

# Word for Word

## Setting the stage for the correct use of person-first language



The use of person-first language in biomedical writing is intended to emphasize the distinction between a diagnosis, disease, or disability and the person who has it.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the convention in academic and scientific writing is to prefer, for example, *patients with cancer* over *cancer patients* or *people with schizophrenia* over *schizophrenics*.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, information about a patient's diagnosis and prognosis, such as cancer staging, should clearly refer to the cancer, not the patient. Compound adjectives such as *advanced-stage* or *stage IIB* should therefore not be used to describe *patient*.

**Incorrect:** *EGFR* K858R substitutions were identified in 10% of early-stage patients with non-small cell lung cancer.

**Correct:** *EGFR* K858R substitutions were identified in 10% of patients with early-stage non-small cell lung cancer.

**Incorrect:** Breast tumor samples were obtained from 112 stage III patients.

**Correct:** Breast tumor samples were obtained from 112 patients with stage III disease.

Likewise, biomedical writers should avoid saying that a patient *was* a stage; instead, a patient *has* a cancer, tumor, or disease of a particular stage or TNM category.<sup>3</sup>

**Incorrect:** Of 218 women with cervical cancer, 23% were stage IIB or higher.

**Correct:** Of 218 women with cervical cancer, 23% had stage IIB or higher disease.

**Incorrect:** The patients included in the trial were M0.

**Correct:** In the included patients, the M category was M0.

**Also correct:** The patients included in the trial had no distant metastasis.

## References

1. People-first language. *AMA Style Insider* blog. October 5, 2017. Accessed June 15, 2022.  
<https://amastyleinsider.com/2017/10/05/people-first-language/>
2. *AMA Manual of Style*, 11th ed. Oxford University Press; 2020:547-548.
3. Deming S. TNM cancer staging terms. *Word for Word* blog. March 28, 2018. Accessed June 16, 2022.  
<http://inside2.mdanderson.org/w4w/2018/03/tnm-cancer-staging-terms.html>

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