

Following, Bending and Breaking



Dahlynn & Ken,

Your newsletters are informative and I enjoy them immensely. Will you please expand a subject grating on my nerves? I know rules of diagramming a sentence has changed since I went to school and some things are no longer taboo. However, everyday I read newspapers and books with sentences beginning with a conjunction such as "and" and "but." Am I totally out of the loop thinking the conjunction words should remain as a joining structure?

Perhaps I am wrong in my way of thinking but reading these sentences from journalists and such makes me cringe. Will you think about putting it in a newsletter or shoot me an email and put me out of my misery.

*Joyce Rapier
Arkansas*

Great question! The simple answer is that you can break many writing rules whenever you feel a need to break the rules. The tricky part is knowing what your editor wants. To quote from my *Webster's Dictionary*: "Language rests upon use; anything used long enough by enough people will become standard." If such were not the case, we in the United States would still be speaking Old English with a decidedly British accent.

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Writer@PublishingSyndicate.com
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Regarding Joyce's specific concern: according to what is generally considered a writer's Bible, *The Chicago Manual of Style* explains that, contrary to popular belief, there is no rule in English grammar that prohibits beginning a sentence with either "and" or "but." This style guide goes on to explain that it is often better and more powerful to begin a sentence with one of these words. While searching through my stash of English language books, I came across another small handbook for writers, one I've had since my college journalism days, the venerable *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. Even Strunk and White began a sentence in their short and concise treatise on writing concisely and clearly: "But a writer may err by making his sentences too compact and periodic." This is yet another example dispelling the notion that "and" and "but" are to be confined only to the central portions of sentences.

Related, and equally erroneous to believe, is that it is against some common law—or at least your high school English teacher's law—to end a sentence with a preposition. About 50 percent of English teachers are guilty of inculcating such misguided nonsense in their students. There is a story about Winston Churchill sending a note to the book editor who apparently edited one of the British Prime Minister's sentences so as not to end it with "with." Churchill's note stated simply: "This is the sort of English up with which I will not put."



One thing to remember is that the English language is dynamic—when it hasn't been stealing and changing words from other languages, it's been busy creating new words and new ways to use those words. A word as simple as "life" comes from the Old English "lif" with links to the German "leib," with another connection to Latin. It wasn't all that long ago that such words as "e-mail" and "automobile" did not exist. We are constantly creating new words to meet our changing needs and adding new meanings for old words when such is necessitated by popular usage. How long has being "cool" meant something different than being cold? And why do we say someone is "hot" when we are not talking about their body temperature?

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Are there times when we can't begin a sentence with "and" or "but?" Yes! When the person for whom you are writing—and who is paying you—tells you it's not okay to do so. But that's where something called a "style guide" will provide guidance. *The Chicago Manual of Style* may give such usage its blessing, other style guides, including *HCI's Guide to House Style* (the original *Chicken Soup for the Soul* publisher) and *The Associated Press Stylebook*, don't mention such use either for or against. I'm sure someone's style guide prohibits such use.

Knowing that word meanings evolve, I looked up "twitter" in my ancient *Webster's New World Dictionary* (copyright 1980) and to my surprise, it was listed:

"*Twitter*—A person who twits." Hmmm, I looked up *twit*:

"*twit*—a foolish, contemptible, little person" or to "reproach, tease, or taunt especially by reminding of a fault or mistake." Now I'm not sure if I should start a Twitter account or not!

--Ken



Send your writing and publishing questions to Ken and Dahlynn at Questions@PublishingSyndicate.com.

*Happy holidays from
our home to yours!*



HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF!

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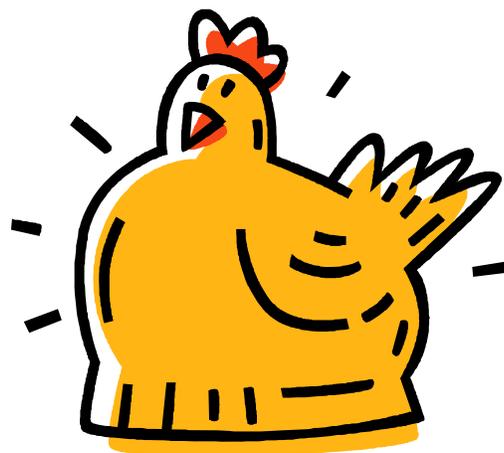
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