

Word for Word

***Synergism* and *synergy*: Are they synonyms?**



When writing about two entities (such as two drugs) working together, we can choose from multiple similar words. Which is better: *Synergism* or *synergy*? *Synergistic* or *synergic*?

The short answer is that these words have very similar meanings and are often used interchangeably. Whichever you choose will likely be understood. That said, there are sometimes differences in how the words are used.

First, let's look at the nouns *synergism* and *synergy*. Both terms convey a beneficial combined effect of two entities, generally meaning that the two entities together have an effect that is greater than the sum of their individual effects.¹⁻³ However, in the Medical Subject Headings online thesaurus, which contains the vocabulary used by the National Library of Medicine for indexing and cataloguing biomedical information, *drug synergism* is an official heading, described as “the action of a drug in promoting or enhancing the effectiveness of another drug,”⁴ and *synergy* is not listed. Thus, if you're referring to drug combinations, we recommend using *synergism*. In lay contexts (such as business), *synergy* is more common.

Example:

We observed synergism between the two drugs in reducing cell proliferation.

We see a lot of synergy between our two organizations.

Now let's consider the adjectives *synergistic* and *synergic*. Because *synergistic* is derived from *synergism*, the same principle applies: we recommend *synergistic* when discussing drug combinations. The National Cancer Institute's Dictionary of Cancer Terms includes *synergistic* as its term of choice⁵; *synergic* is not listed. For lay contexts, either *synergistic* or *synergic* is acceptable (*synergistic* is more common).

Example:

The two drugs had a synergistic effect.

Yoga and meditation had a synergistic impact on his well-being.

Yoga and meditation had a synergic impact on his well-being. [less common]

There are two other related words: the noun *synergia* (a very uncommon synonym for *synergism* and *synergy*) and the adjective *synergetic* (also uncommon; this word can be a synonym for *synergistic* and *synergic* or can relate to physical/chemical sciences or systems theory). We recommend avoiding these words in favor of the more common ones.

In sum, the pairs *synergism/synergy* and *synergistic/synergic* are essentially synonyms in general practice, but *synergism* and *synergistic* are preferred in biomedical writing. A final tip for deciding which word to use is to determine the standard practice in your area of research. We recommend searching for the words you are considering using in respected journals in your field.

Bibliography

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