



Tips and tools
FOR CONTENT & DESIGN

Top 4 English Language Myths

In the English language, there are several popular myths posing as rules. Most of these fraudulent rules restrict our choices when we're writing; we're told to never do this and never do that. It's important to know where these myths come from and why it's OK to ignore them.

While it can be hard to let go of a supposed rule that you've followed most of your life, you can do it. We hope this field guide helps.

MYTH 1: NEVER END A SENTENCE WITH A PREPOSITION

Many of us were taught to never end a sentence with a preposition. This "rule" is a remnant of Latin grammar — in Latin, prepositions must come before nouns. In the 1600s, some English authorities decided, with no real basis, that certain Latin rules should apply to English.

Today, virtually all dictionaries and style guides approve of terminal prepositions. [Merriam-Webster's website](#) says: "There is nothing wrong with ending a sentence in a preposition like *to*, *with*, *for*, or *at*. English speakers have been doing so since the days of Old English. The people who claim that a terminal preposition is wrong are clinging to an idea born in the 17th century and largely abandoned by grammar and usage experts in the early 20th."

There's an old quotation on this topic often attributed to Winston Churchill, although there's no evidence Churchill really said or wrote it. As one version of the story goes, someone inserted a note in a manuscript saying it's wrong to end a sentence in a preposition. Churchill (allegedly) replied to the note with the following: "This is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put."

Whoever wrote that had the right idea. Twisting a sentence around to avoid a terminal preposition sometimes produces awkward results.

MYTH 2: NEVER BEGIN A SENTENCE WITH AND, BUT, OR BECAUSE

In elementary school, a teacher might have told you it's wrong to begin a sentence with one of these words. But professional writers do it all the time. And it's perfectly natural in speech. Because this rule was drilled into us, many people continue to believe it. (See what we did there?)

Our teachers meant well. They were trying to teach us to avoid sentence fragments or simply passing on advice someone else had given to them. But the advice is without merit.

Language expert Bryan Garner, in *Garner's Modern English Usage*, cites over a dozen reputable sources that tell us it's OK to begin a sentence with *and* or *but*. One of those sources is *Dreyer's English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style*, which states, "Do begin a sentence with 'And' or 'But,' if it strikes your fancy to do so. Great writers do it all the time."

Garner goes on to call the prohibition of *because* at the start of a sentence "novel and absurd." He cites several examples of respected writers, including E.B. White (of Strunk and White fame), using *because* to begin sentences.



MYTH 3: NEVER SPLIT AN INFINITIVE

An infinitive verb is the base form of a verb before you apply tense or mood. Examples include *run*, *work*, and *play*. In English, an infinitive verb is often preceded by *to*, and that's where the trouble starts. In constructions such as *to run*, *to work*, and *to play*, many people think they're not allowed to insert a word between *to* and the verb. For example, they'd say *to quickly run* is incorrect, insisting *to run quickly* is the only valid option.

To quickly run is known as a split infinitive. According to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage (MWDEU)*, language authorities began disapproving of such constructions in the 1860s, although the term *split infinitive* didn't show up until 1897.

The origin of the disapproval is a bit of mystery, though *MWDEU* ventures a guess: The split infinitive was a fairly new construction in the 1800s, and when language commentators notice any new construction, their immediate reaction often is disapproval. Combine this with the fact that infinitive constructions cannot be split in Latin and Greek, and the fist-shaking began.

MWDEU provides examples of split infinitives written by the likes of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and James Thurber, and it states, "The objection to the split infinitive has never had a rational basis." Bill Bryson, in *Bryson's Dictionary for Writers and Editors*, wrote, "It is practically impossible to find a recognized authority who condemns the split infinitive."

To return to the example above, it is important to note that *to run quickly* and *to quickly run* could be read with two different meanings. "I need to run quickly to the library" implies the speed of the running is accelerated. "I need to quickly run to the library" implies that the entire task must be completed in a short amount of time. So, if you rearrange words to avoid splitting an infinitive, you could inadvertently change the sentence's meaning.

MYTH 4: NEVER USE PASSIVE VOICE

You might have been taught that passive voice is weak. Or, to put it more actively: Someone might have taught you that passive voice is weak. Many English students have misinterpreted this advice and think that passive voice is wrong. It's not. In fact, sometimes it's the better choice.

The dislike for passive voice gained momentum after William Strunk published *The Elements of Style* in 1918. (The book was later revised by E.B. White and became popularly known as "Strunk and White.") The advice in that original edition, which remained in all subsequent editions, was: "The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive. ... This rule does not, of course, mean that the writer should entirely discard the passive voice, which is frequently convenient and sometimes necessary."

Many fans of *The Elements of Style* read this as "NEVER use passive voice," and those fans have passed the non-rule on to others.

A century later, in *The Joy of Syntax*, June Casagrande wrote, "A lot of people think that passive voice is necessarily bad or, at least, inferior to active voice. In some cases that's true. Passive can deflate the action of the sentence, making writing less lively. ... But passive voice is ideal in situations where the doer of the action is less important than the object of the action."

For example, "The roads were closed" is probably a better choice than "The city closed the roads." In this case, it doesn't matter who closed the roads; what matters is that the roads were closed.

But what if I want to continue practicing these non-rules in my own writing? Go ahead! One of the great things about writing is that we can all write the way we want to write. As long as your meaning is clear, feel free to follow whatever rules and non-rules make you comfortable when writing. Of course, keep your audience in mind. If your readers are academic types who still believe in many of these non-rules, then it's a good idea to tread lightly.

Just remember this: Don't force these non-rules on others, and don't judge others for ignoring them.

