



Five Grammar Myths

For scams and urban legends, we have snopes.com. But what about the grammar myths that fill the air at so many workplaces? Are these five myths holding you back—or making you crazy?

If you think you can't start a sentence with "but" or "because" or would rather get a root canal than split an infinitive, prepare to be liberated.

Myth One: You can't start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction like *and*, *yet*, or *but*.

What it would mean if true: All nine Supreme Court Justices would be incompetent writers.

Who says it's a myth:

- ▶ *Chicago Manual of Style, 16th ed.:* This myth has "no historical or grammatical foundation"; "a substantial percentage [often as many as 10 percent] of the sentences in first-rate writing begin with conjunctions" (5.206).
- ▶ *American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style:* starting sentences with conjunctions is "rhetorically effective" (p. 70).
- ▶ Joseph Williams, *Style:* "Just about any highly regarded writer of nonfictional prose begins sentences with *and* or *but*, some more than once a page" (p. 182).
- ▶ *Garner's Modern American Usage:* "It is a gross canard that beginning a sentence with *but* is stylistically slipshod" (p. 121).

Contact

Ross Guberman
(703) 209-0121
(703) 991-4620—Fax
ross@legalwritingpro.com

Newsletter

Monthly Writing Tips:

- ▶ *Fowler's Modern English Usage, 2nd ed.*: “That it is a solecism to begin a sentence with *and* is a faintly lingering superstition. The OED gives examples ranging from the 10th to 19th c.; the Bible is full of them” (p. 29).
- ▶ Wilson Follett, *Modern American Usage*: “A prejudice lingers from a by-gone time that sentences should not begin with *and*. The supposed rule is without foundation in grammar, logic, or art. *And* can join separate sentences and their meanings just as *but* can both join sentences and disjoin meanings” (p. 27).
- ▶ *Merriam Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*: “Everybody agrees that it's all right to begin a sentence with *and*, and nearly everybody admits to having been taught at some past time that the practice was wrong. . . . Few commentators have actually put the prohibition in print; the only one we have found is George Washington Moon (1868)” (p. 93).

Myth Two: You can never split an infinitive.

What it would mean if true: The *Star Trek* writers should have rewritten this famous sentence: “To boldly go where no man has gone before.”

Who says it's a myth:

- ▶ *Chicago Manual of Style, 16th ed.*: “It is now widely acknowledged that adverbs sometimes justifiably separate an infinitive's *to* from its principal verb” (5.106).
 - ▶ *The Elements of Style, 4th ed.*: “Some infinitives seem to improve on being split,” as in “I cannot bring myself to really like that fellow” (p. 113).
 - ▶ *American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style*: “[T]he split infinitive is distinguished [by both] its length of use and the greatness of its users . . . noteworthy splitters include . . . Abraham Lincoln, George Eliot, Henry James, and Willa Cather” (p. 441).
 - ▶ Barbara Wallraff, *Word Court*: “Splitting an infinitive is preferable both to jamming an adverb between two verbs . . . and to ‘correcting’ a split in a way that gives an artificial result” (p. 99).
 - ▶ *Fowler's Modern English Usage, 2nd ed.*: “We admit that separation of *to* from its infinitive is not in itself desirable,” but “we will split infinitives sooner than be ambiguous or artificial” (p. 581).
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Myth Three: You can't split a verb phrase.

What it would mean if true: You would have to write “he usually will take an extreme position,” not “he will usually take an extreme position.”

Who says it's a myth:

- ▶ *Chicago Manual of Style, 16th ed.*: “There is no rule against adverbial modifiers between the parts of a verb phrase. In fact, it's typically preferable to put them there” (5.168).
- ▶ *Garner's Modern American Usage*: “[M]ost authorities squarely say that the best place for the adverb is in the midst of the verb phrase” (p. 23).
- ▶ Wilson Follett, *Modern American Usage*: “With a compound verb—that is, one made with an auxiliary and a main verb—the adverb comes between auxiliary and main verb (He will probably telephone before starting)” (p. 18).
- ▶ *Merriam Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*: “This bugaboo, commentators agree, seems to have sprung from fear of the dread split infinitive” (p. 36).
- ▶ *Fowler's Modern English Usage, 2nd ed.*: “It is probably a supposed corollary of the accepted split-infinitive prohibition; at any rate, it is entirely unfounded. . . . There is no objection whatever to dividing a compound verb by adverbs” (pp. 464-65).

Myth Four: You can't end a sentence with a preposition.

What it would mean if true: You would have to mimic Winston Churchill, who famously mocked the alleged rule by saying, “This is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put.”

Who says it's a myth:

- ▶ *Chicago Manual of Style, 16th ed.*: “an unnecessary and pedantic restriction” (5.176).
- ▶ *Garner's Modern American Usage*: The rule is “spurious” (p. 654).
- ▶ Patricia O'Connor, *Woe is I*: “This idea caught on, even though great literature from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Milton is bristling with sentences ending in prepositions” (p. 183).

- ▶ *Fowler's Modern English Usage, 2nd ed.*: “It was once a cherished superstition that prepositions must be kept true to their name and placed before the word they govern in spite of the incurable English instinct for putting them late” (p. 473).

Myth Five: You can't start a sentence with *because*.

What it would mean if true: Emily Dickinson made a mistake when she wrote, “Because I could not stop for Death, / He kindly stopped for me.”

Who says it's a myth:

- ▶ *American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style*: starting a sentence with “because” is “perfectly appropriate” (p. 53).
- ▶ Mark Davidson, *Right, Wrong, and Risky*: starting a sentence with “because” is “fully accepted” (p. 105).
- ▶ Joseph Williams, *Style*: “[T]his particular proscription appears in no handbook of usage I know of” (p. 181).
- ▶ *Garner's Modern American Usage*: “odd myth [that] seems to have resulted from third-grade teachers who were trying to prevent fragments” (p. 92).
- ▶ *Merriam Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*: “This rule is a myth. *Because* is frequently used to begin sentences,” often “for greater emphasis” (p. 171).

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