The suffixes -ic and -ical can be confusing. Do they mean the same thing, or is there a distinction? Unfortunately, the answer is, “It depends.”

Both suffixes form adjectives meaning “of or relating to” the root noun.¹ ² In some cases, words ending in -ic and -ical have the same meaning. For example, neurologic is synonymous with neurological, astronomic with astronomical, and hematologic with hematological. When the two forms have the same meaning, it’s important to choose one form and use it consistently throughout your manuscript.
In other cases, similar words ending in \(-ic\) and \(-ical\) have distinct meanings. In past *Word for Word* entries, we’ve described the distinctions between *classic* (typical) and *classical* (pertaining to the arts or humanities),\(^3\) *historic* (important to history) and *historical* (occurring in the past),\(^4\) and *periodic* (occurring at regular intervals) and *periodical* (a newspaper or magazine).\(^5\)

Often, the difference is more subtle. *Merriam-Webster* points out that in some instances, “adjectives formed with \(-ical\) have a wider… range than corresponding adjectives [formed with] \(-ic\).”\(^2\) For example, *physiologic* generally refers to normal—as opposed to pathologic—characteristics, while *physiological* has the broader meaning of “pertaining to physiology.”\(^6\)

When you’re not certain whether to use the \(-ic\) or \(-ical\) form of a word, consult a dictionary. If it’s a medical term, it’s best to consult a medical dictionary such as *Stedman’s* or *Dorland’s*. You can also email RML-Help@mdanderson.org or RML-Editing@mdanderson.org and ask for your question about word usage to be directed to the on-call editor.

**References**
