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In re Words: Rein in Your ‘Reigns’

By Juliette Gillespie

It was Dec. 5, 2019, when I posted the following message on Facebook: “I just edited an article where the author correctly used both ‘reign’ and ‘rein’ ... my heart is full!” A happy day for me—for sure—and proof that my obsession with vocabulary is not a product of pandemic-lockdown nuttiness (*All work and no play makes Juliette a dull girl!*) but a trait I have long possessed and nurtured.

Today’s topic is *rein* vs. *reign*. They both sound like “rain,” with the long A sound created by the digraph “ei.”

You are probably familiar with this mnemonic device: “I before E, except after C, or when sounding like A, as in neighbor or weigh.” There are so many exceptions to this “rule” that one commentator wrote, “Why don’t we all just agree that it is dumb and useless, and be content just to laugh at it?” Another suggested that it should be “consigned to oblivion.” For our purposes, however, the words *rein* and *reign* do “sound like A,” so the rule is good enough for me and will live another day.

A rein is a long, narrow strap attached at one end to the bit of a bridle, typically used in pairs, to guide or check an animal while riding or driving. It is usually used in the plural, as in “to take the reins.” A person can literally take the reins in order to steer the animal (usually a horse). Or, one might metaphorically take the reins by assuming responsibility or taking charge. One can “tighten the reins,” and something can be “reined in.” Both these expressions indicate pulling on the reins to exert more control.

But all of these uses of “reins” are spelled *reins* ... not *reigns*.

So, why (oh why?) am I seeing the following examples? It did not take me long to find these in articles published over the last several months:

- New Jersey: “The message to litigants is clear: Be prepared to see a *tightening of reigns* on venue in patent cases.”
- Pennsylvania: “Chief operating officer [XYZ], who *took the reigns* of the advisory services subsidiary as president”
- Washington, DC: “Now the Justice Department has stepped up *to reign in* this Texas-sized assault on our reproductive freedoms.”

And it’s not just Americans making this faux pas. From the UK: “Laws and regulations should be tightened and enforced, *to reign in* the worst behaviour.” (*Behaviour!* Adorable.)

So what is this word *reign*?

The verb *to reign* means to hold royal office, or rule as king or queen. “Queen Victoria reigned over Britain from 1837 to 1901.” (That’s a long reign.) It can also indicate being the best or most important in a particular area or domain. For instance: “The bicycle

reigned supreme as Britain's most popular mode of transport." Or: "For more than a century, peace reigned undisturbed in Brittany."

The noun *reign* is the period during which a leader rules. For example: "The reign of Louis XIV lasted from 1643 until his death in 1715." (That's an even longer reign!) A reign can also be the period of time when something is the main feeling or quality in a situation, like the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution, 1793-94.

To be fair, I did find plenty of instances where "reign" was used correctly. For example:

- Washington, DC: "The days of the decade-plus reign of firm leaders may be behind us."
- California: "While litigation has historically reigned supreme in the region, the talent pool is shifting as more lawyers relocate."

From my thoroughly unscientific review of recent legal publishing, it appears that people simply prefer to use "reign" instead of "rein." Maybe it's the fun, quirky spelling with the random, silent "g."

It's easy to remember which word to use if one is familiar with a bit of Latin. *Regina* means queen, and *regnum* is "kingship, dominion, rule, realm." So, when deciding between *rein* and *reign*, the one that contains a "g" (like *regina* or *regnum*)—*reign*—is the one about a ruler or ruling. The other one refers to the reins on a horse or other animal, like, perhaps, some kind of deer.

According to the [San Diego Zoo](#): "Reindeer are thought to have first been domesticated by Arctic peoples at least 3,000 years ago in northern Eurasia (Lapland), and still remain the only deer species to be widely domesticated."

They are the only deer on which reins are used. Thus they are rein-deer! That's the origin of the word, right?

Wrong.

The word "reindeer" comes from an Old Norse word: *hreindyri*. "Dyr" means animal, and "hrein"—when used by itself—references a horned animal.

Apparently, I stumbled upon a “folk etymology.”

In present-day English, some native speakers conceive of the word *reindeer* as composed of two meaningful parts: *rein* + *deer*. This is something which, in the Christian tradition at least, does make a lot of sense. Given that the most prominent role of reindeer in the West is to serve as Santa’s means of transport, an allusion to “reins” is unsurprising. This makes the hypothesis of folk etymology plausible.

Van Epps, Briana, “Reindeer = Rein + Deer,” Morph, June 6, 2018.

So, my explanation is plausible, and it makes sense—it’s just not accurate. However, it can still be used as a way to remember which spelling of “rein” to use. It certainly helps me.

With all this talk of reindeer and Santa, I have the perfect segue into *sleigh*, which looks a lot like *sleight*, as in sleight-of-hand, which is also known as *prestidigitation* and *legerdemain*. (I’m in word-nerd heaven!) And would you believe that “sleight” also comes from Old Norse? It’s hard for me to resist going down this rabbit hole.

But, sadly, I am out of time (and space). It will have to wait until next year.

May all variants of COVID-19 be reined in, and may peace and prosperity reign in 2022.■

Juliette Gillespie is Law Editor at the New Jersey Law Journal, where she is responsible for contributed content and special sections. Contact her at jgillespie@alm.com. On Twitter: @JGillespieNJLJ