



Language for Lawyers

by Gertrude Block

Question: Which of the choices below is correct?

The boy should promptly deliver the message.
The boy promptly should deliver the message.

Answer: Philadelphia attorney Charles F. Forer, who sent this e-mail, added, “This question always bedevils me.” But he should relax, for both of his choices are grammatically correct. However, for stylistic reasons I prefer a third choice: “The boy should deliver the message promptly.”

My reason is that the most important part of a sentence should come at the end, the next most important language at the beginning, and all the rest of the language should be placed in the middle, because the middle of the sentence is what the reader pays least attention to. Both of Attorney Forer’s sentences placed the phrase “deliver the message” right next to or within the verb phrase, which is desirable. (In this message, there may not be a need to call attention to the adverb “promptly.”)

Attorney Forer asked another good question, which many other readers have asked: whether the pronoun “that” is necessary in the following sentences:

The boy told me he broke the window.
The boy told me that he broke the window.

Again, both sentences are grammatically and stylistically correct, but the word “that” in the first sentence could be omitted. Usually brevity is desirable in writing: When you can say something in fewer words, do so. But sometimes “that” must be included, when leaving it out would cause confusion, forcing the reader to go back and re-read the sentence.

Take a look at the first sentence of my answer to Attorney Forer’s second question and delete the fourth word “that.” What’s left is “My reason is the most important part of the sentence” The omission of “that” might make the reader think that the sentence equates “reason” with what follows. So don’t omit the word “that.”

Another illustration of the importance of adding “that” is in a sentence like, “I heard your speech yesterday was very ef-

fective.” Reading the sentence quickly some people would understand that sentence to mean that the writer had been present during the speech. Adding the word “that” would save the reader some time and perhaps annoyance.

Speaking of annoyance, this column has received e-mails from many people who are annoyed when *that* (instead of *who* or *whom*) is used to refer to human beings, a usage considered incorrect until recently. Here are two illustrations:

The people that (whom) I met in my new job were very cordial.
The man that (who) crossed the street against the light was hit by a bicycle.

In each of these sentences, *who* or *whom* were formerly the only correct choice; *that* applied only to animals, places, objects, and other things. (Animal owners are also apt to bestow the honorific “who/whom” on their pets.) However, linguists describe language as it is currently used, not as they think it should be used; and there is now wide usage of *that* to refer to people who are not known by the speaker, or who are thought of as members of a group, not as individuals. (My own prejudice favors the traditional usage.)

Potpourri

A Boston reader reports that in New England there is now a third choice available for an answer to the question “Married or single?” The answer is “Not married but not single.” That phrase now describes a “couple” who are not engaged, but are in a “relationship.” (I have not heard that description in the South, but it may be more widespread in the New England area.) ☺

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