

# Rules That Aren't

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2005

**MYTH: Style uber alles!** Style is what it is. It doesn't trump common sense. One big f'rinstance: Most stylebooks call for *President Bush* on first reference. Fine. But if the first reference happens to be in a quote, and some poor sap happens to call him *Bush*, please, please, please leave it *Bush*. None of this (*President*) *Bush* crap. People know who Bush is. Or maybe Raleigh or Columbus or one of umpteen other cities that didn't *quite* make the AP dateline list appears in a caption. Let it go. If *Columbus, Ohio*, is in the story, it can be plain old Columbus in the caption.

**MYTH: Never split an infinitive.** As the story has it, the myth comes from devotees of Latin, a language in which infinitives are single words and therefore couldn't be split no matter how hard you tried. In English, the most natural place for a modifier is directly before the word it modifies. So we have "To boldly go where no man has gone before," to cite a popular example. Some say splitting infinitives is fine but should be avoided when possible. I say that's fine if your audience is made up of constipated old biddies; otherwise, you should do what sounds best, and placing a modifier between *to* and its verb usually sounds best.

**MYTH: Never end a sentence with a preposition.** Winston Churchill allegedly said, "That is the kind of nonsense up with which I will not put," or something like that. It's not unusual that a sentence-ending preposition *does* sound funny. *The company of which he was the president* is probably better than *the company he was president of*. But the "rule" isn't a rule. If *Dance with the partner you came with* sounds better than *Dance with the partner with whom you came*, then that's what you should write.

**MYTH: Never begin a sentence with a conjunction.** And why is that a rule? It isn't. The device can be overused, sure. But it should not be banned.

**MYTH: Do not use contractions.** Some contractions are more awkward than others, and some stories are better suited to informality than others, but there's no reason to insist that every *it's* in every story be changed to *it is*. When I see copy editors stiffen up a story that way, I'm tempted to change the byline identifier to *Washington Post Staff Robot*.

**MYTH: Never use the passive voice.** It's easy to find silly examples of passive voice. *Mistakes were made* comes to mind. But sometimes — often — the object of an action is much more important than the actor. *The winning Powerball numbers will be announced tonight*. (Who cares who's doing the announcing?) *Three city officials were arrested Friday*. (I can wait a couple of sentences to learn the oh-so-vital detail of which police force was doing the arresting.) *I wasn't born yesterday*. (And, sorry, but I don't remember the name of the doctor who brought me into this world. I was young at the time.)

**MYTH: Always write in complete sentences.** You might wince at the use of fragments as a literary device, but it can be done well. Really.

**MYTH: Never write in the first person.** This writer thinks that's hogwash. *This writer?* Ugh. There are good reasons to keep the writer at a distance. If the writer *should* be part of the story, however, it's usually best to simply use *I*.

**MYTH: Got is a dirty word.** Often, there are more elegant ways of saying what you mean. But don't let yourself be so consumed with hatred for this workhorse of a word that you reflexively reach for longer words: *Kerry obtained 38 percent of the vote in Iowa?* No. *Kerry received 38 percent of the vote in Iowa?* Fine, but I don't think it's worth the extra ink and paper compared with *Kerry got 38 percent of the vote in Iowa.*

**MYTH: Fast and slow cannot be used as adverbs.** *Quickly* has its place, but it shouldn't be an automatic search-and-replace substitute for *fast*. Maybe I want to finish the meeting quickly so I can get home and watch "Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica," but when I get in my car to make that happen, I drive *fast*. (Nobody drives "quickly.")

**MYTH: Over and under refer only to physical relationships.** Nonsense. I'm under 50, and sometimes I drive over 55 mph.

**MYTH: Fewer cannot be used with countable things.** Well, there's countable and then there's countable. Measurements such as age and money, for example, often don't translate to discrete units. You probably make *less* than \$1 million a year, and you hope you don't have *less* than six months to live.

**MYTH: Between can be used only when just two items are involved.** On the beach you feel the sand *between* your toes, even if you have four or five of them. You might travel *between* three continents; to travel *among* sounds silly.

**MYTH: Always different from; never different than.** Sometimes the *than* idiom is the only way *different* can work. Ali is different now than he was when he was the champion – there's no reason to muck up that sentence by making it "different now from *the way* he was when he was the champion."

**MYTH: Never use a hyphen after a word ending in -ly.** That guideline applies only to *adverbs* ending in those letters, so *family-run business* is fine. And beware of adjectives that take the *-ly* suffix: *Manly* and *likely*, among others, are not adverbs.

## And then there are some gray areas . . .

You will be ostracized by your colleagues, deluged with letters to the editor and quite possibly forced out of the industry if you follow my advice (explicit or implied) on some of these points, but, as Dirty Harry once said, you have to ask yourself, punk:

- Is *media* plural? When it's referring to more than one medium, yes. When it's referring to the press and its electronic equivalents, well, ask yourself this: Is Dan Rather a medium? Are you a medium?
- And then there's *data*. Technically it means more than one datum. Have you ever seen *datum* used outside a discussion like this one?

- Is it hopelessly ignorant to use *hopefully* the way normal people do? Sure, the meeting isn't *being hopeful* in *Hopefully, the meeting will end soon*. But is the meeting being fortunate in *Fortunately, the meeting ended*? Plenty of words function as “sentence adverbs,” but only *hopefully* is showered with derision.
- Can *host* be a verb? I think so. It's clear, it's well established, and the alternative (*play host to*?) is clunky.
- Can *gender* mean *sex*, as in the difference between boys and girls? Technically and traditionally, *gender* applies to the masculine or feminine state of a noun in languages that make that distinction. Realistically, I think the evolution of the word to mean *sex* is useful and should not be resisted. People tend to think of something else altogether when the word *sex* comes up.

## **To Learn More . . .**

You'll find elaboration on these points and more in my new book, “The Elephants of Style.” It's available wherever fine books are sold, and you'll find links to the Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com ordering pages at my Web site, The Slot ([www.theslot.com](http://www.theslot.com)).