

Data: Singular or Plural?

Yes.

That is, The Times's style manual allows "data" to be construed as either singular or plural.

I gather that some faithful **After Deadline** readers find this permissiveness hard to stomach. Still, many of these Latin plurals ending in "a" seem to make a slow transition to singular use in English. "Agenda" has made the switch completely (not to mention "opera"). On the other hand, our stylebook continues to insist on "media" as plural — "The news media have followed the story intently" — though it is used more and more as a singular elsewhere.

"Data" seems to be to be midway in the transition process, and our treatment of it reflects that status. Here's our stylebook entry:

data is acceptable as a singular term for information: *The data was persuasive*. In its traditional sense, meaning a collection of facts and figures, the noun can still be plural: *They tabulate the data, which arrive from bookstores nationwide*. (In this sense, the singular is *datum*, a word both stilted and deservedly obscure.)

I'm not a linguist or a lexicographer, but I suspect that one factor influencing the plural or singular use of such words is whether the original Latinate singular is still in common use. No one refers to a single entry on a to-do list as an "agendum." On the other hand, "medium" is still routinely used to describe, say, television as opposed to print, which argues for continuing to use "media" as a plural.

"Datum" is still used occasionally in technical contexts, but seldom elsewhere. As it fades, it leaves room for "data" as a singular — however much the traditionalists wince.

Hobgoblins

By Philip B. Corbett

After Deadline examines questions of grammar, usage and style encountered by writers and editors of The Times.

It is adapted from a weekly newsroom critique overseen by Philip B. Corbett, the deputy news editor who is also in charge of The Times's style manual. The goal is not to chastise, but to point out recurring problems and suggest solutions.

Since many writers wrestle with similar troubles, we think these observations might interest general readers, too.

Some Rules That Aren't

Readers of *After Deadline* are not shy about describing their own usage peeves. They frequently find fault with elements of *Times* style, and they're quite willing to offer constructive criticism of my prose as well.

A few points of usage have prompted recurring questions. I thought I'd take a moment to explain my view on a handful of these points — not to shut off the debate, but to keep it going.

Contributed by Nicholas W. Napoli