

Q. My wife and I disagree about which of the following statements is correct. “He said, “I am a lawyer,” or “He said he was a lawyer.” I maintain that the first statement is correct because it was true when he said it and is still true. Am I right?

A. For your sake, I hope no money was involved, for the first statement is wrong and the second statement is correct. In the first statement, the double quotation marks are correct, but inside the double quotes there should be single quotation marks around what the second person said. Double quotation marks should surround the entire statement, for *you* are quoting something the individual said; but the inside quotation is something *he* said, which you are repeating. So the entire statement should read, “He said, ‘I am a lawyer.’” (A lot of quotation marks, but they’re all needed.)

That punctuation error is common and often goes unnoticed. But both you and your wife are to be congratulated for getting the sequence of tenses right, for that error involves a stylistic decision that books on grammar often ignore, at least partly because the situation is in flux.

Here is the sequence of tenses rule: in indirect discourse (in which the speaker is not quoting another person’s words exactly) the tense of the dominant verb in the sentence decides the tense of the subordinate verbs that follow. The following two sentences exemplify the rule; both you and your wife probably follow it without thinking:

- He told me, “I’m hungry.” (Direct discourse, indicated by quotation marks.)
- He told me he was hungry. (Indirect discourse, no quotation marks.)
- He said, “I, too, am a magician.” (Direct discourse.)
- He said that he, too, was a magician. (Indirect discourse.)

Because the first sentence is a direct quotation, ordinary quotation marks as well as temporal distinctions apply: the first verb is in the past tense, the second is in the present tense. (If the speaker

had said, “He told me, ‘I was hungry,’” the statement would indicate that the speaker was no longer hungry.)

The second sentence above is an indirect quotation; the dominant verb is in the past tense, and it controls the tense of the following verbs. So despite the fact that the speaker may still be hungry now, the past tense is correct.

As you can imagine, the sequence of tenses rule might cause ambiguity. If so, rephrase the sentence as a direct question or, as most writers usually do, ignore the rule. The rule itself also has an exception: to describe a constant and permanent truth or a habitual action, the first (otherwise dominant verb) does not decide the tense of the following verbs. For example:

- The teacher told the preschool children that the earth is round.
- They were warned to avoid snakes because some snakes bite.

Typically, if exceptions to any rule become numerous, or if a rule is ignored by an overwhelming majority of English speakers, it loses force and is eventually dropped. In the eighteenth century, a phrase that English poet Walter Scott solemnly predicted would describe the fate of a disloyal citizen could apply here. You may recall the language:

Breathes there the man with soul
so dead,
Who never to himself has said,
This is my own, my native land!

The phrase that Scott chose to predict his fate was: [that man will die] “unwept, unhonoured, and unsung.” It seems likely that the sequence of tenses rule will suffer the same fate.

Q. To settle an argument, please answer the following question: Which of the following three sentences is

correct? (The questioner said she believes that the third sentence is correct.)

- Response is due within 30 days.
- Response is due within thirty days.
- Response is due within thirty (30) days.

A. Her selection indicates that her usage is conservative. The poet Alexander Pope would have agreed with her. In his “Essay on Criticism,” he warned:

Be not the first by whom the new
are tried,
Nor yet the last to lay the old
aside.

The answer to the reader’s question would also be easier if all authorities agreed. But, as grammarian William Sabin writes in the *Gregg Reference Manual* (5th ed., 1995), there is no such consensus. Most authorities prefer the first choice above: using figures for numbers larger than ten. A few, however, prefer to use figures only for number 25 and above.

But lawyers and other educated individuals often use hyphens promiscuously. For example, correspondents have noticed that in newspaper announcements the phrase *board certified criminal lawyer* was not hyphenated even though it should have been, as *board-certified criminal lawyer*.

Others have noticed that the phrase “a sentence with a twenty-five year mandatory-minimum” is usually written as shown. Those hyphens are misplaced; there should be two hyphens in the three-word phrase, because “twenty-five-year” is to be read as a unit. But the hyphen in the phrase “mandatory-minimum” is unnecessary and incorrect.

Authorities do agree about one rule: A number that begins a sentence should be spelled out: “Eighty-five members were present.” **TFL**

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