

Q. It troubles me that the *Washington Post* seems to split infinitives as a matter of policy, and the *New York Times* also permits the practice. Split infinitives too often weaken the verb without adding the emphasis the author intended. Please comment.

A. Attorney Nicholas Cobbs, who sent these comments, is not the first correspondent to voice his dislike of split infinitives. Most of the readers who agree with him believe there is a grammatical rule against splitting infinitives, and that even those who ought to know better (like the journalists mentioned above) are violating it.

In fact, no such rule exists. The rule against splitting infinitives originated with 18th-century grammarians, who thought that there ought to be a rule, so they created one. It was clear to these well-educated gentlemen that the English language was corrupt; their leader, Bishop Robert Lowth, an Oxford University professor, said that it was “extremely imperfect” for “even many of the best writers” constantly make egregious errors in English. So it was necessary that they, the “authorities”—wise persons knowledgeable about language—take charge.

The problems of English occurred, these grammarians believed, because speakers of English had polluted their language by straying from Latin, the perfect language. Lowth’s book, *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* would cure its ills by enforcing Latin rules on English grammar, even retaining their Latin names (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, and ablative).

There were at least two problems with that plan. First was the grammarians’ assumption that English had descended from Latin. It is true that both languages descend from an Indo-European progenitor, but there are many Indo-European groups, and English descends from the Germanic group, while Latin descends from the Italic group.

The second mistaken assumption of the 18th-century grammarians was that language could be set by fiat and then kept without change. They were unaware that changing majority usage determines both the meaning and the

grammar of a language. The English grammarians were also unaware that Latin had undergone many changes since the classical rules were written, so that Latin, too, had been corrupted. But, undeterred by their limited knowledge, the 18th-century scholars pursued their agenda.

One of the characteristics they deplored was that the English infinitive had been divided into two words. In Latin, the infinitive form itself had contained the preposition *to*. As we all learned in Latin 101, *amare* means “to love.” Obviously, that infinitive ought not have been “split.” (The grammarians could merely have rejoined the two words, creating the infinitive form *tolove*, but they ignored that possibility.)

So the rule against splitting infinitives was born. The grammarians announced that phrases like “to safely refuse,” “to carefully consider,” “to politely acknowledge,” and “to unduly postpone” were ungrammatical. (All these phrases were taken from modern legal casebooks.) They declared that these should be replaced by: “safely to refuse,” “carefully to consider,” “politely to acknowledge,” and “unduly to postpone.” (Also correct would be, “to refuse safely,” “to consider carefully,” “to acknowledge politely,” and “to postpone unduly.”)

The trouble with their “rule” was that almost nobody observed it. English royalty and aristocrats ignored it, and the English lower classes were blissfully unaware of it. Even those people who promulgated the rule often ignored it. Schoolmarm obediently taught it to their pupils, but forgot to observe it themselves. The pupils remembered to cite the rule, but often forgot to follow it.

In America, however, with its huge middle class of rule followers, a surprising number of people felt that to split an infinitive was almost sinful. It became a shibboleth, distinguishing the educated from the uneducated.

(Many educated people still believe that split infinitives are incorrect.)

There is, of course, nothing wrong with refusing to split infinitives. But if there were such a rule, it would be stylistic, not grammatical. Under that rule, the criteria are clarity and emphasis. If splitting an infinitive would result in clarity and emphasis, go ahead and split it. The following sentences containing split infinitives seem to me to pass that test, but you may differ:

- It is necessary to really understand the matters at hand.
- The result was to considerably lessen the benefit.
- The aim is to better equip candidates for office.

Some readers also believe that expanding the infinitive rule proscribes the insertion of an adverb into a verb phrase. Some time ago Timothy Levin, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, sent two illustrations of supposedly incorrect usage.

- Average weighted maturity will ordinarily exceed five years.
- The portfolios may also invest in other fixed income securities.

He also provided correct versions of the same statements:

- Average weighted maturity ordinarily will exceed five years.
- The portfolios also may invest in other fixed income securities.

But there is no rule against inserting adverbs into verb phrases. All four of the above statements are grammatical. The only distinction in preference is that of clarity. The second two sentences may be ambiguous because the adverbs might be understood to modify the preceding word rather than the following word. For example, does the phrase “ordinarily will exceed” modify “maturity” or does it modify (as intended) “five years”? This problem is called the “Janus effect,” so-called for the mythical Roman god of doors, who could look both forward and back. **TFL**

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