

English support
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News & Tips
from

English support

NB: If you received this newsletter by e-mail, it is (hopefully) because you have expressed a wish to do so. If this is not the case, and/or you do not wish to receive it in future – *please let us know!*

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Dear friends

What an amazing month! This newsletter has been delayed due to the sheer pressure of work. We are only half way through the second quarter, and already the turnover from work done and work ordered for this quarter is up more than 41% on last quarter's record figure. More and more people are discovering *English support* (also for other languages). And almost every day we get new readers for this newsletter, which is also very encouraging.

It's a funny old world, isn't it!

At this time last year, I wrote an **open letter** to *Dansk Translatørforbund* (which translates its name as the *Danish Association of State-Authorised Translators and Interpreters*), suggesting they change this English version of their name, so that it doesn't sound as if the notorious *Stasi* is still alive and well and living in Copenhagen! DT had started renewing its website, but had not yet got to the English pages, so I thought it might be a good time to make the change. In June I also asked for the right of reply to leading DT member Dee Shields' scurrilous attack on *English support* in DT's magazine (*MDTnyt*) for daring to hold views at variance with her own on this matter.

There was a brief exchange of views with Mette Aarslew, DT's leader at the time (see *News & Tips* nos.19–21), but, since then, nothing – no change, no apology, no retraction, and no right of reply.

As one reader complained at the time:

I am "fed up" with hearing about Dansk Translatørforbund. Most "normal" Danes know that there is no such word as "state-authorised"! It is, and will always be, a "danglish" word ...

The really odd thing, though, is that *the DT web site is still waiting for the English translation*. It seems that, while native-speaker Dee Shields could find time to write an 11,000-word attack on my person and my company (based on zero knowledge of either), in the last 12 months she has not had time to translate the less than 3000 words on her own organisation's website into English.

I guess it's a matter of priorities. But it makes you think, doesn't it! ☺

More than three hundred topics have been tackled so far in the pages of

News & Tips

You can look them up on the website at: <http://www.englishsupport.dk/EN/backindex.htm>, and back issues can also be downloaded at: <http://www.englishsupport.dk/EN/backissues.htm>, where you can also download a whole year at a time (if you want to) by clicking on the year heading.

Please turn over!

Re: Business letters

I thought we might take a brief look at business letters this week. There are a lot of useful phrases and hints on layout and style in the *English support* sheet, *How to write a business letter*, which you can download from the website at <http://www.englishsupport.dk/EN/teaching.htm>. But my attention has recently been drawn to a number of other points that are worth making.

The first is that little word “*Re*”. Most English-speakers consider using “*Re*” a little stiff and rather old-fashioned, but Microsoft has given it a new lease of life in the subject headings in e-mails. Actually, you do not need to put anything at all in front of subject headings in letters.

But it seems that whole generations of bilingual secretaries and other highly qualified office staff in Denmark have been taught (*inter alia* at the Copenhagen Business School, no less!) that “*re*” is short for “*regarding*”. It is not. “*Re*” is a Latin word meaning “*In the matter of*”.

The misinformation has led to an awful lot of people writing letter subject headings starting with “*Regarding*” or that other favourite, “*Concerning*”, either of which is definitely not normal here.

In fact, even in the text of the letter, these two can sound odd. As noted in *News & Tips* No. 20, using them a lot, when you could just as well have written “*about*”, sounds foreign. And where you might want to use them to introduce a new topic, there is another rather more common English expression: *with regard to*.

Hereby, herewith, hereafter, etc.

A great many non-native speakers use these words a lot in business letters and e-mails. Partly this is a reflection of the fact that in most languages the difference between the written word and the spoken word is much greater than in English. That is why I always recommend that you translate what you would *write* in your own language into what you might *say* to someone in your own language, before translating it into English. In fact, this rule applies just as much to scientific papers and other formal reports as it does to business letters.

Like that other favourite, “*To whom it may concern*” (see *News & Tips* No. 3), words like *hereby*, *herewith* and *hereafter* should really only be used in that most formal of formal styles beloved of the legal profession – or at least some parts of it! Not to mention the fact that *hereafter* is also a noun for where you may or may not go after you are *dead* – so using it can lead to some really strange-looking sentences. An example might be: “*In the hereafter, you will find a description of the cottage*”. In this sentence, using “*In the following ...*” would avoid unnecessary confusion!

You and you and You

One last point on business letters: it is surprising how often I see “you” written with a capital letter in business letters in the middle of a sentence. This is a carry-over from the German *De* (also found in some other languages including Danish), which is a formal/polite way of addressing someone. It does not exist in English. The word “you” is only ever written with a capital letter at the start of a sentence and (sometimes) in headings or titles of books, etc.

Did you know?

English support can offer **native-speaker** help with not only *English*, but also *Chinese, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Russian, Serbo-Croat, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish* and *Ukrainian*.

From the workshop...

Scientific writing

I have been doing quite a bit of teaching on how to write scientific papers recently, and I also proofread a lot of scientific texts in the course of my work. It seems to me that there are two things which could make a real improvement to the English in a great many scientific papers: using the right tense and not using the passive forms of the verb so much.

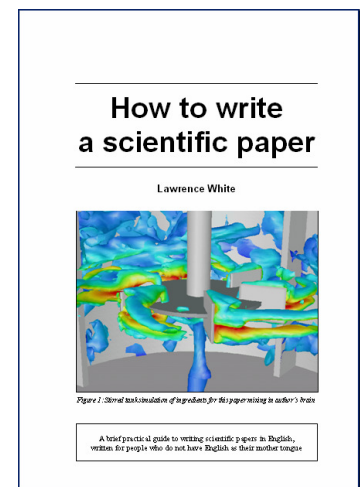
Passive forms

It is not really surprising that Danish writers of English tend to use the passive forms of the verb too much. This is because the passive forms are used a lot in written Danish. But written English prefers active forms, and uses passive forms little more than in spoken English.

When it comes to scientific writing, there appears to be even more pressure to use passive forms. A great many PhD students and other researchers seem to have been told that they *must on no account* use “I” or “we” in a scientific paper, *because that would suggest a lack of objectivity*.

Now the idea that scientific objectivity might be rooted in grammar is so silly that you only have to put it into words to see how daft it is.

Scientific objectivity is based on the *repeatability* of your work, and using a lot of passive forms when describing your work can only have a *negative* impact on the ability of others to understand, repeat and check it. The fact is that passive forms make your language more complex, less clear, and more difficult to understand.



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The tense of the verb

The other thing that can make it difficult to work out *who did what when* is the habit of using the wrong tense. One example is the use of the present perfect when talking about the past. The rule in English is that you should use the *past tense* to talk about the *past*. In a scientific paper, this means that you should use the past tense to talk about what you did and the results you got. If you write “*An experiment has been carried out to demonstrate X*”, you risk your readers thinking that this information is about what other people have done, not what you did.

The (simple) present tense should be used for general-fact (timeless) statements. For instance, you use the present tense for talking about what your paper’s diagrams, graphs, tables, etc. *show*, and you can also use it for what is stated in published work: “*X says that ...*”. Descriptions of equipment or materials or software used are also general-fact statements. But when talking about what you specifically *did* with them, or *found out*, you should use the past tense.

The present perfect (see also *News & Tips* No. 17) is best thought of as a present tense. Its focus is on explaining the present. In a scientific paper, it might be used to say something like, “*So far as we are aware, no experiments using this technique have been done before*”, or “*Until now, it has always been thought ...*”.

“How to write a scientific paper is an excellent guide – even for the experienced author of scientific articles and reports. It is easy to read and gives good advice about the structure of such papers, the writing process, and a number of the many linguistic traps that authors who do not have English as their mother tongue tend to fall into.”

Order it now from *English support* at www.englishsupport.dk

Kurt Lauridsen, MSc, PhD
Danish Decommissioning

Please turn over!

Questions & Answers

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Technical words and phases

I have a customer who often has a need for technical words and expressions in English that you can't find in the dictionaries on the Internet.

*What do **you** do when you need technical words and expressions in English? Do you look in an English technical dictionary? And is it good enough and up-to-date?*

This is a really excellent question and I am sure there are lots of good answers.

My own approach is based on the fact that "technical English" is not one kind of English. People working even in adjacent fields sometimes find it difficult to understand each other's usage. This means that there are limits to the usefulness of all but the most specialised technical dictionaries.

But for Danish readers, there is one resource which deserves to be more widely known and used, and that is Gyldendal's Danish-English Industrial Dictionary (*Industriordbog*), which is not just concerned with heavy industry, as the name might seem to imply, but many different kinds of processes associated with production.

If I can't find what I am looking for there, I usually start looking on the Internet – not specifically in the dictionaries, though of course you may get useful hints there, but by doing searches for the Danish words or phrases in a similar context, where there is an English version too.

Or if I am proofreading a text in English, I might see if the same word or expression is used elsewhere in a similar way in a similar context.

Used carefully and sensibly, the Internet is a fantastic tool for people working with language.

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More next month!

Best wishes

Lawrence White

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