We have all heard about communication and how words themselves are the least important part of communication. And, within the words themselves, the least attended-to word seems to be the so-called “extra” words, such as prepositions, adjectives, and adverbs.

We focus on verbs to be sure they are action oriented, used in the correct tense, case correct, and meaningful. Nouns often are determined by content and context. From there, we pay less attention to adjectives, adverbs, and, probably least of all, prepositions. Yet, those are each important. Let me give you an example.

When Dr. Anne Bavier assumed the presidency of the National League for Nursing (NLN), she emphasized why NLN was “for” nursing and not “of.” Specifically, Anne said:

Please note, it’s not National League of Nursing—it is National League for Nursing. It reflects our founding values that educators are pivotal for the profession, and must have a forum just for their purposes. It speaks VOLUMES that NLN is a service, a resource. We believe faculty members are our greatest hope for continuing to advance human health. And, we act on your behalf.

This example shows how a small part of speech (and writing) can direct one’s thinking. Sometimes a preposition may not make a difference, yet other times it makes a great deal of difference.

That brings me to the name of this journal. It is The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing. In other words, it is not for continuing education of nurses, meaning our content is not about content for the population of nurses. Rather, its focus is of continuing education in nursing, which means that our focus is on what is important in the provision of continuing education. The seemingly insignificant preposition has specific meaning.

Now think for a minute about adjectives and adverbs. Women, the dominant gender in nursing, tend to use lots of flowery, softening, emphasizing words prior to nouns. Men, typically, just say what they mean. It isn’t a “little suggestion,” or whatever the noun might represent. It is a suggestion. Yet, sometimes adjectives are important. For example, when we say something such as “the small sample,” certain thoughts occur to us. In this case, small is important because it suggests a limitation to what we are reading.

We also face similar challenges in the use of adverbs. For example, whenever I see an objective that starts with an adverb, I become concerned. As an example, if I am to accurately administer a medication, does that mean I can be willy-nilly in performing other objectives? Can I do an assessment that isn’t accurate or complete, yet say I met the objective because, unlike the medication example, the relevant objective wasn’t preceded by the word accurately? I doubt that is our intent; however, I could argue that the author of the objectives obviously was not concerned with accuracy because it was omitted in the assessment objective.

English, as with any other language, can be tricky. Our task as authors is to use the various elements of words, even though they are the least effective part of the complex process of communication, to do our best to let others know what our intent is.

After writing this, I found Jerry Scott’s and Jim Borgman’s Zits comic strip (2017). For those of you unfamiliar with the strip, Jeremy is the teenage son, and he is a perfect stereotype of what we think of when we hear teenage boy. In the first strip, he says he is going to “study Sara.”
(Sara is his girlfriend.) Strip 2 shows really shocked parents. And then in strip 3, Jeremy corrects himself by saying “WITH! I’m going to study WITH Sara.” His father’s comment fits with this editorial. Dad says: “Prepositions matter, son.” Yes, they do!

REFERENCE