

Separate from essential meaning but still important: space, colons and dashes

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Introduction

Some time ago, there was a period when Japan was flooded with direct mail advertising from overseas written in Japanese. I assume that this was because overseas postage and printing fees were much cheaper than those in Japan. Often just one quick glance would uncover multiple incongruities suggesting that the mailing was not produced in Japan. As a result, the advertised products would seem somehow suspicious. In addition to grammar mistakes, the usage of Japanese punctuation marks would seem at odds with standard Japanese. I imagined that these mailings were prepared on a word processor by a non-native Japanese speaker reading from a manuscript written by a Japanese person.

When writing an academic paper, it goes without saying that the most important point is to accurately convey your core message. To share the results of your research with the world, you will need to write papers in English. When editors and reviewers assess your papers, they will pay particular attention to whether the essence of your research can be clearly ascertained without any confusion. Your relative English skills will not significantly impact the essential value of your paper, provided the meaning is clearly conveyed. This is fair argument, but still I am afraid that a native English speaker checking a paper written by a non-native speaker will probably have the same feeling of incongruity as Japanese people reading Japanese text written by someone outside of Japan. If you can put a little effort into reducing such incongruities, readers should be

able to more easily focus on the essence of your research. When I started helping with the editing of academic journals, I often encountered punctuation mistakes. I am not in the position to provide commentary on difficult English grammar rules. However, I would like to provide a few useful examples.

Spacing between words and numbers

Is “Fig. 1” or “Fig.1” correct? Or are they both acceptable? A good tip is to try completely spelling out both the abbreviation and number. In this case, “Fig. 1” becomes “Figure one.” On the other hand, “Fig.1,” which has no space, becomes “Figureone.” So, it is clear that a space is needed between “Fig.” and “1.” The same is true for spacing between numbers and measurement units. For example, “5 mm” is spelled out as “five millimeter,” while “5mm” would become the awkward “fivemillimeter.” This illustrates why a space is necessary. The Japanese language does not have this concept of spacing between words, which is one reason why some Japanese people do not pay particular attention to spacing when writing in English.

Colons

Semicolons are placed between two sentences to function as either a strong comma or a weak period. Colons are a bit different in that they serve to warn the reader to pay particular attention to what follows. That is why colons are used to add explanations or provide examples for the content presented in front of the colon. For example, colons are used to express time such as 10:43. Here, we are told

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that it is the 10 o'clock hour, along with the additional information that it is the 43rd min of the 10 o'clock hour. Furthermore, you may come across something like "J Med Ultrasonics 2003;22:1409–1411" in a reference. This means that the referenced material is from Volume 22, with the exact page numbers provided as additional information. The use of colons and semicolons in references probably makes much more sense now.

Dashes

The hyphen, dash, and minus symbol are all straight horizontal lines. However, there are slight differences, not only in length, but also in height. Furthermore, there are two different types of dashes based on length. The first has the same length as the letter "n" and is called the "en dash," while the second is as long as the letter "m" and is called the "em dash." The en dash is used to express a numeric range and to arrange two equivalent words side by side. That is why the en dash is often used to indicate the first and last page of a referenced section (22:1409–1411)

and when the names of two researchers are used as a prefix in the name of an equation (Rayleigh–Plesset equation).

Due to character set limitations with typewriters and early PCs, a hyphen was used for the minus symbol and two hyphens were used to create a dash. These substitutions are still commonly seen today on Web pages with character display limitations. That is why even now many people use hyphens where minus symbols and dashes are required. These substitutions are allowed to some degree. However, minus symbols and dashes should be used when preparing a proper academic paper.

The usage of roman and italicized letters, as well as the writing of numbers are examples of other areas in English writing that may go unnoticed by Japanese readers, but would grab the attention of a native English speaker when used incorrectly. These points are separate from the essential meaning of an academic paper. Still, remember how Japanese written by a foreigner can seem strange and a bit dubious to a native Japanese speaker. So, it is important to take the time and try to reduce any similar incongruities within your own English writing.