The Grammar of Nursing Research

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Introduction

In the Winter, 2003 issue of this journal, Barbara Holmes Gobel pointed out three common grammatical errors that were made in nursing manuscripts: (1) misuses of “that” and “which”; (2) confusing orderings of terms in a list; and (3) the use of complex words where simpler words are equally good if not better. I would like to point out some other grammatical errors that I have often encountered in reports of nursing research. Gobel (2003) refrained from naming names of the perpetrators, and so shall I.

Data

Although some readers of this article may disagree, the word “data” comes from Latin and it is a plural noun that takes plural verbs and modifiers. (The singular form is “datum”.) Bethel Powers and I have argued that position in all three editions of our dictionary of nursing theory and research (Powers & Knapp, 1990; 1995; 2006). I cringe every time I read “The data shows…” or “This data…” Aaargh!

Criteria

This word also comes from Latin, also is plural, and also takes plural verbs and modifiers. (The singular form is “criterion”, and it is the singular form that is used in such expressions as “criterion-referenced measurement” and “criterion-related validity”.) Powers and Knapp (2006) argue for that as well. “The inclusion criteria for enrollment in the clinical trial is age greater than or equal to 65” is just plain wrong, if that is the only condition that must be satisfied for participation in a particular trial.

Between vs. among

The word “between” holds for two things, not for more than two things. The principal offenders here are statisticians who refer to the “between-groups” sums of squares and mean squares in an analysis of variance for which there are three or more groups. The opposite error is to talk about “the relationship among these variables” when there are more than two variables; relationships hold between two variables. It is admittedly awkward to have to say, for example, “the relationship between X and Y, the relationship between X and Z, and the relationship between Y and Z”, but there is no such thing as a relationship among variables.

Semi-colons

Bethel Powers and I love semi-colons, but editors are always changing them to commas or full stops. They’re perfectly fine for pauses that are longer than for commas and shorter than for full stops.

Hyphens

Some day I may write a whole book on hyphens. They have been the subject of countless articles,
both pro and con. My favorite is the piece by Charlton Ogburn (1986) who points out, among many other interesting examples, that a word like “patient-services” has to have the hyphen (any grammatical rules to the contrary notwithstanding); otherwise the reader will interpret it as services that are provided patiently. (Notice how I sneaked that semi-colon in there?) Editors are always taking hyphens out of terms such as “non-normal distributions”. Please don’t (there are too many n’s that are too close together in that example). Hyphens should be used far more often than they are (in my not-so-humble opinion).

-ic vs. –ical

Several years ago I wrote a tongue-in-cheek poem entitled “The dilemma of –ic versus –ical” (Knapp, 1992), in which I admitted confusion about whether the adjectival counterpart to nouns such as “geography” and “epidemiology” should end in –ical or the shorter form –ic. Which should it be? My colleague and friend at the University of Rochester, George Grella (English department), told me that it all depends on how it sounds. (Does “theoretic” sound funny to you? It does to me.) I generally prefer the –ical ending, but there seems to be a recent trend toward –ic. (Why most physiologists use the term “physiologic”, when their professional organization is still called the American Physiological Association, is beyond me.)

There is sometimes a difference in meaning between the –ic and the –ical endings of the noun form. For example, “historic” is a much stronger word than “historical”; and “economic” isn’t the same as “economical”.

Sex vs. gender

I may be old-fashioned, and I realize that there are occasionally subtle distinctions between references to a person’s “sex” and references to a person’s “gender”, but when one is using a questionnaire to gather demographic (demographical?) information the variable should be called “sex”, not “gender”. I remember reading a research article about differences between males and females, in which half of the sources in the references had ”sex differences” in their titles and the other half had “gender differences” in theirs!

Insignificant vs. non-significant (Note the hyphen; MS Word insists on it.)

If hypothesis testing is used in a research study and the null hypothesis is not rejected, the result should be called “non-significant” (or even better, “statistically non-significant”). “Insignificant” is too pejorative.

Issues

Just a comment about the use of the word “issues” instead of “problems”, “situations”, or the like: My experience is that nurses are one of the guiltiest (is there such a word?) over-users. Journals have volumes; volumes have numbers or issues. Nurses might have problems, but they don’t have issues.

Reprise: That vs. which

Gobel (2003) explained the difference between “that” and “which” in terms of restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses. I prefer to think of it in the simpler context of comma vs. no-comma. You don’t need a comma before “that”, but you do before “which”, as the following closing comments to this article illustrate:

1. I have tried to indicate some grammatical errors that are commonly made in reports of nursing research.
2. I have tried to indicate some grammatical errors in the reports of nursing research, which include the use of "data" and "criteria" as singular nouns.

References

Some relevant websites (but don’t expect them all to agree with the above):
http://www.apastyle.org/previoustips.html : This official American Psychological Association (APA) website has many answers to frequently asked grammatical (not grammar…please) questions.
http://www.ccc.commnest.edu/grammar/ : This would appear to be an unofficial APA website, sponsored by the Capital Community College Foundation in Hartford, CT, but it has lots of nice stuff.
http://www.refdesk.com/factgram.html : Ditto (unofficial and also nice stuff).

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