

Word for Word

-ic or -ical: When Suffixes Are Problematic (Problematical?)



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

1. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary. 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/-ic>. Accessed February 12, 2021.
2. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary. 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/-ical>. Accessed February 12, 2021.
3. Classic or Classical? Word for Word. April 4, 2012. <http://inside2.mdanderson.org/w4w/2012/04/classic-or-classical.html>. Accessed February 12, 2021.
4. Historic or Historical? Word for Word. July 11, 2012. <http://inside2.mdanderson.org/w4w/2012/07/historic-or-historical.html>. Accessed February 12, 2021.
5. Hale K. Periodic or Periodical? Word for Word. September 16, 2015. <http://inside2.mdanderson.org/w4w/2015/09/periodic-or-periodical.html>. Accessed February 12, 2021.
6. Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary, 32nd ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier/Saunders; 2012:1444.

—Bryan Tutt

Copyright © 2021, All rights reserved. Research Medical Library, Editing Services.