



Ms. Particular Presents: Detract vs Distract

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More and more science writers seem to be using these two useful *d* words incorrectly, which makes Ms. P cranky.

From *Garner's Modern American Usage* (Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 242):
“Although *detract* can be transitive (meaning “to divert”) as well as intransitive (meaning “to take something away”), the transitive use—by far less common—encroaches on territory better served by *distract*. Thus, instead of using *detract attention from*, careful writers say *distract attention from*. “

Don't distract your readers by mixing up these frequently confused *d* words

***“detract”* means to diminish, take away from, or reduce the value of something**

“The many grammatical mistakes detracted from the quality of the author’s paper.”

***“distract”* means to divert someone’s attention or interest, and it *always* takes a direct object (the thing that is distracted)**

“The many grammatical mistakes distracted readers and prevented them from concentrating on the scientific arguments presented in the paper.”

Here’s a simple two-step test:

1. “Do I mean *diminish* or *reduce*?” Use *detract from*.
2. “Does the sentence have an object for the verb (somebody or something that directly receives the action of the verb)?” Use *distract*.

Some recent *PRL* horrible examples:

“Static on a radio station, ancillary conversations in a crowded room, and flashing neon lights along a busy thoroughfare all tend to obscure or distract from the desired information.” [Should be *detract*; no direct object for the verb.]

“What one has done by adding Eq. (25) to \vec{J}_2 is actually to distract some part of the proton spin and add this part to the photon orbital angular momentum or the opposite process.” [Even worse; I think the authors meant subtract, not *distract or detract*. <sigh>]