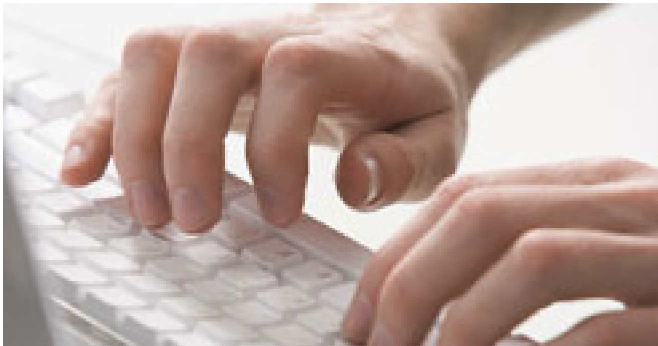
Think SCIENCE

English Writing Myths: 4 Rules You Don’t Have to Follow



English, like every language, has fundamental rules governing grammar, punctuation and other aspects. However, it also has many other rules that are stylistic, such as not starting a sentence with a digit. Stylistic rules can serve a useful purpose, but they can also be quite arbitrary. They can even differ between different kinds of text; for example, we usually do not use contracted negative forms (e.g., “didn’t”) in academic writing, but they are perfectly acceptable to use in many other forms of writing.

But who makes these stylistic rules? Although numerous style guides offer advice and usage panels decide whether recent changes in English are considered acceptable or not to most speakers, there is no final authority on matters of English style and usage. So, while many rules are universally accepted, others are points of contention, such as words with disputed usage and other controversies over English usage. The figure shows an example of disputed usage: *Different from / Different to / Different than*.

Against this backdrop, some stylistic “rules” persist despite the very best writers ignoring them and style guides advising against them. Such “rules” are actually myths. These myths persist because many writers believe them to be strict rules even though style guides and English scholars say otherwise.

In this article, I’ll introduce a few myths you may have heard or learned about English. Perhaps you’ve heard them from a reviewer, an English teacher, or a colleague. These myths are spread with the best of intentions—everyone aspires to write well and to help others write well—but deciding what’s good English style and usage can be confusing, even for native speakers.

Different from / Different to / Different than

- “Different from” is universally considered correct.
- “Different than” is used in American English but considered less acceptable in British English.
- “Different to” is used in British English but considered by many to be incorrect. It is not idiomatic in American English.

Universal usage: Apes are different from monkeys.

Disputed usage: Apes are different than monkeys.

Disputed usage: Apes are different to monkeys.

Below are four common English myths. I hope this information will be useful to you when you’re writing your next paper.

You may copy and redistribute this text if nothing is added or removed, and if you retain the company name ThinkSCIENCE, Inc.
Copyright 2015 © ThinkSCIENCE, Inc. All rights reserved.

Think SCIENCE

Myth 1: Never split infinitives

An infinitive is the dictionary form of a verb, such as “to write.” Infinitives appear in many common English constructions, such as “I need **to write** a letter.”[1] When words are placed between “to” and the verb, the result is a split infinitive: “I need **to** *quickly* **write** a letter.”

Many students of English (including those learning it as a first language) are taught to never split infinitives, but the consensus among English usage experts is that split infinitives are usually acceptable.

This myth has murky and complicated origins, but the reason why it’s okay to split infinitives is simple: Splitting infinitives is often necessary to avoid ambiguous, incorrect, or awkward phrasing.

Consider the following sentence: “Companies are required **to** *safely* **dispose** of waste generated during manufacturing.” Where else could “safely” go?

- “Companies are *safely* required…” changes the meaning.
- “…required to dispose *safely* of waste…” is awkward because it interrupts the phrasal verb “dispose of.”
- “…required to dispose of *safely* waste…” is unnatural.
- “…required to dispose of waste *safely* generated…” would probably be read to mean that the waste was generated in a safe manner.

Throughout the history of English, writers have split the infinitive form. Don’t be afraid to do so yourself when you need to. Because this myth is so widespread, however, it’s usually a good idea to avoid unnecessary or very long split infinitives that might distract some readers. An example of a very long split infinitive is “to *quickly, precisely, and accurately* measure.” In short, feel free to split infinitives, but try to keep “to” and the verb close together.

Myth 2: Never use first person

In English, the first person perspective is indicated by the pronouns “I” and “we.”

Here at ThinkSCIENCE, one of the most common questions we’re asked is whether it’s okay to use first person in academic writing.

Some people object to using first person, suggesting that it is immodest and places emphasis on the writer instead of the subject. Others claim that first person introduces the writer’s subjective viewpoint at the expense of objective facts.

However, writing in first person offers many benefits, including clarity, conciseness, and honesty about viewpoint. Writing in first person is often clearer and avoids ambiguity arising from a missing subject or misuse of the phrase “the authors.” For example, in the sentence, “It is suggested that the protein is involved in the signaling pathway,” it is not clear who is making the suggestion. Does it indicate general consensus in the field? Was it made in a previous study by other researchers? Are the sentence’s authors making the suggestion? In the latter case, it is much clearer to write, “**We** suggest that the protein is involved in the signaling pathway.” There is no ambiguity, and the phrasing is stronger because the authors are accepting responsibility for the idea, rather than obfuscating its source.

[1]Technically, the infinitive has two forms: with and without “to.” For example, in the phrases “I ought to write my grant proposal” and “I should write my grant proposal,” the grammatical form of both “to write” and “write” is the infinitive. For this article, we’ll limit the discussion to the form with “to” because this is the form that can be split.

You may copy and redistribute this text if nothing is added or removed, and if you retain the company name ThinkSCIENCE, Inc.
Copyright 2015 © ThinkSCIENCE, Inc. All rights reserved.

Think SCIENCE

Writing in first person can also make your sentences more concise. Active voice ("**we** conducted a study") becomes easier to use, limiting the use of passive voice ("a study was conducted by the authors"). Sentences in active voice are clearer, shorter, and easier to read and don't require awkward passive voice constructions.

Modern style guides, such as the *AMA Manual of Style*, the *ACS Style Guide*, the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, and *The Chicago Manual of Style*, encourage the use of first person. So, using "we" is now a well-established part of academic writing.

The only time you should definitely avoid "we" is when you are submitting a paper to a journal that specifically prohibits the use of first person. Most journals don't do this, although there are a few holdouts. Overall, the trend toward the use of first person in academic writing is getting stronger.

Another argument against the use of first person is that it was traditionally avoided in academic writing. Yet, there are many examples of classic papers written in first person. For example, Watson and Crick's 1953 paper[2] on the structure of DNA opens with first person.

This usage in a seminal paper written over sixty years ago illustrates the use of first person was acceptable then, and it's even more widely accepted today.

A classic paper using first person

"We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid. . . .This structure has novel features which are of considerable biological interest."

Watson and Crick (1953)

Myth 3: "But" and "because" are too informal

In academic writing, certain words and phrases are avoided because they are considered too informal; for example, "humongous" (meaning "huge" or "enormous") and "dilly dally" (meaning "waste time through indecision," "vacillate," or " dawdle").

But the rule against casual phrasing is sometimes applied too broadly, leading to the myth that "but" and "because" are too informal for academic writing. We're often asked about the use of these two words at ThinkSCIENCE, and it is not uncommon to encounter native speakers who avoid them. The telltale sign that someone is heeding this myth is that all instances of "because" have been changed to "since" and "but" has been replaced with "although" or "however."

Yet, both "but" and "because" are perfectly acceptable in academic writing. In fact, they are often the best choice. "Because" is strong and clear, and it avoids ambiguity arising from the temporal meaning of "since" (e.g., "since 2004"). "But" can be used to draw a sharper distinction than "although" and to achieve a tighter connection between ideas than "however."

"But" and "because" are simple but not too casual. They are helpful words that any writer can use, even in the most formal writing.

[2]Watson, J. D., & Crick, F. H. (1953). Molecular structure of nucleic acids. *Nature*, 171(4356), 737-738.

You may copy and redistribute this text if nothing is added or removed, and if you retain the company name ThinkSCIENCE, Inc.
Copyright 2015 © ThinkSCIENCE, Inc. All rights reserved.

Think SCIENCE

Myth 4: Never end a sentence with a preposition

This myth is rooted in a piece of good advice: Don't end a sentence in an *unnecessary* preposition.

However, this advice is often overextended, giving rise to the myth that sentences should never end in a preposition ("of," "in," "by," etc.).

Here are some examples of *unnecessary* prepositions at the ends of sentences:
- "What are you researching *into*?" → "What are you researching?"
- "Where are you going *to*?" → "Where are you going?"
- "We identified where the projectile landed *at*." → "We identified where the projectile landed."

In these examples, the prepositions at the end of the sentence are redundant. Because the prepositions can be omitted without changing the meaning, it's good advice to leave them out.

In some sentences, however, the preposition cannot be omitted without changing the meaning. This is especially common for phrasal verbs, such as "composed of," "correct for," and "log in." Because the preposition is an integral part of the phrasal verb, it can't be omitted. In such cases, the best place for the preposition may be at the end of the sentence. Let's look at some examples.

- "We monitored the system that the user logged *into*."

This sentence is correct, and rearranging the sentence to avoid the terminal preposition would result in awkward, unnatural phrasing: "We monitored the system into which the user logged."

- "The following parameters were corrected *for*."

If the preposition "for" were omitted, then the meaning would be changed: "The following parameters were corrected." An even better option would be to say, "We corrected for the following parameters." This is better not because the preposition at the end of the sentence was wrong, but because this sentence now uses first person ("we") and active voice.

Concluding remarks

If you'd like to read more about English style and usage, the site *Real Grammar* examines the topic by looking at evidence of actual English usage in corpus data. Also, a good general resource is *Garner's Modern American Usage*. In addition to providing advice on English style, this book includes a useful feature called the Language-Change Index, which indicates the current acceptability of items on a 5-point scale (1 = *Rejected* to 5 = *Fully accepted*). For example, "different than" is given a 3 (= *Widespread, but*…).

In this article, we've reviewed four frequently encountered myths in English writing. I hope that knowing you don't have to follow these will help you write with confidence.

At ThinkSCIENCE, our editors and translators stay up-to-date with the latest trends in academic writing, so please let us know if you have any questions or need any help with a difficult or controversial aspect of English style and usage.

You may copy and redistribute this text if nothing is added or removed, and if you retain the company name ThinkSCIENCE, Inc.
Copyright 2015 © ThinkSCIENCE, Inc. All rights reserved.