDAQ*, *AUDI* (*Auto Union Deutscher Industrie*)—the component letters of which derive from the initials or parts of the words or phrases they represent.
- *Initialisms* are spoken as a series of individual letters or characters that represent the initial letters or parts of the terms thus represented—*TGIF*, *DNA*, *rpm*.
- *Abbreviations*, *truncations*, *contractions* and other similar shortenings derive their meanings in ways other than the above—*Ph.D.*, *abbr.*, *dept.*, *Ms.* (the

form of personal address)—and usually terminate with a period, at least in the United States (see discussion later in the article).

Hybrids and Low-Brids

There are many crossovers and combinations between and among the above three groups.

- Some CAs are indeed pronounced as a word but incorporate both initial and noninitial letters—as in *radar*: **radio** detection and **rang**ing.
- Some CAs are pronounced as a word by some speakers and not by others or are used both ways by individual speakers—*LAF*, which stands for the Lance Armstrong Foundation, is rendered both as “laff” and as “ell-ay-eff”.
- Some CAs are pronounced by combining both letter sounds and word sounds, sometimes incorporating a phonetic foreshortening—as with *DNase* (de-nays), deoxyribonuclease; *007* (double-oh-seven), the fictional James Bond.
- Some CAs are not really CAs at all or were CAs once but are no longer—as with *SAS*, the company once known as Statistical Analysis Systems, or *SuSE* (as in “loose”), the Euro-Linux open-source software version that was originally “*Gesellschaft für Software und Systementwicklung mbH*”.

A Clash of Symbols

Some people treat CAs and symbols (as in *Pb* for lead) identically—that is, as single letters or letter combinations that stand for a longer expression. However, because of their different derivation, symbols and abbreviations should not be confused. *Scientific Style and Format, Sixth Edition* (1994) has this to say on the distinction:

Many symbolic notations in science have been developed in a logical and coherent scheme for specific functional needs. They may serve either to represent what cannot be as economically expressed by a term or to represent the subject symbolized in a functional relation to other symbol-

ized subjects, as in mathematical equations. In contrast, abbreviations have been developed mainly to eliminate the effort that would go into writing out what they represent or to save space; they usually represent simply the shortening of a term.

For example, *ISO* (not *IOS*) is the symbol—not the *CA*—for the International Organization for Standardization: www.iso.org/iso/en/isoonline.frontpage. A Greek-root prefix, *ISO* stands for “is equal to” or “the same”.

Contrasting Contractions

Contractions (often called *suspensions* in International English) are commonly thought of as a kind of abbreviation; however, they are treated differently from the standpoint of punctuation in United States and International English. Contractions and suspensions are formed by omitting some internal letters of a word and keeping others—often only the first and last. Examples are *mister*, which is abbreviated identically but commonly punctuated as *Mr.* in the United States and *Mr* in International English, and *department*, which is commonly treated as *dept.* and *dept*, respectively. The Council of Science Editors follows international style in this regard.

Deriving a Living as an Editor

CAs have their legitimate place, but their overzealous use can be a burden to the reader—not to mention to the editor, who has to derive them. *The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition* says that abbreviation of relatively unfamiliar terms “should be used only if they occur, say, five times or more within an article or chapter” and specifies that “the terms must be spelled out on their first occurrence” (usually in parentheses that follow the terms unless a *CA* is more familiar than the term that it is derived from). Editors of documents that are rife with *CAs* should probably supply a glossary.

The Long and Short of It

According to the *AIAD*, the longest acronym is a US Navy term, *ADCOMSUBORDCOMPHEIBSPAC*. According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, the longest initialism is *NIIOMT PLABOPARMBETZHELBTREBTRABSOM ONIMONKONOTDTEKHSTROMONT* (56 letters in English), which has to do with “concrete and ferroconcrete operations for composite-monolithic and monolithic constructions” and is found in the *Concise Dictionary of Soviet Terminology*.

The shortest *CA* is any one of the 26 letters of the alphabet. If you lump symbols in the same category as abbreviations (see discussion above), the letter *A* or *a* can have 418 meanings that range all the way from *hail* (meteorology) to *Helmholtz energy* (chemistry) to *ampere* (physics). *ZZZZ* is the last entry in the *AIAD*'s 16th edition and represents “Unknown Elements in a Formatted Flight Plan” according to the US Department of Transportation.

It could also represent the state of alertness of any reader who had just finished reading more than 520,000 *CAs*.

Chuckle of the Month. From Richard Lederer's Anguished English desk calendar: “Warning: Trespassers will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law!” (sign on the convent grounds of the Sisters of Mercy).