

On the current presentation of scientific papers: 4. Spacing things out

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Authors are largely guilty of not providing accurate copy; many simply do not check their penultimate version with their co-authors, which quickly improves accuracy, and many clearly do not assiduously proof-read their final versions. A glance at some papers shows that they will be a nightmare to correct if they are not sent back to the authors to make the necessary, if fastidious, amendments. Here I will be talking mainly about spacing in the text of an article.

You might think there is not much to say about spacing, but as an editor I find it one of my most annoying jobs. This is because it is normally quicker to get a paper through to publication if corrections are done in the editorial office. Getting the authors to comply is like pulling teeth; a few corrections are made, many are missed and innumerable versions go back and forth before a definitive copy is achieved.

So what are the more common issues regarding spacing? A few examples can help illustrate them. I will show superfluous spaces as hash signs (#) hereafter:

"in a similar case(#Martin et al.#, 2011)"...instead of
"in a similar case (Martin et al., 2011)"

The lack of a space between the last letter of the sentence and the parenthesis occurs in many, for which I have no explanation. A space after the first parenthesis is often seen, as also between the full stop and comma. These are hardly noticeable, even trivial; so should we leave them as they are? I also wonder why some authors (mostly from the Far East) put double spaces after a sentence before starting a new one, or between words# in# the# same# sentence. Interestingly the first double space shows up as an error in Word (ie without the hash being used here), and when it is corrected, the next double space shows up, and so on. These errors are not that easy to spot when they are isolated cases, but they are usually repeated throughout a document. It would be arduous to correct them if we did not have a suitable tool ("Replace all") in Word; but how do you replace all double spaces by single spaces as it does not work so well in this case? There is another less frequent oddity, which is not using sensible letter spacing; sometimes the letters seem to be holding each other up, while in others they seem to have a body odour problem. The Help menu of Word will guide you through the business of letter spacing, less of a problem today than with older versions.

I have an issue with text references given as figures - which do you prefer [14,15,16,17,18], or [14,#15,#16,#17,#18]? And is this not better as [14-18], making spacing between the figures redundant? Another case where spaces might or might not be used is after units, on which there seems to be little consensus, eg 12cm or 12 cm; gm/L versus gm / L. A common case is with P values, where P<0.05 is better than P#<#0.05. It also seems odd that in about 70-80% of articles I edit, authors use the words "more than" and "less than",

ignoring the simple symbols < and >.

What about spaces between words when some of them today are written without any? Do we use *Key words* or *Keywords*. There are hundreds of similar examples, eg flow cytometry, down regulation, over expression. According to Wikipedia, "*asynalephaor (synaloephaeis) the merging of two syllables into one, especially when it causes two words to be pronounced as one.*" [In American English, many more synalephae are creeping in.] Is there any consistency among editors, or indeed the rest of the literary world, on which to choose, and does it matter? Clearly Wikipedia itself is inconsistent within its own entry:

"Keyword (linguistics)

In corpus linguistics a key word is a word which occurs in a text more often than ... Key words are..."

Spaces are found unnecessarily after (and sometimes before) superscripts (#²). They may be inserted after numbering of a heading, a subsection, a figure or table (eg 2.#1#Chemicals). Long single (!) spaces occur when authors end a paragraph with only a few words on the last line and forget to hit "Return". Spaces are difficult to control between lines, a good example being insertion of a formula without encroaching on the lines already written. And what spacing should authors use before and after each line? They can choose single spacing, 1.5 spacing, double spacing and so on. But the distance can also be controlled by using the *Page layout* submenu to set the distance before and/or after a particular line of writing. These are problems that authors probably assume will be sorted out by the editors of a journal or the publishing staff, just as the white space around a figure is not a matter that the average author considers. Should authors be given explicit instructions on these matters? Some journals can be very fastidious, eg *Biochemical Journal*, but their "Instructions to Authors" amounts to some 40-50 pages.

In some instances spacing is never a problem, one being in email addresses. If everyone accepts this convention, it is not impossible for authors to adapt to situations where spaces ought to be standardised. One example where spacing varies, ie from no spacing to regular spacing, is in the presentation of references. Some journals prefer maximum compaction (eg *Neuro-Oncology*2012;14(6):701-711), whereas others use spaces between the different components.

To recapitulate, maybe this diatribe about the problem of spacing is vacuous; perhaps it is not worth the time or effort to conform to particular conventions (if these were ever to come into existence) because the "errors" considered above seldom if ever change the meaning of what has been written. But I am sure someone will have an example where the omission of a space or the insertion of an unnecessary space has created a problem.