
As words go by

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We have removed the general terms from our journal's style guide and are instead requesting authors to comply with standard official orthography. In practice, this allows for more freedom of choice and room for more individual writing styles.



Photo: Sturlason

To communicate its content, the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association needs to use functional Norwegian medical terminology. One of the tools is the journal's word list, with 'recommended spelling of medical terms and expressions' (1), which has been revised and adjusted on numerous occasions since its first appearance in 1973. Today, the list encompasses approximately 3 000 entries. Most of them are medical terms, but until recently, the list has also included some common general terms. These terms have been based on various linguistic norms, editors' preferences and social trends. This has sometimes given rise to stylistic confusion, since forms such as *bein* and *sju* were used in parallel with *frem* and *solen*. In recent years, the house style has followed a moderate Bokmål standard. There has been little room for variation: *Ben*, *boken*, *deltager*, *endrede*, *frem*, *solen*, *syv* and *trett* were permitted, but not *bein*, *boka*, *deltaker*, *endrete/endra*, *fram*, *sola*, *sju* or *trøtt*.

These linguistic guidelines have caused discontent among some of our authors. Many feel uncomfortable in such a 'linguistic straitjacket' (2) and are frustrated when word forms that feel natural to them are corrected. This is unsurprising, given that the forms comply with the official Bokmål norm. Often, these spellings that have not been permitted in the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association are deeply ingrained in the minds of both authors and editors, and most likely also of a majority of the population. The National Library's N-gram service reveals that the competing word forms tend to be used with equal frequency, and in some cases the 'outlawed' forms may be the most frequently occurring ones. In these cases, the house norm will be perceived as too strict.

However, the goal is not necessarily to follow the majority. The Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association has a clear aim of 'reflecting the diversity in medicine and among authors, for example with regard to different genders, places of residence, ethnicities and career stages' (3). A natural consequence of this aim would be to also reflect linguistic diversity, making use of the entire Bokmål norm and permitting all official forms of the language. The current norm provides for broad freedom of choice and for use of a written style that approaches the spoken language for those who so prefer.

As a part of what National Librarian Aslak Sira Myhre referred to in the *Dagsavisen* daily as 'the compact majority, all those informal setters of linguistic norms in daily life, newspapers, teachers, authors and writers, who through their choices make my choices increasingly hard to adhere to' (4), the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association has chosen to abandon a strict house style. We do not wish to maintain the notion that using diphthongs and the *-a* suffix is somehow un-academic (5). This is why we recently deleted approximately 400 general terms from our word list and replaced them with a single rule (6): 'In Norwegian, you are free to choose any orthographic variant, as long as you comply with the official orthography of either Bokmål or Nynorsk.'

The Bokmål and Nynorsk norms are prepared by the Language Council of Norway, which thereby determines what is considered valid orthography. Approved spellings are found in the Bokmål and Nynorsk online dictionaries

ordbok.uib.no), maintained by the University of Bergen and the Language Council of Norway. These are free of charge and 'the only available digital dictionaries that include the entire range of forms' ((7)). They also provide the inflected forms of all entries. If you find it there, you can write it – including in the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association. The dictionaries are continuously updated, and the ongoing revision project will also ensure that the vocabulary, definitions and examples of usage all reflect current language usage (7).

«We do not wish to maintain the notion that using diphthongs and the -a suffix is somehow un-academic»

If anyone at this point should be concerned about an approaching flood of radical Bokmål in the columns of the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association, they will not be the first. It is almost one hundred years since G. Winge, irate at having read the word *søknad*, rather than *ansøking*, requested that the language in the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association 'in the name of decency and reason' be kept 'pure and clean' (8). We, on the other hand, endorse the view of the linguist Marit Julien: 'Since the spoken language is undergoing constant change, we cannot rely on tradition as our only guideline if we want to have a written language that can be used by everybody' (9). This should after all be our goal.

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