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Peripatetic editorial notes

Writing well (4)

Virgule

All right, what is a virgule? I can help you with some clues. It has nothing to do with virtue, virgin or virago. If I tell you that the alternative word for virgule is solidus, you might be tempted to suppose that it is related to virile or to *Viagra*, but your guess would be wrong. Actually a virgule (or solidus) is an oblique line used to mean *per*, *and* or *or*, and to divide items (eg. numerator and denominator in fractions) and lines of poetry.

Three conditions have to be fulfilled when the virgule is used for *per*: the construction must have a unit of measure, at least one element of it must be a numerical quantity, and on each side of the virgule must be either a unit of measure or a specific numerical quantity.

51. The haemoglobin content was 8.5 g/dl.
52. The resting heart rate is 94/min.

When used to mean *per* the virgule should not be used if a prepositional phrase comes between the two elements (53), when neither element contains a specific numerical quantity (54), or in non-technical expressions (55).

53. The solution contained 51 mmol/l of sodium.
(Reword as: ...a sodium concentration of 51 mmol/l).
54. The flow rate was given in millilitres/minute.
(Reword as: ... given in millilitres per minute.
55. The vacation leave allowed is 10 days/year.
(Rewords as: ... is 10 days per year. Or better still as: Annual vacation leave allowed is 10 days).

The virgule is sometimes used in dates, but this practice should be confined to tables and figures to save space. Otherwise always write dates as *Wednesday, 23 August 2000* or as *23 August 2000*. When the virgule is used in fractions to separate numerator from denominator, parentheses and brackets are often required to avoid ambiguity.

56. We used the formula $x=(t_1 + t_2)/(s_1 + s_2)$

Stephen Lock MD, FRCP
London, UK.

Samiran Nundy FRCS, FRCP
New Delhi, India.

N Medappa MD
New Delhi, India.

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The Sri Lanka Medical
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Wijerama House
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Colombo 7
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Telephone +94 1 693324

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E-mail SLMA@eureka.lk

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The virgule is appropriate for rates or proportions when placed in parentheses, but a colon is used for ratios (eg. 1:4). The following will be acceptable to most journal editors.

57. Complications occurred in 6 (3%) of 200 patients.

58. Complications occurred in 3% (6/200) of patients.

If the fraction's denominator is clear from the context 59 is also acceptable.

59. Death occurred in 4 patients (1%).

However, the numerator/denominator form should not be used in running text (60).

60. Death occurred in 4/400 patients.

Do not use the virgule in ungainly he/she constructions (61), or in tortuous verbiage (62), for they can easily be rephrased to avoid sexist language (63,64) or verbiage (65).

61. This simple technique can be learnt by any doctor even if he/she has no previous experience.

62. Which of the following is/are true/false regarding acute sinusitis?

63. Any doctor can learn this simple technique even without previous experience.

64. No previous experience is required by doctors to learn this simple technique.

Sentence 62 is used by some of our colleagues as the stem in multiple choice questions, presumably to show how meticulous they are as examiners, when all they need to say is

65. True or false regarding acute sinusitis?

Reference

Iverson C. American Medical Association manual of style. 9th Edition. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1998.

Colvin Goonaratna, Joint, Editor CMJ