To show the sequential relationship of ideas in a scientific article, sentences or paragraphs can begin with words that clarify this relationship. For example, sentences or paragraphs that need to present information in a specific order can begin with words such as “first” or “firstly,” “second” or “secondly,” etc. Either form of the introductory word is acceptable, but most English language authorities consider the “first” form to be the better choice.

**Examples:**

**Acceptable:** *Firstly*, remove the mononuclear cell layer from the interface.

**Preferred:** *First*, remove the mononuclear cell layer from the interface.
Acceptable: I have to watch my guinea pigs closely for several reasons. Firstly, they ate my research paper. Secondly, they chewed up my tax return.

Preferred: I have to watch my guinea pigs closely for several reasons. First, they ate my research paper. Second, they chewed up my tax return.

The Grammar Girl website explains why “first” is a better choice than “firstly.” One reason is the length of the two words: “first” is shorter and simpler than “firstly,” which makes “first” a better choice in scientific writing.\(^1\)\(^2\) The second reason is that in a longer list, the “-ly” form becomes awkward (e.g., “seventhly” and “eighthly”).\(^1\)

Merriam-Webster agrees that “first” is the better choice, commenting that “In writing, first is much more common than firstly and is probably the best bet for most situations, even if the only reason is that a reader may wonder if firstly is proper and be distracted by this word choice.”\(^3\)

Merriam-Webster offers an interesting historical note, stating, “there’s been a conspiracy against firstly for centuries”; in fact, when the word was first added to Webster’s Dictionary in 1847 (after being in use since the 1300s), “. . . it wasn’t even accorded the courtesy of a definition; instead, the entry simply reads ‘FIRST-LY, adv. Improperly used instead of first’.”\(^3\)

References


\(^3\)Merriam-Webster, Words At Play, 2021 https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/first-or-
Even though they are both the best bet for most. Accessed May 5, 2021.

— Tammy Locke

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