
6 Grammar Superstitions: The Never-Never Rules

For many of us, “grammar” is all about the things you should never do: Never end a sentence with a preposition. Never split an infinitive. Never use a contraction. Never begin a sentence with *and*, *but*, or *because*. Never refer to yourself as “I” or address your reader as “you.” But any look at professional writing, the kind of writing that lives and breathes, will reveal the folly of the Never-Never Rules. They are merely hobgoblins and superstitions.

The Never-Never Rules prevail in many English classrooms probably because English teachers learned them and feel an obligation to pass them on. (Try twisting that sentence into a pretzel to avoid violating the final preposition “rule.”) But follow them to the letter and all you are likely to end with is writing that is stilted, voiceless, and uninviting. The Never-Never Rules might have made sense once, somewhere, sometime, for somebody (they were usually stylistic suggestions that eighteenth-century writers and grammarians became increasingly dogmatic about). But over time, language changes. Over space, language varies. The wise writing teacher watches language as it is actually used and is not haunted by superstitions.

Let’s look at some of the Never-Never Rules one by one:

1. *The Dreaded Sentence-Ending Preposition*

The superstition that a sentence should not end with a preposition grew out of a somewhat reasonable piece of eighteenth-century advice that an effectively written sentence should not end with a weak or unimportant word. But in the nineteenth century, the advice about final prepositions hardened into a stern grammar rule, and despite the best efforts of some major writers and commentators to get rid of it, it unfortunately endures. Even Winston Churchill tried to put this superstition to rest. When he was criticized for a sentence of his that ended with a preposition, he retorted, “That is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put!”

Even in the eighteenth century, grammarians understood that although its Latin name suggested that a *pre-position* was positioned *before* its object, English prepositions were often more closely connected to the verbs they came *after*. Take the sentence *We were talking to Ricardo*.

When you form the question *Is Ricardo the person you were talking to?*, the affinity between the verb and the preposition—*talking to*—is clear. And the question *Is Ricardo the person to whom you were talking?* simply seems to deny one of the great strengths of the English language, its flexible word order.

Moreover, hundreds of common English verbs include what is known as a particle as an integral part of the verb itself. Such phrases are *phrasal verbs*. (The particles are words that also serve as prepositions and adverbs, so it is no wonder that many people are unsure how to view phrasal verbs.) Think of all the phrasal verbs we use that are formed from just the one verb *take*: *take after*, *take apart*, *take back*, *take down*, *take for*, *take in*, *take off*, *take on*, *take out*, *take over*, *take to*, and *take up* (these are all listed in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as *take's* phrasal verbs). Some phrasal verbs are separable: we can say, "Take out the garbage" or "Take the garbage out." Others—sentences that end in what look like prepositions and that are impossible to change unless you alter the words—include *The dinosaurs died off*; *Cheap loans are not easy to come by*; and *I hope a riot doesn't break out*.

Phrasal verbs are essential components of smooth, informal English prose. You can help your students by asking them to keep a record of phrasal verbs so that they feel encouraged to use them and so that they understand them clearly as a type of verb. You'll also be helping to put one bothersome grammar superstition to rest.

2. *The Abhorred Split Infinitive*

To split an infinitive is to insert an adverb between *to* and the verb, as in *to boldly go*. To acquire a sane and relaxed attitude about this so-called rule is *to boldly go* where few teachers have dared to go before.

So what's wrong with splitting an infinitive? Nothing, really. It is time (and has been time for some two hundred years now) *to firmly lay* to rest any injunctions now enforced against the so-called splitting of infinitives. And since we are permitted to split infinitives, we really have no use for the term itself.

Why has such a superstition survived for so long? Probably because, like the final preposition, the split infinitive is easy to spot. For those in the past who wanted to fuss about grammar but weren't too sure that they really understood it, detecting both errors was just a matter of looking at word order: the *to* followed by the adverb, the little preposition at the end of the sentence. You don't have to know much about grammar to find those constructions and call them errors. But we should know better.

3. *The Contraction of Ill-Repute*

Contractions soften the writer's voice. To write without contractions is to deliver a standoffish, unrhythmical, overly formalized style that won't ease the reader's journey to understanding. Although it's true that students need to learn the academic voice that separates serious writing from instant messaging, it's also true that the common contractions appear in plenty of serious books and essays. The "do not use contractions" method of achieving high-sounding prose is shallow and only leads to other superficial fix-ups. It's no substitute for helping a student improve the tone of his or her writing with richer diction and more varied sentence structure.

4. *Three Little Words: And, But, So*

As fledgling writers learn how to connect one sentence to another, they make a few errors regarding clause boundaries. If ideas are flowing nicely from sentence to sentence, they may even emulate professional writers and begin a few sentences with the coordinating conjunctions *and*, *but*, or *so*. The word *but* especially is such an easy and succinct way to open a sentence with a new direction that one finds plentiful examples in most professional writing. *But* if we slash our students' papers in red for writing in the style they read, we send them one of two absurd messages: either all of these professionals are wrong and never learned their sentence-starting rules, or there must be some kind of graduate club of writers that students are denied access to.

Better we should just tell them the truth: Beginning sentences with coordinating conjunctions lends an air of informality that may or may not be welcome, depending on the audience, occasion, and purpose. It is far more educationally sound to have students deduce, from real text, circumstances in which writers never begin any sentences with conjunctions and other circumstances in which they do so freely. They can also describe the rhetorical or stylistic effects of opening sentences this way.

The same logic applies for the much-maligned yet ubiquitous one-sentence paragraph.

5. *The Impudent I*

We want students to develop voice, right? Then why are we taking away their personal pronoun? If you look carefully at your students' writing, you are likely to find that some of their worst moments result from avoiding a touch of first person: ineffective use of the passive, the stuffy use of "one" or "an individual," and other distancing mechanisms—leading to such clunkers as *There was a party last weekend attended by many of the juniors*.

The first-person pronoun can be used unobtrusively, tastefully, in the service of conciseness. It is a natural term to use when the writer is the center of an action or a thought. From Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech: "But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice."

6. *The Unconscionable You*

Just as we want students to write *from* a real self, we also want them to write *to* a real audience. To *you*. *You* language is direct, personalized, focused, and purposeful. It invites you in, speaks to your needs, makes you feel that a real person is talking to you. You might have noticed that it plays an important part in the style and tone of the book you are reading. Encourage your students to care about their subjects and their readers by using *you* accurately and often to address the reader.

Here's the point: Writing is good or bad only to the extent that it suits its intended audience for a particular occasion and purpose. As teachers, we need to teach students to suit their style of writing to the many rhetorical modes through which writers and readers come together: personal narrative, academic essay, description, persuasive essay, reportage, lab reports, technical and scientific writing, etc. Each mode tends to have its own voice, a voice determined by grammatical choices that alter the relationship between writer and reader.

For more guidance on these and other grammar superstitions, as well as sound explanations of acceptable practice in standard American usage, spelling, and punctuation, see Bryan Garner's *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style*.