

## Snubbing the Grammar Snobs

Welcome to The Writing Company. Today's topic: Grammar snobs. They're everywhere. Through pursed lips and teacher voices, they point and judge. They watch. They wait. For one tiny mistake. And then pounce!

No wonder we're all "grammar-phobes." Is it who or whom? John and I or John and me? And grammar and spell check don't always help. Those virtual English teacher—"checker programs"—are used as a crutch giving us a false sense of security. And until face-to-face with the cocktail party grammar police, we are blissfully unaware of every pronoun misdemeanor and split infinitive felony.

The truth is, many grammar rules are easier to understand than we think. And other rules are archaic—they matter only to those with nothing better to do than hunt for flaws in others. But, there are some grammar offenses that can lessen your credibility and cause you to appear unintelligent, particularly in the business world.

### *A rule to remember*

Consider an endangered species—the adverb. Since many of us haven't even heard the word "adverb" since high-school English class, an explanation is in order. It's simple: adverbs modify the action of a verb. For example, adverbs show:

How something moves.

- The river moved **swiftly** (swiftly is the adverb).

Degrees of comparison.

- This copier works **faster** than the old one (faster is the adverb).

A quick hint: some adverbs are easily recognized because they use the "ly" endings. For example:

- He will **surely** call.
- The accountant checked the figures **meticulously**.

But for some reason—in conversational speech—adverbs often fall to the wayside. Take your average trashy talk-show episode and watch closely for vicious butchering of the adverb. You'll often hear a bearded man exclaim that his daughter "sang perfect." Or a disgruntled mistress whine that her sugar daddy "used to treat her nice."

It is up to us to save the adverb from extinction. We're its only hope.

### *Another rule to remember*

For every rule threatened by grammar extinction, there is a mutant word child that emerges.

Take for instance, the grizzly use of the word *axe*—a good form of weaponry if you are Lizzie Borden or Paul Bunyan. Axes are excellent for creating firewood (or in Lizzie’s case income). However, in recent years the “x” in the word has found its way into the word *ask*. People now *axe* questions. *Axe* their friends to help. *Axe* for raises. An awkward proposition if you think about it carefully. I would hate to be *axed* anything!

### *Rules to be broken*

Before we become grammar snobs ourselves, let’s discuss some rules that can be “chopped” out of the language. According to Edward P. Bailey’s *Writing and Speaking at Work: A Practical Guide for Business Communication*, there are three rules you can break.

For example, your eighth-grade English teacher may have warned you to never end a sentence with a preposition.

What’s a preposition? You ask. A good way to remember many prepositions is to imagine them as “box” words. For example: *On, in, over, through*...anything you can do with a box is likely a preposition.

- ***On*** the box
- ***In*** the box
- ***Over*** the box
- ***Through*** the box
- ***Above*** the box
- ***By*** the box

But, to make things more complicated, there are some words that are prepositions that aren’t box words. For example:

- Beyond the box
- During the box
- Until the box

*Beyond, during, and until* are all prepositions, but don’t pass the box test. The key? You just have to memorize them or catch them in context. For a list of more prepositions, visit our site at [writingcompany.net](http://writingcompany.net).

Okay, back to the myth. Many grammar snobs believe that a sentence should never end with a preposition. But this makes for an awkward and stuffy construction. For example Winston Churchill is thought to have mocked this rule by saying: “This is the sort of English up with which I will not put.”

Can you imagine using this rule in business documents?

*This is the type of financial hypocrisy against which we will rally.*

Huh?

The second rule made to be broken is the rule of fragments. English teacher types will cringe at seeing a sentence that starts with *and* or *but*. *But* that is the way we speak. *And* most people won't even notice this type of fragment. That doesn't mean that all fragments are okay. Consider the problem with the following examples:

- Because we missed the deadline.
- Which is from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.
- According to Kim who started last year.

These fragments in writing are as frustrating as they sound in speech. There is a pregnant pause that creates drama where drama is unnecessary.

Bailey's third myth is never split and infinitive. But we rebels know that this is silly. Wait. What's an infinitive you ask? An infinitive is the generalized and simple form of a verb. For instance "to be" "to find," etc. When you add a modifier like *always* *sometimes*, *never*—that is where the trouble begins. Our tightly wound friends might claim that the arrangement should not interrupt the infinitive form. For instance:

*It is important **never to be** late  
Bringing the GPS is necessary, if I am **always to find** my way home.*

However, by splitting the infinitive you create emphasis:

*It is important **to never be** late.  
Bringing the GPS is necessary, if I am **to always find** my way home.*

The second examples sound more "natural" and provide emphasis on the words that need it.

So now you're totally confused. Whose rules do you follow? How do you know what is acceptable? For this we have some careful advice.

Follow the culture of your industry and organization. Some companies are more formal than others. Some follow certain rules for good specific (sometimes legal) reasons. Because of this it is always good to find out if your company has a style-guide. If one exists, get your grubby little hands on it. If one doesn't exist, you might offer to work closely with your boss to help create one for some extra office brownie points. If that sounds too daunting, just follow the cues of the organizational culture around you.

And finally, use the spell and grammar checking software that you have. There is no reason not to and it can save you from making embarrassing mistakes. It also helps to read your documents aloud.

Punctuation comes from early oral traditions.

When speaking, we naturally pause for a short time (usually a spot a comma should go) or a longer time (usually a spot where a period should go) and so on. If you run out of breath while reading, you are missing some punctuation. You may feel a little silly reading out loud to yourself at first, but the pay off and the avoidance of grammar snobbery will be well worth it!

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