

Q. Which word is correct if you want to indicate that statements will be mailed twice monthly: “bi-monthly” or “semi-monthly?” If meetings are scheduled for twice weekly, same question: “bi-weekly” or “semi-weekly”?

A. It’s better avoid both of these words. Surveys reveal that most Americans believe that *bi-weekly* and *semi-weekly* mean “twice a week.” The same majority believes that the terms *bi-monthly* and *semi-monthly* mean “twice a month.”

However, members of the majority are often unaware that a sizable minority of Americans believes just the opposite: that the prefixes *bi-* and *semi-* mean “every other” week or month, not “twice” a week or month. That misunderstanding can cause significant confusion, so if you use either phrase, be sure to clarify what meaning you intend.

Both *bi-* (from Latin “two”) and *semi-* (from Latin “half”) are synonyms. But until the public also thinks they are, it’s better to substitute phrases like “every two months” or “twice a month.” The reader who sent this question wrote that she had read my column about the ambiguity of the word *next* in a phrase like “next Friday.” She added, “Can you imagine your confusion on reading, “Next Friday will be the bi-monthly meeting of the ‘Society to Stop Ambiguity?’”

And More Ambiguity

Norristown, Pa., reader Charles Campbell wrote that improperly writing the phrase, “One hundred and fifty dollars” disturbs him. Avoid that phrase, he urged. Say, “One hundred fifty dollars.” He points out that one should never use the word “and” when stating numbers greater than 99. He’s right: adding “and fifty” to those words “usually implies that it means “fifty cents.” (An even clearer statement would be “One hundred fifty dollars and fifty cents.)

However, on page 108, the eighth edition of the *Gregg Reference Manual*, disagrees with Mr. Campbell, saying that, “In whole dollar amounts the use of *and* between hundreds and tens of dollars is optional.” (This view, how-

ever, can result in ambiguity in the stated amount.)

Q. An increasing number of my graduate students have picked up the word *backwards*; they use it instead of *backward*, which has always been common both in speech and writing. Which form is preferable—or are they both acceptable?

A. The *s-less* form (*backward*) is preferable, and that is also true of all similar pairs (like *forward*, *upward*, *onward*, *outward*, and *toward*). They are preferable, certainly in written and noncolloquial English. The singular form is older and never violates grammar—and it indicates an educated speaker. The word *backwards* is new and grammatical only as an adverb modifying a verb. (“He walked backwards”). It is ungrammatical as an adjective (as in “his backwards walk”). So it is simply better to choose *backward* and the *s-less* forms of all the other words as well.

Another reader asked about the acceptability of the pair, *anyway* and *anyways*. Here in the Southeast one seldom hears *anyways*; that form seems to be prominent mostly in the Northeast. The word *anyways* is acceptable only as slang and seems to be widely and emotionally disapproved by educated speakers. The online journal, *Daily Writing Tips*, welcomes reader response, and its readers have responded—vehemently—in the case of *anyways*.

All their responses were negative. The following were characteristic. One reader wrote, “I hate *anyways*; it is in the same category of “All’s you have to do is...” Another wrote, “[Anyways] is like *alot*, which also bothers me a lot.” A third correspondent wrote: “I am so happy to know that my mother did teach me correctly! I think *anyways* sounds like some fourteen-year-old valley girl.”

Given the strong dislike of *anyways*

that numerous readers expressed, it seems clear that *anyway* is preferred. But then one might ask about the choice of two words (*any way*) instead of the merged form *anyway*. These two words look similar, but are quite different in category and meaning. The compound *anyway* is an adverb meaning “nevertheless” or “at any rate.” The phrase *any way* means “in whatever way.” It is an adjective plus a noun phrase. It would occur in “I am glad to help in any way I can.”

In English, compounds typically result from a progression of changes: first is a phrase composed of two words. Then—as a result of wide usage—the word becomes a hyphenated two-word phrase. Finally, it becomes a single-word compound. Here are a few examples: *ball park* to *ball-park* to *ballpark*; *mail man* to *mail-man* to *mailman*; *loop hole* to *loop-hole* to *loophole*; *iced cream* to *ice-cream* to (in some contexts) *icecream*—though my computer does not recognize that final stage.

The hyphenated form sometimes changes the meaning of the word. Consider the difference between “a little-used car” and “a little used car,” “a re-covered sofa” and “a recovered sofa,” and “extra-judicial duties” and “extra judicial duties.”

In speech, that difference is expressed by the sound of your voice and a pause; in writing, by the hyphen, which indicates that the hyphenated phrase is to be read as a unit. For example, in the phrase “a large, well-lighted room,” the word *large* is a single-word modifier, but *well-lighted* is also intended as a single modifier. The same “rule” is exemplified in the phrase “A well-known legal principle.”

The progression of change for affixes occurs in two stages. A word frequently used, like *co-operate*, is now often spelled without the hyphen. The same is true of *pre-register* and *co-sponsor*. Words less used or words mispronounced if the hyphen is omitted, like *re-issue* and *de-ice*, retain the hyphen longer. There is no rule; the editor decides. **TFL**

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