

Q. In the following language, “If there are urgent or significant unexpected findings, radiologists should communicate directly with the referring physician,” what does the word *urgent* apply to? Does it apply to the entire phrase, “significant unexpected findings” or just to the word “findings”?

A. The disjunctive *or* in the sentence that the correspondent submitted clearly indicates that if either “urgent findings” or “significant unexpected findings” are present, the radiologist should communicate directly with the referring physician. That small word *or* is especially important. If the word *or* had appeared twice, the sentence would read, “If there are urgent *or* significant *or* unexpected findings.” Then, if any of the three alternatives occurred, the radiologist should communicate directly with the referring physician; that is, if the findings were either “urgent,” or “significant,” or “unexpected.”

The word *or* (a disjunctive) often occurs as part of a pair in the phrase *either/or* (“either one thing or another”). That pair contrasts with the conjunctive *both/and* (“both one thing and the other”). All English speakers, even very young children, understand the difference. They know that if they are told, “You may have both a cookie and a candy,” they may have the two treats, but if they hear, “You may have either a cookie or a candy,” they get only one. In this statement, as in many others, the smallest word can cause confusion.

In the correspondent’s question, however, there is another confusing word that he did not inquire about. That word is *should*, the past tense of the modal *shall*. The word *should* is ambiguous because it can express either obligation or probability. Its meaning has been argued over many years by lawyers on one side or another of a contract, and courts have still not decided the argument conclusively. (See *Roget’s International Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* for numerous court holdings on this subject.) So, for clarity substitute either *must* or *may* for *should*.

Q. Which word is correct (*me* or *I*) in the following sentence: “John

admires Joe more than me”?

A. That seemingly simple question is impossible to answer unless one knows what has been left out of it. Does John admire Joe more than I admire Joe? Or does John admire Joe more than John admires me? As you can see, the subjective case of the pronoun *I* is missing from the first statement, but the objective case of the pronoun (*me*) is missing from the second statement.

In the following statements, the subjective case of the pronoun is correct because the pronoun is the subject of the conjunction:

- College students socialize more than law students, who study more than *they* (college students) do.
- Philip is younger than Jack, but taller than *he* (Jack) is.

But in the following sentences, the objective case of the personal pronoun is correct:

- The Prime Minister invited my wife and *me* to dinner.
- Between you and *me*, the defendant’s argument was specious.

Another error that causes more humor than confusion is the misplaced modifier. The following are actual citations:

- “In *Barton*, the plaintiff was a passenger on a carrier raped by a chauffeur.” (Sentence written by a law student in a final examination)
- “Tutor needed by a law student proficient in verbal skills” (Sign posted on a bulletin board at a law school)
- “Being filthy and infested with roaches, my client had the right to break his lease on the apartment.”

(Argument made in moot court by a law student)

- “The law school administration has compiled a list of law students broken down by sex.” (From a column in the student newspaper)
- “Homeless man improves after car runs into him” (Newspaper headline)
- “To anyone and everyone who was in any way involved in my husband’s passing, a heart-felt thanks.” (Obituary in a New York newspaper)
- “If the economy does not flow in the next quarter as I expect ...” (Financial guru on a television program—the moderator interrupted, saying “You do expect, or not?”)

Potpourri

Heard on the car radio: A disgruntled customer complained that a checker at a local supermarket was not properly trained. When the customer placed an artichoke on the counter, the checker asked, “What’s that?” The customer answered, “It’s an artichoke.” After checking the price list and being unable to find “artichoke,” the checker asked, “Doesn’t that word start with an ‘r’?”

My thanks to David Lester, who sent the following dialogue from an article called, “When Insults Had Class.” (Taken from the correspondence of two well-known individuals):

Note to Winston Churchill from George Bernard Shaw: “I am enclosing two tickets to the first night of my new play; bring a friend ... if you have one.”

Winston Churchill’s response: “Cannot attend the first night, but will the second ... if there is one.” **TFL**

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