

Word for Word

“Alternate” vs. “Alternative”: Which is the correct alternative?

In biomedical writing, *alternative* is intended more often than *alternate*. *Alternative* is used when a choice is offered (e.g., alternative suggestions) or when something differs from conventional practice (e.g., alternative treatments), whereas *alternate* is used when something occurs by turns or every other time (e.g., alternating shifts) or when one thing substitutes for another (e.g., alternate reviewers). *Alternative* and *alternate* can both be used as nouns, but only *alternate* can be used as a verb. Both terms can serve as adjectives, and both words have adverb forms (ending in *-ly*).

Incorrect:

Radiation therapy is an effective alternate to surgery in some patients.

Correct:

Radiation therapy is an effective alternative to surgery in some patients.

Incorrect:

Mary was chosen as an alternative for the jury.

Correct:

Mary was chosen as an alternate for the jury.

Incorrect:

We sought an alternate explanation.

Correct:

We sought an alternative explanation.

Incorrect:

Regimens X and Y were given alternatively.

Correct:

Regimens X and Y were given alternately.

Also correct:

We alternated regimen X and regimen Y.

Bibliography

Garner BA. *Garner's Modern American Usage*, 3rd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2009:38.
Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster; 2003:37