

**Q.** For some time I have been troubled by the expression *for free*, as it is used in the media and elsewhere. That usage seems awkward, and I wonder if it is incorrect.

**A.** My thanks to Pennsylvania attorney Forest N. Myers, who asked this question. Although the question has previously been asked and answered in this space, it should probably be discussed again.

If you ask a number of people what they think about the phrase “for free,” you will probably find that most would prefer to delete the word “for,” but can’t explain why. They just say it just sounds better without that word.

I think I can explain why it “sounds better.” The definition of the adjective “free” already includes the idea of “for no cost,” so adding the preposition *for* seems unnecessary and awkward. In addition, if you add *for* you are treating the adjective “free” as if it were a noun or pronoun. (Substitute the noun *cost* for the adjective *free*, and the resulting phrase, “You got it for no cost” probably sounds all right. So does, “He got it for little *cost*” or “He got it for nothing.”)

Those people who say “for free” probably are assuming “for free” is analogous to “for no cost.” Because it is not, it sounds awkward. But if “for free” becomes widely used, it will no longer sound awkward.

**Q.** Here is a question that always bedevils me. I think I know the answer, but I need confirmation. In each pair of statements, which statement is correct?

- The agreement should also exempt claims that have accrued.
- The agreement also should exempt claims that have accrued.
- The boy should also promptly deliver the message.
- The boy promptly also should deliver the message.

**A.** This question, sent by Philadelphia attorney Charles F. Forer, involves the position of *also* and *should*. Attorney Forer says he

believes *also should* is correct because that placement avoids separating (splitting) the verb phrases “should exempt” and “should deliver”:

- The agreement also should exempt claims that have accrued.
- The boy promptly also should deliver the message.

In answering the previous question (about “for free”), I wrote that “analogy” causes word change. The answer to Forer’s question is also based on analogy. What called his attention to the word order in these sentences is that early in his education, some teacher taught him that verb infinitives should not be “split”—that is, to place a word between “to” and the verb- infinitive.

As a child you too may have also been forbidden to “split infinitives.” Teachers enforced that rule so vigorously that generations of little primary students applied it to other verb phrases (like “should exempt” and “should deliver,”) as well.

But, in fact, no such rule existed; it was the brainchild of a small group of 18th century schoolteachers who knew almost nothing about linguistics development, but who held strong likes and dislikes. They believed that by creating rules to govern usage, they could perfect the English language and prevent future generations from changing it. These efforts were obviously due to fail and will be discussed more fully in a forthcoming column.

So the answer Forer’s question is: Make whichever choice you prefer, for either statement is correct. I have no evidence, but it seems to me that most Americans prefer the other alternative. (If you think I’m wrong, let me know.)

#### Addendum

In the September “Language for Lawyers” I responded to a question

by New Jersey attorney Elenora L. Benz about the apparent misuse of the abbreviation *scrip* by some lawyers, who think it is an abbreviation of “prescription.” I wrote, “Neither ‘scrip’ nor ‘script’ has anything to do with prescriptions.” But I was wrong.

The *Old English Dictionary* (the ultimate authority on the English language) says that in the United States, the slang word *scrip* is an abbreviation of “prescription,” and it usually refers to narcotic drugs. (The O.E.D. cites a 1951 *Baltimore Evening Sun* column for that usage.) The standard meaning for the noun *script* “interest on notes,” is much older. In 1768, one citation reads, “The Bank of England gives no interest on their notes, whereas the Bank of the Universe improve what we have lying there to immense advantage. ...”

*Scrip* originally was also an abbreviation of “subscription.” The O.E.D. says that currently, in strict commercial use it describes a provisional document entitling the holder to shares in a joint-stock undertaking. In “loose or popular language” it applies to share certificates in general.

During the fourteenth century, a *scrip* was merely “a small bag, wallet, or satchel, especially carried by a pilgrim, a shepherd, or a beggar.” The two nouns—*scrip* and *script*—probably share an Old French root derived from Latin. The noun *scrip* seems to have been an alteration of *scrap* (“a small piece of paper, usually with writing on it”), its spelling influenced by association with *script*. The phrase *scrip-scrap* survived until the end of the nineteenth century; it meant “miscellaneous scraps; odds and ends.” TFL

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