

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!*

No. 46 – August 2008

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Dear friends

Last month, Michael de Laine kept the office going single-handedly, while I took a brief holiday in Paris. And that was really good, because there has been no let up in work. In fact, it seems rather to be increasing. Well done, Michael! And now Claire is back and we can start preparing for the next academic year's teaching. But we still need someone who can help out in the office – a sort of all-rounder who can help us keep things on course... Any (freelance) offers? ☺

Translating the *Sea Stallion* from Glendalough

Over the years, *English support* has worked hard to help Danish scientists communicate their results to the rest of the world.

In 2006, we published a little booklet on *How to write a scientific paper*, and we have run quite a few courses based on it at Denmark's Technical University and now also at the University of Copenhagen.

We have also corrected the English in hundreds of scientific papers prior to publication, not to mention books, such as one on civil engineering, and another on systemics in relation to planning.

But we have never been involved in anything quite like the *Sea Stallion* project before. This is an experiment in progress, being described as it goes on and immediately presented to the world.

And the world is definitely interested. I don't know, but there are probably hundreds of thousands of researchers, sailing enthusiasts, journalists, and others out there who are following the project to varying degrees and are entirely dependent upon the English translation of the Danish reports that come in every day. We feel very privileged to be the ones doing the translation for them.

It's also a fantastic experience. I sit here in my comfortable office in Roskilde, far away from the actual sailing. But when you translate texts from one language into another, you have to get under the skin of the authors and feel what they feel. And in this case it can vary from the enthusiasm of a marine archaeologist explaining his theory about what Viking sails and rigging were really like, or the excitement of the stormy crossing of the Celtic Sea, to the palpable boredom of the long wait for a favourable wind in Lowestoft. And all the time decisions are being made and explained.

This is a marine archaeological experiment to test the theories behind the reconstruction. But it is also a test of the people involved (the 60-strong crew on a 30-metre ship), an educational voyage throwing more light on Viking life and times for us all, a publicity and fund-raising activity that will make further research possible, and a fantastic sailing adventure. All at the same time.

Follow the final stages of the *Sea Stallion*'s voyage home to Roskilde at www.havhingsten.dk.



The *Sea Stallion* crossing the North Sea.

Photo: Werner Karrasch.

Copyright: Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde

Achieve, attain, obtain

Here is a little group of words with some overlap in meaning, but which are far from entirely interchangeable. So when do you use which?

Achieve

The verb *achieve* is used with reference to the end results of effort of some kind.

So you can *achieve* a (metaphorical) *target* or *goal*, so you can *achieve fame, popularity, success, wealth*; you can *achieve promotion* or a *good job*; you can even *achieve everything* or *something* or *nothing* (that you set out to do).

Note how the verb to *achieve* is not about the process involved but the result. So I cannot say I have *achieved* a project or a piece of work.

Note too that the result is always abstract. I would not say I have *achieved* a cake or a computer program. And Robin Hood did not *achieve* targets with his bow and arrow; he *hit* them. Similarly, footballers *score* goals, and thereby *achieve* results.

Contrast the way the noun, *achievement*, can also be applied to a *cake*, a *book* or any other concrete result of effort. And it can even be applied to the process involved, as in "*Sailing the Sea Stallion from Dublin to Roskilde was quite an achievement*".

Attain

This verb comes from a Latin word meaning to *reach*, and is used in this quite literal sense in some limited contexts, such as the *age, depth, distance, height*, or *speed* reached, as in, "*The*

Sea Stallion attained a speed of ten knots in the Limfjord" or "*He attained the age of 65 and promptly retired*".

Otherwise, in modern English at least, it is best thought of as an alternative to the verb *achieve* in connection with careers and education, where it may be preferred to *achieve*, as in "*She attained a masters degree*".

The noun *attainment* is only ever used in this latter sense.

Note that *attain* is a more formal word than *achieve* and, unlike the latter, does not necessarily imply that any effort needed to be made... Use with caution.

Obtain

The fundamental sense of *obtain* is to *get* or *receive*. So we can also say, "*She obtained a masters degree*", but the meaning is quite different from our previous example with *attain*.

For instance, you can *obtain* results by getting others to *achieve* them. You may also be able to *obtain* a grant. And you can *obtain* the average speed of the *Sea Stallion* by dividing the distance travelled by the time taken.

Note: There is also a very special (intransitive) usage of *obtain* meaning *apply*, as in "*These conditions no longer obtain*".

Do you write scientific papers?

"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.

Kurt Lauridsen, MSc, PhD
Danish Decommissioning, Risø

Published by *English support*. Order it now from your local bookshop or direct from www.englishsupport.dk

How to write a scientific paper

Lawrence White

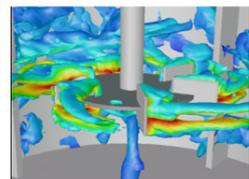


Figure 1. Global maximization of a gradient for the paper writing in author's brain

A free practical guide to writing scientific papers in English, written for people who do not have English as their mother tongue

From the workshop...

Reach and arrive at

The fundamental idea in the verb *to reach* is *to stretch out and touch*, as in “*Can you reach the ceiling?*” Its metaphorical use contains this idea: “*The longbow could reach a target 180 metres away*”, and “*During the war, the BBC reached deep into occupied Europe*”.

So when we use it to describe a journey, as in “*The Sea Stallion has reached Lowestoft*”, the idea is of the journey as a kind of stretching out over the distance covered. Contrast with *to arrive at*, which can be used interchangeably with *to reach* in journey descriptions, but which contains no sense of stretch at all.

And the point of arrival in both cases can be metaphorical: you can *arrive at/reach* a conclusion, a decision, a proposal, a solution, etc. The subtle difference is that *to reach* a decision, for instance, implies some discussion or effort or thought beforehand (the “stretching” if you like), whereas *to arrive at* or *come to* a decision does not.

Reach and catch

Things you *reach* for are usually stationary; things that are moving, you have to *catch*. So we *catch* buses, planes, ships and trains – all of which (being means of transport) are characterised by *not* staying in one place. ☺ For the same reason, you have to *catch* someone’s attention.

And the same goes for people on the move: “*I tried to reach Mr Stephens at his office, but I didn’t catch him before he left*”. Sometimes you have to *catch up* with someone, which means that you must move faster than them to get within range so you can talk.

The verb *catch* can also have a passive sense in relation to things that are thought of as moving: so you might *catch* a cold or a disease, or you might *not catch* what someone says to you.

Did you know?

English support can offer you **native-speaker** translation and proofreading help with not only *English*, but also *Bangla, Bulgarian, Chinese, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Farsi, Finnish, French, German, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Kurdish, Malay, Nepali, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Russian, Serbo-Croat, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, Ukrainian* and *Urdu*.

Forecast and predict

These two verbs mean more or less the same thing. The first can also be a noun, while the noun from the latter is *prediction*. So when we talk about the weather forecast, we often say something like: “*The weather forecast predicts a day of blazing sunshine*”.

But isn’t this a bit like saying “*the forecast forecasts*” or “*the prediction predicts*”? That would clearly be not only redundant, but also clumsy. Must we then say, “*The weather forecast is for a day of blazing sunshine*” or can we say “*The weather forecast promises...*”?

On the next page, we look at another case of redundancy readers have raised...

Don’t forget:

KOMMUNIKATIONS- OG SPROGFORUM 2008

Thursday, 25 September, in “Ovnhallen”, CBS Copenhagen

Information and booking: <http://www.kommunikationogsprog.dk/Forum>

Tel. 33 91 98 00 or e-mail: forum2008@kommunikationogsprog.dk

See you there!

Questions & Answers

(Edited)

If you did not receive this newsletter by e-mail, you will need to subscribe if you want it again. It's FREE. Get on the mailing list via the website!

The reason why is because...

Hi Lawrence and thanks. Always interesting, but I stumbled over a phrase in there. Can you say that "a reason is because"? In your newsletter, it says: "...The reason for the lack of government action is because there is little any democratic government can do to make people take courses they don't want to..."

Or should it say: "The reason... is that..."? In Denmark, saying "Grunden er fordi..." would be harsh and plain wrong in my ears.

How delicately put! My second correspondent was a little less indirect:

Hi Lawrence –

"The reason for the lack of government action is because there is..." – I have been accustomed to a higher standard from you. "Worrying about what you can't do anything about" – sloppier than what would be expected. Perhaps the publishing of this issue was pushed a bit into the premature?

Hmm! Perhaps. So let me say right from the start that both correspondents have a point. These sentences are not as elegant as they might be. I expect my second correspondent would prefer "Worrying about *things* you can't do anything about", and in retrospect I think I would too, but it must be said that there is nothing actually wrong with the sentence I wrote, in which "what" plays a perfectly reasonable grammatical role, whereas in my correspondent's joke, "sloppier than *what* would be expected", it has no role whatsoever, is entirely superfluous, and should not be used.

But what about "a reason is because"? Well, there certainly is redundancy, and it might have been better if I had written either "The reason for the lack of government action is *that* there is..." or "The lack of government action is *because* there is...", but the plain fact of the matter is that there are 999,000 hits in Google for "reason is because", and that takes no account of all the cases with words in between "reason" and "is because", as in my case.

Now, quite a few of these hits are for sites explaining how the construction is "incorrect", but they all agree it is widely used. And, indeed, this is abundantly clear from all the other hits. My own view is that when grammarians have to put a lot of effort into explaining why we should *not* say something almost everybody *does* say, it is probably a sign that the language has moved on. A closely related example is the expression "the reason why", which is now established idiom.

So, I agree it is not elegant, and I think it is probably wise to avoid it – if only so your Danish and Norwegian friends don't start believing you are losing your grip – but it's actually quite normal at all levels of speech and writing, included edited writing, and I suspect the theologians of grammar will be avidly defending it within half a century. ☺

Roskilde City Council and the Viking Ship Museum invite you to a giant

WELCOME-HOME PARTY FOR THE SEA STALLION

10:00 AM: Viking Ship Museum opens with a Viking Market, and the four other Skuldelev Viking ship reconstructions sail off to meet the *Sea Stallion* in Roskilde Fjord

2:00 PM: *The Sea Stallion from Glendalough* arrives in the Museum harbour to an official welcome

For the full programme, see www.vikingskibsmuseet.dk and (in Danish only) www.roskilde.dk

See you there!

Best wishes

Lawrence White

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(4)

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