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There are two little words in the Filipino language that cause more than their fair share of headaches for writers and editors who strive to be faithful to the *balarila*, the official grammar of the national language. The words *nang* and *ng* are actually the same single word but with many meanings – the short *ng* is just an abbreviation of the longer *nang*. This prompts the question, “What’s the difference and which one is correct for a given situation?”

The reason there are two spellings for this word was probably a matter of convenience in the beginning. The word *nang/ng* was so many uses in the Filipino language that it naturally occurs with great frequency in writing. Using an abbreviation saves time and ink.

In the days of the old *baybayin* alphabet, 500 years ago, *nang* was written with just one character, (ᜏ), because the *baybayin* was incapable of showing the whole word *nang*. Writing just one character for this word was not a great burden back then, but this character was the letter *na*, which just happens to be another very common Filipino word. So although it was easy for the writers, we can imagine the confusion among readers who tried to figure out which of the multitude of possible meanings the writer had intended to say.

During the Spanish era, the Western alphabet replaced the *baybayin* script. Originally *nang* was always spelled in full – as can be seen in the first book ever printed in the Philippines, the *Doctrina Christiana* of 1593. Later, various abbreviations arose for this ubiquitous word. Most of the abbreviations used the Spanish tilde ~ mark to signify the Filipino *ng* sound and to distinguish it from the sounds of either *n* or *g* alone. By the end of the 1800s, it was

## Nang or ng? The long and the short of it

common to abbreviate *nang* as *ñg* or *nᜏ*, or with a single large tilde above the pair of letters.

With the revolution against Spain, there was a revolution in Tagalog spelling as well. The national hero, himself, Dr. Jose Rizal laid out new ideas in his *Studies on the Tagalog Language* (1893) to simplify the often-awkward conventions of Spanish spelling.

Rizal and other reformers added some useful foreign letters to the alphabet such as *k* and *w*, and he advocated the use of the letter *ᜏ*, alone with a tilde, to represent the sound of *ng*. He proposed that the long *nang* should be spelled, *naᜏ* and the short *ng* as *nᜏ*.

The general public accepted most of these ideas immediately but the long *naᜏ* was not one of them. The various versions of the short *ng*, however, persisted well into the 1900s.

In 1940, Lope K. Santos wrote the *Balarila*, the standard grammar for the national language. In it he standardized the rules for using the short *ng* (without a tilde) and the long *nang*, so that writers could convey their ideas more precisely. But to this day most people are still confused about which one to use.

For many Filipino students, grammar class is a nightmare and it doesn’t help that even the teachers are often confused by this little word. Rules for using it are needlessly complicated and can fill pages in a textbook. It is no wonder that the rules are applied inconsistently throughout written media, from informal blogs to respected newspapers – even from page to page within a single newspaper.

But there is a relatively easy way to remember the correct usage of *nang/ng* without invoking the dreaded B-word (*Balarila*). Just keep in mind that *there are only five situations where you*

*should write the long nang, and for everything else, just write the short ng.*

The author, poet, critic and national artist, Virgilio Almario boiled all the rules down to these five cases in one of his articles on language in a 1992 edition of *Di-yaryo Filipino*.

Use the long *nang* in the following situations:

1. When *nang* means the same thing as *noong* –

*Umaga nang barilin si Rizal.*

*Nang umagang iyon ay nagkasakit si Pedro.*

2. When *nang* means the same thing as *upang* and *para* –

*Sa mga Espanyol, dapat barilin si Rizal nang matakot ang mga Filipino.*

*Dapat dalhin si Pedro sa ospital nang magamot.*

3. When *na* and *ng* are combined –

*Sa mga Filipino, sobra nang lupit ng mga Espanyol.*

*Sobra nang hirap ang inabot ni Pedro.*

4. When *nang* describes how something is done or to what extent –

*Binaril si Rizal nang patalikod.*

*Namayat nang todo si Pedro dahil sa sakit.*

5. When *nang* is a ligature that joins a repeated word –

*Barilin man nang barilin si Rizal ay hindi siya mamamatay.*

*Ginamot nang ginamot si Pedro para gumaling.*

That’s all there is to it. Grammarians may spend an eternity splitting hairs about the application of the long *nang* and short *ng*, but the rest of us don’t need to know about all that. As long as we remember these five special cases for the long *nang*, we can write the short *ng* for everything else and forget the rest of the rules.

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