On the Papers

IRRATIONAL RULES: MINUSCULE MYSTERIES OF GRAMMAR DEMYSTIFIED

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If we were taught grammar at all, we were asked to memorize rules and enjoined not to break them. Many of us—especially those schooled after the mid-1970s—were never taught grammar. Studies had "proved" there was no connection between success on grammar tests and writing well. In the 1990s, grammar faintly returned; but many of its teachers had not themselves been educated in its mysteries. We have failed to understand that grammar should be approached not as rules but as tools—tools to help readers read. In this article, I look at three rules that are not founded on reason—the kind of rules that convinced us the rules were in the service not of readers but only of English teachers.

1. The Split Infinitive

The kind and learned man who hired me at Duke University, 30 years ago, was so offended by the presence of a split infinitive that the blood would rush to his head and turn the ridges of his ears red. All that energy expended on his part, wasted.

An infinitive is the form of a verb that incorporates the word "to"—to do, to go, to boldly go. The third of these was considered a sin: If you allowed any word to intervene between the "to" and the verb, you had "split" your infinitive. Points deducted. Red ears. "To boldly go" was a famous split infinitive, part of the opening credits for *Star Trek*, a well-watched television show of the mid-1960s: "To boldly go where no man has gone before."

I fail to fully understand what all the fuss was about. I ask you: Did you notice that I just split my infinitive—"to fully understand"? Even if you did, did it keep you from understanding my meaning? Why all this fuss?

The source of the fuss goes all the way back to the beginning of the 17th century, when the first English grammars were produced. English was used for centuries before it was generally accepted as a language of the intellect. French was the language of society; Latin was the language of professional thought. Those first grammar books were not created from scratch, but were rather translations/adaptations of Lily's Latin grammar (c. 1500), the most popular contemporary textbook. Many English grammatical rules were therefore crafted for another language. Therein lies the problem.

In Latin, the infinitive was formed not by adding a separate word, but rather by adding an ending to the verb stem. *Rogo* meant "I ask." If you wanted to say "to ask," the form was *rogere*. Therefore, if you were translating Latin for your school assignment, you would be in error to introduce anything between the "to" and the "ask." The infinitive had to remain an uninterrupted unit. Hence, the rule not to split your infinitive.

So why does "to fully understand" not defeat comprehension in English? For the answer, I return to the principle I have been exploring for more than four years in these columns: Language functions on expectation. E.g.: Because readers expect the action of a sentence to be articulated by its verb, then our writing becomes easier and clearer for them to read if we use the verb to say what is going on.

Once we encounter the word "to" when we know it will be part of an infinitive, what are we expecting will arrive next? We expect the verb that announces the action, immediately. "To fully understand" is effective English because the action being expressed is the sum of the force of the two words "fully" and "understand" taken together. This two-word action immediately follows the "to." To "fully understand" is an action I try to accomplish many times a day. It is different from either "fully to understand" or "to understand fully." You might have indeed felt burdened or annoyed had I written "to fully and without any possible doubt understand," because all those interruptive words cannot blend together easily and forcefully to modify "understand."

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So here is my advice: For the next 10–15 years, never split your infinitive in professional prose. Starting around the year 2030, go for it—as long as the intruding word blends seamlessly with the verb that follows. Why wait for 2030? Because until then, the people in charge of things will be of the generation that had their knuckles rapped (or at least had points deducted) by their teachers when they youthfully split their infinitives. Once these elders are no longer in power, the rule of reason will be free to take over.

2. The Comma, the Period, and Quotation Marks

This rule is far more outrageous than the rule prohibiting split infinitives. When a comma or a period appears next to a quotation mark, should it be placed inside or outside the quotation mark?

It would be lovely if this question was resolved by the following perfectly reasonable and reader-friendly answer:

> *If the comma or period is part of what is being quoted, it goes inside the quotation mark. If it is not part of what is being quoted, its goes outside. (*An asterisk indicates a statement considered incorrect.)

That makes sense. If the whole sentence is a quotation, the period should be part of the sentence and therefore should be placed inside the closing quotation mark.

> "Damn the torpedoes; full steam ahead."

If only the last word of the sentence requires the quotation marks, then the period should follow the closing quotation mark.

> *I just hate these arcane and nonsensical "rules".

That indeed *is* the applicable rule for all punctuation marks other than the comma and the period:

> I just hate these arcane and nonsensical "rules"!

But for the comma and the period, the (unreasonable) rule is different. The comma and the period *always* go within the quotation mark—if you are writing west of the Atlantic Ocean. They *always* go outside the quotation mark—if you are writing east of the Atlantic Ocean. Extraordinary: Two equally absurd but equally stringent rules, depending on whether your editor lives in New York or London.

Most grammar books offer no explanation for this. Here is mine. In the 18th century, the people of the American colonies waged a revolutionary war to free themselves from the rule of the British crown. Having won, they took whatever small opportunities they could to differentiate themselves from their former authorities. They decided that British words like "colour" and "honour" would express a new-found American freedom if they were relieved of those unnecessary *u* vowels. "Color" and "honor" shrieked with freedom whenever they appeared on a page.

I think they did the same kind of thing when they moved the comma and the period from outside to inside the quotation mark. They turned up their collective noses at this ridiculous British rule and demonstrated that they could create their *own* ridiculous rule if they moved those punctuation marks within the sheltering safety of the quotation mark. They left the sensible rule for question marks and quotation marks as it was, because that rule was, well, sensible. It will take an international treaty to resolve this puerile stubbornness. I do not look for it to happen during my lifetime.

3. The Oxford Comma

Which of the following is the proper punctuation for a series?

1a. A, B, and C
or
1b. A, B and C ?

Most grammar books will tell you, with great confidence and appropriate solemnity, that both are completely acceptable. Ridiculous, say I.

The principle behind *all* grammatical rules, I suggest, should be based on one concept—readability. Whatever is better for the reader ought to be considered the proper usage.

The second comma, in example (1a) above, is often referred to as "the Oxford comma" or "the serial comma." It helps readers. The single comma, in example (1b) above, always raises a momentary ambiguity. Ambiguities are a waste of a reader's energy. If a reader is aware that a list is unfolding, the comma after "B," followed by the "and," unambiguously announces that the third and last member of the list, "C," will arrive immediately. But without that Oxford comma, the "and" that follows "B" might be announcing *either* the arrival of the third and final list member *or* the second half of a bipartite second member, "B and C." If (1a) is good for readers and (1b) is bad for readers, then (1b) should be wrong and (1a) should be right. Given that the grammatical pundits offer you the choice, choose the good one.

Punctuation was invented in the fourth century CE as an aid to Christian missionaries traveling far and wide to introduce the Scriptures to the heathens. A confused conflation of words that were meant to be separated from each other could result in the loss of souls. The dots and squiggles were added to the holy texts to aid the missionaries as training wheels aid the beginner bicyclist. The dots and squiggles worked so well, they were never discarded. As long as we've got them, they ought to continue to benefit readers. ■

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