

Writing with Clarity

Turn corporate sludge into focused, compelling writing

Grammar Myths

Rules that Don't Really Count

Don't start a sentence with the following:

Because

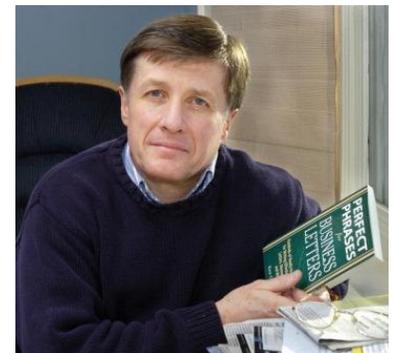
However

And

Common Myths about Grammar

These five "rules" were arbitrarily introduced into English as early as the 1700s and continued to be taught in schools for generations. Linguists, who study the science of grammar, say there is no basis in fact for any of these.

- **Never start a sentence with *because* or *however*.**
These words are standard parts of speech, and they serve specific roles. *Because* is a conjunction used in cause-and-effect situations. *However* is an adverb and is used to express a contrast with something said previously. Good writers have started sentences with these words for centuries.
 - ***Because*** we are reorganizing, spending is frozen.
 - She offers some great ideas. ***However***, most of them are expensive.
- **Never start a sentence with *and*.** Starting with *and* helps the reader connect the thought to the previous sentence, thus providing a smooth transition between ideas. It avoids an abrupt beginning on a sentence. Use it sparingly, but it is acceptable.
 - *We need to do A, B, C, and D. **And** that's not all. We also need to ...*



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“These five ‘rules’ were arbitrarily introduced into English as early as the 1700s”



- **Never end a sentence with a preposition.** It is perfectly acceptable and always has been. Even people who rail against it do it frequently without realizing it, because they don't know all 48 that we commonly use. In 1672, English poet John Dryden read a Ben Jonson poem and noticed that three lines ended in nouns, and the fourth ended in a preposition. Dryden arbitrarily declared the inconsistency to be wrong, and it became a “rule.” Most linguists and other language experts discourage teachers from perpetuating the myth.

- You are likely to say this: *These are the only topics I can think of.*
- You are not likely to say this: *These are the only topics of which I can think.*

- **Do not split infinitives.** Infinitives are verb forms, a main verb usually accompanied by *to* (to go, to study, to manage). “Splitting” the infinitive means inserting a modifier between the *to* and the root verb. Don't do it carelessly, but sometimes that is the most effective way to add emphasis to a verb. Good writers have done this for 200 years.

- I need you to **really** understand the importance of this.

There is no other good place to put *really*. If you place it before *need*, the emphasis is on *need*, not on *understand*.

- **Never use sentence fragments. Always write in complete sentences.** Fragments are sometimes used for effect. Business communication is more polished than conversation, but occasional fragments help create a breezy, conversational tone and they help to add emphasis.

- For years, people have assumed this practice is wrong. **Not quite.**

About the Author: Ken O'Quinn

Through his Writing With Clarity workshops, writing coach Ken O'Quinn has helped thousands of business professionals worldwide to express their ideas and tell their stories in ways that capture attention and keep readers engaged.

Corporate communicators, business professionals, and executives at such companies as Chevron, Visa, Oracle, John Deere, Raytheon, Burson-Marsteller, and Fleishman Hillard have turned to Writing With Clarity for the techniques of well-crafted communication.



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