THE JOY OF ENGLISH

100 illuminating conversations about the English language

'...targets common pitfalls and troublesome areas.'

JESSE KARJALAINEN

answers to common questions without – I hope – putting anyone off.

Instead of being a complete book of grammar or punctuation, or an exhaustive A–Z of language terms, *The Joy of English* is about only those areas that I feel will improve and elevate your language skills the fastest. The 100 chapters presented in this book essentially comprise the 100 most common grey areas that cause the most day-to-day confusion and doubt.

Some people will take the inevitable position that language is always changing and therefore, “it does not matter”. To them I would say: the advice included in this book is presented in the form of tools rather than rules. Ignore them at your pleasure. But remember, even if you don’t care about language and how you use it, there are many other people who do. And they might be the ones reading your next memo/e-mail/letter, etc. If it is important to them then it should be important to you.

The Joy of English arose from my genuine passion and interest in the everyday workings of the English language. My goal is to

make learning about English usage interesting and, above all, useful in your own communication, whether for work, home or study. There are inevitably going to be those who disagree with certain points that I make in this book, especially if the truth goes against what they previously knew to be true. But I hope that they recognise the broader contribution that I am trying to make when it comes to showing the way towards better English for all who ever wondered but were too afraid to ask.

My ambition has been to make the secrets to good English accessible and present them to you in a conversational manner. True perfection is unattainable but that should not stop us from trying. My aim is that this book will guide you through some common language pitfalls and impart some of my enthusiasm for the subject. While one book cannot have all of the answers, I hope that mine will encourage you to explore further and become more confident in your English abilities.

Credits

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Introduction

You are in for a treat if you feel that your English could do with some spit and polish. Books about English and grammar are like those about dieting: you buy one thinking that this is going to be it, but it never quite delivers on the promise. Rarely are they as described on the cover: “simple”, “quick solutions” or “clear”. To be fair, losing weight and improving your writing skills can only come from hard work. However, you can’t always blame the student. We are all aware of the difference between having a good, inspirational teacher and having a bad one. Dumbing down is not the answer. Making it interesting and relevant is. This book is designed to be an accessible set of English tools that anyone can learn from, rather than just another book about grammar and syntax.

Let me ask you this: if you had a piece of spinach stuck between your front teeth, would you prefer to be told about it or would you rather go about your day unknowingly making people wince? The same can be said about the way that we communicate. If you had a glaring error in your report, e-mail, job application, advertisement, headline or wedding invitation, would you prefer to know about it? I know that I would.

Who do you normally turn to when you get stuck on a point of language or English usage? Like most people, you probably end

up asking friends and colleagues if they have any better idea. Inevitably someone will say, “ask Jonathon, he’s pretty good at English”, or they will say, “ask Isobel, she studied literature at university”, and inevitably you end up turning to that person. Often, when you do, the response comes in the form of a mumbled answer, a shrug of the shoulders and a degree of uncertainty.

There are two common ideological schools of thought when it comes to language and correctness. The dominant view is that – starting in school – we shouldn’t correct pupils’ writing because it will only discourage them and trample on their right to free expression. The thinking is that they will pick up these skills later in their education. Yet the same thing happens when they get to senior school. The can is kicked further down the road until it eventually gets forgotten. The second common view is that “teaching kids grammar” is the Holy Grail and somehow the solution to society’s ills. It is not. We are only talking about language – not solving the world’s problems. The focus of our

attentions in debates about language should be on how to use it. We should lend a helping hand instead of angrily scolding anyone who dares to speak.

One frequently heard phrase in such debates is, “but you know what I mean, so it does not really matter”. In many cases, we do know what you mean. But what is often overlooked is that, not only do we know what you mean, we also know what you do not mean. You can walk round all day with spinach in your teeth and not by bothered by it, but rarely does anyone leave it there once alerted to its presence.

If we are honest, most of us do care about language and how it is used – when we know how. Others say that attempts to “regulate” language never work. I say, what about dictionaries, spell checkers and education? Do these not regulate successfully? If it really “did not matter”, then we would never use or own dictionaries. We would just make up our own meanings to words and expect others to catch on. When it comes to usage the answers aren’t always as easy as, for example,

looking up a particular spelling. So we ask around and hope for the best. If we make a mistake, we won't know anyway. The problem is that no one has ever pointed things out to us –at least not in a constructive, considerate way.

One of the big fears that a lot of people have is that good grammar, perhaps like fine wine, is a world that they know nothing about. This makes it seem scary or intimidating to even entertain the thought of taking an interest in the subject. Second, and unfortunately because of the way that certain "educated" people may behave towards those who are not "in the know", a lot of people perceive both grammar and wine to be only for snobs. Despite secretly having a genuine interest in it, many will shy away from it because of a lack of confidence in their abilities.

The good news is that you don't need a degree in winemaking to learn about and take an interest in wine. And you do not need a degree in linguistics to learn about and take an interest in English.

But what about grammar?

Grammar is, for all intents and purposes, a red herring. If you speak English, then you already know its grammar. All you need now is to be shown a few rights and wrongs. Sure, you can also learn more about grammar for its own sake, just as you could learn about the detailed processes of how wine is made. However, such things are not for everyone. The same is true with grammar. There is no shame in that.

Turning the tables, *The Joy of English* is written to be more palatable than books that focus squarely on grammar (there are enough of those). Instead of teaching you about such terms as conjugation, nominative and preterite, each chapter is dedicated to a common error, myth, problem or bad habit that many of us are prone to use without knowing it.

Everyone has the ability to be better at English. All it takes is a point in the right direction, a couple of good examples as a model and a reasonable amount of practise. This book's 100 chapters represent some of the most frequently asked questions

about English. The bite-sized chapters are not complete guides to, say, how to use an apostrophe. Instead, they look specifically at those parts that usually goes wrong, such as getting “its” and “it’s” wrong. They avoid going over things that you will most probably know as a speaker of English already. This saves you time and effort by concentrating on what you need to know.

There are many components of good English, of which grammar is just one. Other areas include spelling, punctuation and style. This book explores a range of these essential areas. Grammar, of course, does come into the picture. But not always. The first chapter, about why the word very is often not needed, does not involve grammar. The chapter on tautologies (Chapter 6) – why just impulse is better than sudden impulse – has nothing to do with grammar, despite what many people believe. And the differences between British and US spelling (Chapter 71), not to mention commonly misspelt words (Chapter 64), have nothing to do with grammar, yet they are important.

We all learn in different ways, so the book can be used in

various ways. Readers can choose to browse, dipping in at will, or they can read from cover to cover. The book can be read through completely once just to get a handle on things and return to each specific chapter when the need calls. Alternatively, those who prefer can focus on the examples alone – there are 1500 to enjoy.

Each chapter is ordered so that the most important information is at the beginning. There will typically be several examples to begin with, then a condensed summary in bold giving you the outline, or a reminder when you look it up later. Then what follows is usually the nuts and bolts, followed by deeper discussion for those who are interested enough to know more about the reasons, history, etc. And that is all there is to it.

For those of you already feeling the urge to resist being told what to do, have no fear. There are more carrots in this book than sticks, and what you choose to do is up to you alone. Some chapters even provide several alternatives and leave the ball firmly in your court (Chapter 88), while others challenge the

status quo and ask whether it is time for change (Chapter 34).

To use one, final analogy, language is a lot like fashion. Fashions come and go but style always remains cool. There are no rules, only tradition and convention. The way you speak to your friends and family does not matter. However, the way you speak at a job interview may well be more considered. How you speak to your co-workers will differ from how you communicate the day the Queen visits your place of work. It should not matter what we wear, but imagine turning up to your own wedding wearing a pair of jeans. You are right, there are no rules. But if it matters to important people around you, it should matter to you. Just try going to a job interview wearing only a dressing gown and see where that gets you. In the same way, writing privately is different from being a sign writer or news reporter, when your words go out in public.

Yes, language is always changing – but not of its own accord. Language is not a living entity, it is a system of communication between living beings. It changes because people change it.

People change it because they know no better (mistakes) or because they want to change it (slang). Fashion, too, is always changing, but a lot of what changes comes and goes quickly. Few would dream or dare to sport a mullet, let alone insist that everyone else wear one too. Few people wear non-matching socks, yet there is no rule that says we shouldn't. The truth is that, when it comes to the English language, only a small percentage has actually changed in the last few centuries. Certain things come and go, but strip away the fads – whether words like gnarly or stonewash jeans – what remains are still the fundamentals. Nouns are still nouns, sentences are still sentences and the language is still English. A suit still functions as a suit whether it is made from the finest cloth or purple PVC, and socks are still worn inside shoes instead of on the outside.

This book is ideal for the home and the workplace, as well as for study. It is ideal as a refresher, even for the professional writer. The Joy of English will provide you with a deeper understanding of English usage and alert you to the pitfalls to

avoid. Keep it on your desk at the ready, rather than gathering dust on your highest shelf. And most of all, enjoy it and have fun doing so. As you become comfortable and more familiar with the myriad areas of usage found in this book you are sure to begin seeing language in a new way – with greater confidence. I truly believe that this book will change your English for ever.

Jesse Karjalainen
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A Short Grammar

If you are completely unfamiliar with grammar, here are five essential terms that you should know.

noun = another word for “things”, whether person or object, real or imaginary (e.g. book, plan, strategy, Paul, home, dream).

verb = another word for “actions”, or “doing” words. Verbs tell us how or what happens or happened (e.g. spoke, cheat, won, describe, exercised, write).

adjective = a type of word or several words that describe or give more information about “things” (nouns). Adjectives do not describe verbs (e.g. deep, sharp, blue, heavy, large, overweight).

adverb = a type of word or several words that describe “actions” (verbs), adjectives or other adverbs. Adverbs do not describe “things” (nouns) (e.g. deeply, sincerely, well, often, quickly, not).

clause = in simple terms, think of a clause as being a small sentence inside a larger sentence, or one of several statements expressed within a single sentence (e.g. I am tired + because I went to bed late last night. We saw a film + and Dad bought us popcorn. I told you yesterday + that today is my birthday).

01

very

This is very, very unecessary

✓**He has a big family and an expensive car.**

✗ *He has a very big family and a very expensive car.*

✓**These are preliminary results.**

✗ *These are very preliminary results.*

✓**I was on an overbooked flight.**

✗*I was on a very overbooked flight.*

✓**She was tiny.**

✗ *She was very small.*

✓**It is also crucial to our very existence.**

Avoid overusing *very*, which can be removed from most sentences without any real loss of meaning, and consider an alternative choice of words.

People like to use the word very. It is arguably one of the most overused words in the English language – just behind *nice*. It is definitely one of the most frequently used “booster” words

around. The habitual overuse of very fosters not only a poor vocabulary but also displays it for all to see.

People use it without realising that it adds nothing in meaning and is merely a calorie-free word that is good only for padding out text. This is why all good writers self-edit their work and banish it from their writing.

There are some typical problems caused by the indiscriminate use of *very*. Apart from being so (very) disliked in good writing, describing some- thing with *very* can actually result in diluted meaning. Consider these:

a very precise measurement
a very brief affair
a very central location

On reflection: *precise* already means “(very) accurate/specific”; *brief* already means “(very) short duration”; and *central* already means, “in the centre”. They are all absolute meanings. If very is necessary for the meaning to be clear, then the words precise, brief and central lose power.

The other major problem with resorting to very is that it can

become rather nonsensical. Let me show you what I mean:

a very resistant material
a very see-through blouse

As with *precise*, *brief* and *central*, using *very* with *resistant* makes no sense: something is either resistant or not. Unlike *very expensive*, which is relative and not an absolute, a blouse is either see-through or it is not – so why describe it as *very see-through*? There is simply no need.

So, if something is small, say it is *small*. If something is *very small*, then it is better to use, say, *tiny*. If something is *very wet*, why not use *soaked*, *saturated*, *sodden* or *drenched*? Remember, the point being made here is not about using clever words, just better words.

So what using *very* does is indicate that the writer is either really thinking of another word or has run out of words.

This means that *very [something]* is more often than not used when actually a better word exists. Consider the differences between these examples:

✓**My dream is to buy a gigantic house in Texas.**

✓**My dream is to buy a big house in Texas.**

✗*My dream is to buy a very big house in Texas.*

✓**Our pizzas are enormous.**

✓**Our pizzas are large.**

✗*Our pizzas are very large.*

✓**Your feet are tiny!**

✓**Your feet are small!**

✗*Your feet are very small!*

As you can see, the use of *very* in this way will prevent writers from having to think of better words to express what they mean. Too many *verys* and the writing soon becomes dull and unexciting.

Check your writing for instances of *very xxx* and think about what might be a better word to use instead. Consult a thesaurus and replace two words with one. Your writing will improve

greatly when you inject it with great new words.

Very boring	→	tedious, mundane, coma-inducing
Very quiet	→	shy, reserved, mute
Very important	→	critical, vital, key

Once serial users of *very* are converted into sparing users they are often surprised by the noticeable boost in impact that their words now have.

The same approach should be applied to *very much*. Instead, *much* is usually enough on its own.

✓**I am feeling much better.**

✗*I am feeling very much better.*

As a final note, there is one specific use of *very* where it is justified, and that is as a synonym of *specific*.

✓**He grew up in this very house.**

✓**The very notion is absurd.**

✓**Its very existence makes it important.**

In these circumstances, *very* becomes a very (oops) handy tool. But be careful because sometimes it is not as you would think:

I have worked at two very different companies.

While the writer may think very different emphasises the contrast between two companies in a way that plain, old different does not, the writer also has another choice: to use the word disparate instead.

I will admit that using very is so ingrained and comes as such second nature that it is not going to be easy to stop immediately. You will no doubt notice them flying into your sentences without a second's thought. However, I am equally positive that your instincts to resist will strengthen with time.

Notice how, just by stripping one word from your vocabulary, you find yourself searching for clearer and more effective ways to express yourself? This is a great example of how, by taking

even a small amount of time to think about how you use language, you can improve your language skills no end.

02

a historic versus an historic

An ’orrible hysteria over ’istoric

✓**a historic victory**

✓**a horrific accident**

×*an historic victory*

×*an horrific accident*

✓**a hotel receptionist**

✓**a hysterical woman**

×*an hotel receptionist*

×*an hysterical woman*

✓**an honour to serve**

✓**a heroic deed**

×*a honour to serve*

×*an heroic deed*

Do not be afraid to use a instead of *an* with *hotel*, *historic*, *horrific*, *heroic*, *habitual* and *hysterical*. These are all correct because they begin with a “huh”-sound.

Only four words (and their derivatives) beginning with h remain "huh- less" in spoken English and therefore need *an* in front of them. These are: *heir*, *honour*, *hour* and *honest*. This does not include foreign words, such as *homage* or *hors d'oeuvres*. The rest are no longer "huh-less" in pronunciation, which means that there is no phonetic reason to use *an* with them. It really is that simple. Honest!

A fuller list of non-"huh" words that *an* correctly precedes includes:

- ✓**an heir**
- ✓**an heirless**
- ✓**an heiress**
- ✓**an heirloom**
- ✓**an heirship**
- ✓**an honest**
- ✓**an honesty**
- ✓**an honour**
- ✓**an honorand**
- ✓**an honourable**
- ✓**an honorarium**
- ✓**an honorary**
- ✓**an honorific**
- ✓**an hour**
- ✓**an hourly**

✓**an hourglass**

Note: In the US, *herb* remains “huh”-less, so justifies having *an*.

✓**(US) an herb**

✓**(UK) a herb**

For those of you who remain unconvinced, here is how it all happened: many English words come from Latin via French; Latin h-words of course have no “huh”-sound in French, Italian and Spanish (Latin. *hora* →French. *heure* “err”, Italian. *ora* “ora”, Spanish. *hora* “ora”); in English the new h-words were, over time, made to complement the Germanic “huh”-sound of *high*, *house*, *home* etc.; many words remained variable, fluctuating between both pronunciations. *The King James Bible* (1611), for example, includes a*n haven*, *an hedge*, *an hidden*, *an house* and *an hypocrite* among others. Now that we no longer say *’ouse*, *’orse*, *’ero* or *’istory*, these words do not warrant the *an* that they once did.

Despite this, there are those who argue until they are blue in the face that there are “exceptions”, such as the old favourites *historic*, *hotel* and *horrific*. They are wrong and their insistence serves only to keep this old wives’ tale alive. Those journalists and announcers who frequently reinforce this so-called rule over the airwaves only exacerbate the paranoia and confusion surrounding its use.

As a final point, there is one major irony directly relating to (but no longer affecting) the *a/an* confusion, which is that the letter h is correctly pronounced – and spelt, for that matter – as

aitch. Even though in Modern English one no longer “drops one’s aitches”, the “aitch” pronunciation remains correct. This said, “haitch” is on the march, like it or not. This is nothing to waste one’s breath over, in my opinion. Say it as you please. There are bigger linguistic fish to fry when it comes to English. *Aitch/ haitch* is the only remaining example of variable pronunciation in English of the “huh” category, apart from *’erb*, of course. Maybe it should correctly be spelt *’aitch* – with an apostrophe? But let’s not go there!

03

‘I before E, except after C’

When beige pigs fly

Erase this famous mantra from your mind because there are far too many exceptions to this so-called “rule” for it to ever be of benefit.

Reciting the words “i before e, except after c” has never helped anyone get to grips with their spelling. This is because, contrary to popular belief, this “rule” does not hold true. It probably just makes the situation worse.

If the mantra were true, then the assumption is that all or most words of this type are ordinarily spelt -*ie*-. There are, of course, many words that follow this rule:

✓belief

✓believe

✓biennale

✓biennial

✓brief

- ✓chief
- ✓field
- ✓fiend
- ✓fiery
- ✓friend
- ✓frieze
- ✓gradient
- ✓grief
- ✓hierarchy
- ✓hieroglyph
- ✓hygiene
- ✓lenient
- ✓mischievous
- ✓niece
- ✓oriental
- ✓piercing
- ✓priest
- ✓quiet
- ✓relief
- ✓relieve
- ✓science
- ✓series

✓**shield**

✓**siege**

✓**thief**

✓**tier**

✓**variety**

✓**view**

✓**yield**

So far so good, and then therefore, according to the rationale, there are some that are spelt *-ei-* because they come after a *-c-*:

C + -EI- WORDS

✓**ceiling**

✓**conceive**

✓**deceive**

✓**receive**

✓**perceive**

✓**receiver**

✓**receipt**

If only it were that simple, but the problem is that there are plenty of words that break both so-called rules. First are those that have no *-c-* but are still spelt *-ei-*:

-EI- WORDS NOT AFTER C

✓beige

✓counterfeit

✓caffeine

✓either

✓codeine

✓foreign

✓forfeit

✓freight

✓heifer

✓height

✓heinous

✓heir

✓heist

✓leisure

✓inveigh

✓neither

✓neighbour

✓seize

✓protein

✓sleight

✓sleigh

✓veil

✓their

✓weigh

✓vein

✓weird

✓weir

Second, there are also words with a *-c-* that are spelt *-ie-*:

I BEFORE E EXCEPT AFTER C...OR, NOT

✓ancient

✓conscience

✓society

✓deficiencies

✓efficient

✓science

✓scientific

✓species

✓sufficient

✓policies

✓fancied

✓prescient

✓glacier

✓**about whom**

✓**at whom**

✓**by whom**

✓**in whom**

✓**for whom**

✓**from whom**

✓**of whom**

✓**towards whom**

✓**with whom**

✓**without whom**

✗*about who*

✗*at who*

✗*by who*

✗*in who*

✗*for who*

✗*from who*

✗*of who*

✗*towards who*

✗*with who*

✗*without who*

This simple rule goes a long way towards getting *who/whom*

right and serves as a great starting point – all without knowing a shred of grammar.

The second thing to remember is that when it comes to casual conversation, there is nothing wrong with simply using *who* every time. Shocking as this suggestion may sound, *who* is not likely to be misunderstood. You can use it safe in the knowledge that 90% of people will find it acceptable. Few will take offence because the word *whom* is in many respects on the endangered-species list in this regard. Many people – especially those born around the 1970s and later – get by perfectly well using *who* in place of *whom* without any problems or concerns.

For many, these first two approaches are enough to get by with. Nevertheless, the correct usage of *whom* is often treated as a shibboleth that marks a "good education" – so take care, especially in formal circles.

For those wanting a clearer explanation, the third piece of advice is to say that *who* must always be *whom* when expressed in the object form. This can seem an easy concept but it is a lot

trickier to put into practice.

Whom is an example of an old form of English that has survived beyond its use-by date. Before you begin to write me an angry letter in protest, let me elaborate. Of the approximately 1 million words in the English language, *who* (as well as the derivatives *whoever* and *whomever*) is one of only six words that have different subject/object forms. The other five are: *I*, *he*, *they*, *she* and *we*.

SUBJECT
I
he
they
she
we
who
OBJECT
me
him
them
her
us

whom

From this perspective, the difference between *who* and *whom* is seemingly clear: *whom* is the object form of *who* and few will be confused about which of the following examples are correct:

With I?

With he?

With they?

With she?

With we?

With who?

With me?

With him?

With them?

With her?

With us?

With whom?

In this context the difference between the two seems simple enough. Herein lies the real reason that people have so much difficulty with *who/ whom*: it is that they have difficulty understanding the difference between subject and object.

This is Jesse, who wrote that book. (*subject*)

This is Jesse, whom you have been asking about. (*object*)

All of a sudden the *who/whom* game is no longer so much fun. Both of these examples use *who/whom* according to the same principles stated in the lists above, but I can guarantee you that a lot of people will find the difference far from obvious. Is the following example correct or incorrect according to subject/object principles?

I have no idea whom she decided to confide in.

When put on the spot, not everyone will have the confidence to say that this sentence is, indeed, correct. (The clue is that *whom* refers to a third party, someone other than *she*.) The problem with *whom* is that this lack of confidence means that using it correctly has not only become cumbersome for many, but also that it no longer sounds natural in casual language. *Whom* runs the risk of sounding stilted – even when correct. Consider these examples:

Whom did you speak to?	or	Who did you speak to?
Whom do you believe?	or	Who do you believe?
Whom can it be?	or	Who can it be?

05

less versus fewer

How many fewer? How much less?

✓**5 items or fewer.**

✗*5 items or less.*

✓**I try to use fewer plastic bags.**

✗*I try to use less plastic bags.*

✓**I will try to eat less chocolate.**

✗*I will try to eat fewer chocolate*

Think of *less* in terms of meaning “not as much” and *fewer* as meaning “not as many”.

Getting *less* and *fewer* right isn’t always straightforward. If the explanation above does not make immediate sense, ask yourself this question about what it is you want to refer to: would you say, “How many?” or “How much?” Write *fewer* when you would answer “many” and write less when you would answer “much”.

EXAMPLE:

Items

How many items?

many = fewer

✓**Five items or fewer**

✗*Five items or less*

People

How many people?

many = fewer

✓**There were fewer people than expected**

✗*There were less people than expected*

Money

How much money?

much = less

✓**£100 or less**

✗*£100 or fewer*

Points

How many points?

much = less

✓**I now have fewer points**

✗*I now have less points*

You should find it easier to get *less* and *fewer* right by following the simple guidelines above.

Some things, however, can still cause confusion, especially when it comes to *years*, *months*, *hours* and *units of currency*. Ask yourself if the following are correct:

I am working less hours.

She has been with the company three years less than me.

He got paid £200 less than me.

She should be vaccinated at less than 11 months.

All of these sentences are correct because they refer to a *span of time* or *lump sums* – we are talking about "how much time" and "how much money", not necessarily the individual hours or pounds.

Whether or not to write "less doctors", "less teachers" or even "less soldiers" is also a tricky one. Although, technically, these professionals can be lumped together (like *money* and *time*) and seen as a mass or collective group, this approach is generally discouraged because this description tends to dehumanise and devalue each professional's input and the role that they play as individuals. Most people want to be treated by a doctor, not an

anonymous, faceless health worker. In return, these professionals prefer to be treated as individuals and for you to use *fewer*.

✓**The school has decided to employ fewer teachers next year.**

✗*The school has decided to employ less teachers next year.*

✓**We were shocked to find out that there are fewer doctors in our area than there used to be.**

✗*We were shocked to find out that there are less doctors in our area than there used to be.*

The same rules apply to *least* and *fewest:*

✓**I did not think that I would get the fewest votes of all of the candidates.**

✗*I did not think that I would get the least votes of all of the candidates.*

This corresponds with our trick of asking *how many* or *how much* votes.

06

redundancies and tautologies

How much are your free gifts?

✗*No added additives*

Streamline your writing by removing redundant words.

A tautology is saying the same thing twice. A redundant word is one that is unnecessary, like *end result*. Choose your words carefully.

✓**gift**

✗*free gift*

✓**result**

✗*end result*

✓**ice**

✗*frozen ice*

✓**filled**

✗*filled to capacity*

✓**venom**

✗*brief summary*

✓**bouquet**

✗*bouquet of flowers*

✓**cameo**

✗*cameo appearance*

✓**scrutiny**

✗*close scrutiny*

✓**could**

✗*could possibly*

✓**trend**

✗*current trend*

✓**depreciate**

✗*depreciate in value*

✓**estimated at**

✗*estimated at about*

✓**evolve**

✗*evolve over time*

✓**colleague/housemate**

✗*fellow colleague/housemate*

✓**tundra**

✗*frozen tundra*

✓**introduced a**

✗*introduced a new*

✓**witness**

✗*eyewitness*

✓**pending**

✗*now pending*

✓**proverb/cliche**

✗*old proverb/cliche*

✓**fad**

✗*passing fad*

✓**remains**

✗*still remains*

✓**impulse**

✗*sudden impulse*

✓**goal**

✗*ultimate goal*

✓**write**

✗*write down*

✓**high**

✗*high up*

✓**noon**

✗*12 noon*

✓**pure**

✗*100% pure*

✓**introduced**

✗*first introduced*

✓**court**

✗*courthouse*

✓**only**

✗*one and only*

In my (own) opinion, it is not necessary to write (down) more words than are needed. After (close) scrutiny, I think you will agree that the above list (of redundant words and tautologies) is both amusing and (also) useful. While a lot of people (still) remain who use them (themselves), I hope that you will resist any (sudden) impulse to do the same. This advice is (100%) pure gold.

07

the truth about split infinitives

Anyone for a splitting headache?

✓**Remember to always wear matching socks**

So, what is wrong with split infi nitives? Nothing. Every authority on the English language agrees that it is one of the biggest myths of all time.

My boss really wants to see better results.

My boss wants to really see better results.

Make sure not to get lost.

Make sure to not get lost.

I am finally going to be my own boss.

I am going to finally be my own boss.

The notion of the so-called “split infinitive” deserves serious and critical unpacking because it is, for many, the great taboo in the English language. The prejudice against it is unjustified and the charges are false; if any- thing, they are trumped up. If you find this to be overly harsh in tone, then you underestimate the level of scorn that is vented by those who are firmly set on keeping this conspiracy theory alive.

According to the so-called “rule”, words like *really*, *never*, *deliberately*, *not*, *briefly* etc should not go between *to* + *verb*. Here are a few examples:

My boss wants me to <u>really</u> work on my English skills.

I have made up my mind to <u>never</u> speak to her ever again.

It is a crime to <u>deliberately</u> avoid paying taxes, as well as to <u>not</u> disclose offshore income.

It was designed to <u>not</u> look new.

The team continues to <u>effectively and thoroughly</u> meet their targets.

The doctor is now going to <u>briefly</u> explain the procedure to you.

For those of you not cringing by now, the underlined words are the “offending” parts of the sentences above. Putting words (adverbs) between *to* + *verb* like this is not allowed. Why not? Because this would supposedly “split” the infinitive verb (*to* + *verb* → *to* + word + *verb*) and cause the word order to be “ungrammatical”. Hence, the so-called “rule”.

How about one *to* and two verbs? Does that an infinitive spliteth?

Our goal is to detect and <u>accurately</u> measure changes in behaviour. You should already know how to cool and <u>carefully</u> manipulate ice crystals.

forms the infinitive. The word *to* acts as nothing more than a particle (or infinitive marker, if you prefer); it is not wedded to the verb or the infinitive in any way. The two words are in no way "fused" or inseparable, nor do they form a grammatical bond or unit of any kind. Here are three examples of infinitives (underlined):

We need to play well today
Let's play well today
They will play well today

We need to really play well today
Let's really play well today
They will really play well today

Putting *really* in front of *play* does not alter the infinitive one bit, regardless of whether there is a to there or not. Sure it could come after it, too. Both are fine. All *really* does is give more information about the verb in question – nothing is being "split". So, actually, "split infinitives" are a natural part of English word order (grammar), which is why they occur frequently despite being targeted for eradication over several centuries.

Adverbs sometimes go naturally in front of the verb:

to deliberately avoid paying taxes
to always spell correctly
to mistakenly think
to magically fix

And adverbs sometimes come naturally after the verb:

to walk quietly
to appear suddenly to act honorably

English is a Germanic language, not a Romance language, one derived from Latin, such as French, Italian and Spanish. The natural word order of Germanic languages is to typically (!) put a “modifier” (anything that adds extra information or acts as a descriptor) in front of the thing, word or phrase that it modifies.

to like someone
to really like someone

I want to thank you
I want to personally thank you

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