

4 How to keep the grammar police at bay

“Unfortunately you have had the benefit of an education by semi-literate academics who think they can write,” said my first editor on the first day of my first job in journalism. And he was right too. The problem with these semi-literate academics that taught us at university was that they slavishly obeyed all sorts of obscure grammatical tics and yet ignored the absolute basics of good written English. It’s like the trainee surgeon who skips the chapter on hygiene: utterly self-defeating.

Stick to the basics

When all is said and done there are only one or two rules of basic grammar you need to know in order to write well. Forget about trying to work out relative clauses, gerunds, past participles and the like. This kind of language tends to intimidate and stultify. Ignore it.

Just because a person has an intricate understanding of the rules of spelling and grammar, it doesn’t necessarily make them a good writer. Like knowing how to build a wall doesn’t make you a good architect. Roald Dahl, for example, was reputedly terrible at spelling and had absolutely no idea how to use an apostrophe. But no one would contest his genius as a writer and storyteller.

It’s not that grammar isn’t important – far from it. It is integral to understanding. In fact, more importantly, good grammar is good manners. But spaniel-like obedience to the rules often leads to stiff and laboured prose. Or in the case of those semi-literate academics: nonsensical and pompous waffle. Try instead to focus on writing plain English that will be easily understood by everybody. Use lots of full stops and go easy on the commas. Importantly, write as you speak. Ignore all those horrible little grammatical conventions that you think you remember from childhood – the “imaginary rules that petty linguistic tyrants seek to lay upon the English language,”¹ as the author Kingsley Amis so beautifully put it. Clear your mind and write with freedom and happy abandon. Then reread everything to ensure it makes sense.

Here are a few grammatical rules to ignore and rules to obey (in no particular order):

Semicolons: I avoid using semicolons. If you are thinking about throwing a semicolon ruthlessly into your sentence and you're not sure, ethically or morally, whether it is the right course of action, don't. Even a scintilla of doubt as to its proper usage should be enough to put you off. Just use a full stop. And move on. Semicolons are most dangerous in the hands of those people who think they know how to use them. Like fireworks, my advice is to let other people play with them and stand well back.

Commas: People get in such a bind about commas. They either don't use them at all, so none of us can breathe, or panic and then litter their sentences with far too many of them. Commas are an aid to understanding. Using too many can be confusing. Three good tips on comma use:

- Use a comma where there would naturally be a pause for breath in a sentence, like here.
- If you want to add a clause to the middle of your sentence, like this, use two commas.
- Use commas to be crystal clear about what you mean. A single comma in the wrong place can play havoc with meaning. "Shall we eat Aunt Lucy?" is a very different proposition to "shall we eat, Aunt Lucy?"

Over and above all of this advice: always reread your sentences when you have finished them – aloud if possible – and see if they make good sense.

The Oxford comma: Finicky, pernickety grammarian types – who couldn't turn a phrase if it slapped them in the face – talk endlessly about the Oxford comma. The Oxford comma refers to the comma used before 'and' at the end of a list. Such as: we bought sausages, eggs, sandpaper, and high visibility jackets. Yawn. Ignore this debate. Like so many grammatical debates, it detracts from the real issues. It's akin to counting the spoons while your house burns down. Just focus on being clear about what you mean. Commas, whatever university they went to, help in this endeavour.

Whom: Don't even go there. It's not worth the risk. Unless you're absolutely certain about how to use whom – and I don't count myself in that category – then steer well clear. It'll be a fifty-fifty shot as to whether you've used it correctly, and there will ALWAYS be some smug grammarian to correct you if you haven't. Sometimes they will even correct you when you *have* used whom correctly. Just use who. Whom is old fashioned and it will make your writing look old fashioned, like Maggie Smith's Downton Dowager Countess admonishing an errant parlour maid.

Splitting infinitives: My dear old granny cast terrible judgement on those who dared to split their infinitives. To her, there were only two types of people in life: those *who went boldly*, and those *who boldly went*. Needless to say, the latter were dismissed as illiterate fools. I disagree with granny. Splitting

infinitives is fine. I still try to avoid it, however, partly because I think it can give sentences more impact if you don't split the infinitive, but mainly because I fear the ghost of my late grandmother.

Active and passive voice: Favour the active voice over the passive voice. Wellington defeated Napoleon. As opposed to: Napoleon was defeated by Wellington. But don't slavishly make every sentence active. It will look silly. On some occasions the passive voice is more appropriate.

Apostrophes: Use them. They are an aid to clarity and clarity is king. If in doubt about whether or not you should use an apostrophe, look it up. Broadly speaking, apostrophes denote possession. George's Bar and Grill, the car's exhaust pipe, the children's party (plural: the rabbits' lettuce). Or, they signify that a word or letter is missing. As in: I'm hungry, it's delicious, she's asleep, we're off to a party, you're an accomplished writer. Always double check you've used it correctly. Even the most experienced writers get apostrophes wrong.

Fewer or less: Ok, I admit it. This is my particular *bête noir*. For some reason I get infuriated when people muddle fewer and less. Here is how not to confuse them: If something can be counted, like apples, use fewer. If it cannot be counted, like apple juice, use less. If you use fewer commas your sentences will be less ponderous.

Ending sentences with prepositions: Do please feel free to finish sentences with prepositions. Unless you want to write like a Victorian. I cannot see why this rule exists. It doesn't aid clarity. Don't just take my word for it, here's author and all-round literary curmudgeon, the late Kingsley Amis, on the matter: "It is natural and harmless in English to use a preposition to end a sentence with." So there.

However: This is another one of those words that seems to generate all sorts of heated debate as to its correct use. I'm not sure why. There are only a couple of rules to learn. If you start a sentence with however, make sure you put a comma after it. However, if you use this word in the middle of a sentence it needs commas on either side of it. The problem with these kinds of rules, however, is that people soon forget them.

Because: I once had a science teacher who was obsessed with the idea that you could not start a sentence with because. Because? I've no idea. It's not like he was my English tutor. Who knows what went through that man's head.

Adjectives: Use these with caution. It might feel like you're adding panache and jazz to the story by using all these delicious and descriptive adjectives plucked from your thesaurus, but in most cases, you are actually sending your reader to sleep. Get to the point. And if you want to add colour, use a carefully chosen adjective or come up with a strong metaphor or simile.

Nouns and verbs. Avoid turning nouns into verbs. It will anaesthetise your writing and make you sound like an illiterate bureaucratic official. Some common nouns that are brutally forced against their will to become verbs include: task, impact, access, message, resource and exit. The first two on the list are particularly ill-used by corporate executives.

Quotation marks: They indicate speech. If you are writing professionally don't use them in a way that is "ironic" like I've just done. If you start down that "road" it is very hard to "stop". If you want to quote someone, do it like this: "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet," said the British Foreign Secretary. "But I might add that I did once travel to the Isle of Wight." When quoting people, all punctuation goes within the inverted commas. However, if the quotation forms part of a sentence, and the quotation does not include any punctuation, then the full stop goes outside the quotation marks, for example: The foreign secretary was ridiculed for his recent remarks but told journalists that he was "being ironic".

Green squiggly lines: If Microsoft Word has branded your sentence ungrammatical by underlining it with a green squiggly line, ignore it. Sometimes it's helpful, when you forget a question mark, or some such, but most of the time it's just finicky interference by an illiterate programmer. Have confidence in your own turn of phrase. Imagine if Shakespeare had been a slave to the green squiggly line. *Hamlet's* soliloquy would have taken on a very different tone. And as for James Joyce's *Ulysses*...

Some definitions of common grammatical terms

Every so often I find it useful to go through these definitions again. There's no shame in not knowing what a past participle is, or how an adverb works. I am a professional writer and even I need reminding every so often. After all, it's not like this is taught in schools any more.

Adjectives describe, qualify, define – beautiful, dour, splendid, asinine.

Adverbs describe or modify verbs, adjectives or other adverbs – wilfully, eternally, finally.

Conjunctions join parts of sentences – and, but, as.

The definite article – the.

Nouns – name people, places, things – postman, task, courage, house, dog, pain, bone. (A proper noun is an individual name, organisation or place, and is capitalised – John, Royal Mail, Fido, Wimpole Street).

Verbs describe an action, state or occurrence – run, tired, fallen.

Participle is half verb, half adjective. *Present participles* end in –ing: I am thinking, you are going, he is simpering. *Past participles* end in –ed, –n, or –t: I am tired, you have fallen, he has sent (for help).

Pronouns take the place of nouns – he, she, it, them, they, us.

Prepositions show the relationship between the noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence – in, out, to, from, beyond. He went *to* the shops. The dog came *out* from *behind* the sofa *with* the joint of beef.

Summary:

- Ignore all the wicked little conventions you think you recall from school.
- Knowing all the grammatical rules doesn't make a person a good writer.

- Write as you speak.
- Use grammar to make yourself understood.
- Use lots of full stops and go easy on the commas.
- Good grammar is good manners. It makes life easy for the reader.

Note

- 1 Kingsley Amis, 1997. *The King's English*. Penguin.

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