# 29

# Usage Disputes and the Grammar of Style

The final frontier of mastery is knowing which "rules" are real, which are conventions of edited prose, and which are superstitions. This chapter sorts the classic disputes into three bins: **genuine rules**, **register conventions**, and **zombie rules** (invented prohibitions that never matched good usage).

## 29.1 Zombie rules: safe to ignore

**Split infinitives** *to boldly go* has been standard English for centuries. Split when rhythm or clarity demands: *She decided **to gradually reduce** her hours* (moving *gradually* elsewhere changes the meaning or the emphasis). Avoid only very wide splits: ✗ *to, without telling anyone or leaving a note, go*.

**Ending a sentence with a preposition** Fully standard: *This is the kind of pedantry I will not put up **with**. What are you looking **at**?* Fronting is available for formality (*the principles for which we stand*), not required.

**Starting a sentence with *and* or *but*** Standard at every level of formality, and ancient. *But* as an opener is often the cleanest contrast marker. Do not overuse.

***whose* for things** *a theory whose implications are vast* is correct; *of which* is available but often clumsier.

***hopefully* as a sentence adverb** *Hopefully, the rain will stop* is as legitimate as *frankly* or *fortunately* used the same way, and is accepted by modern usage panels.

## 29.2 Register conventions: know your audience

***who* vs. *whom*** *Whom* is required only in formal writing, and only where an object pronoun would appear: *To **whom** it may concern; the candidate **whom** we selected*. Test by substitution: *he* → *who*, *him* → *whom*. In speech, *who* everywhere (except right after a preposition) is unremarkable. Hypercorrect *whom* is worse than no *whom*: ✗ *the applicant whom we hope will join us* → ✓ *who we hope will join us* (subject of *will join*).

***less* vs. *fewer*** Edited prose prefers *fewer* with counted plurals (*fewer errors*) and *less* with mass nouns (*less noise*) — but *less* is idiomatic with measures and sums: *less than three weeks, less than $50, one less thing to worry about*.

***like* vs. *as (if)*** Conservative style reserves *like* for noun comparisons (*runs like a deer*) and *as / as if* for clauses (*as I said, as if he knew*). Conversational English uses *like* for both; formal writing still expects *as*.

***data, media, criteria*** See Chapter 1: singular *data* is standard outside conservative scientific venues; *criteria* and *phenomena* remain firmly plural in edited prose (*one criterion, two criteria*).

***may* vs. *might* in the past** For real possibilities use either; for counterfactuals, careful usage

requires *might have*: *Had the ambulance been slower, she **might have** died* (✗ *may have died* suggests we still don't know).

**Contractions** Normal in journalism, business email, and this book; avoided in contracts, statutes, and the most formal academic prose.

## 29.3 Genuine distinctions worth keeping

***imply / infer*** The speaker implies; the listener infers.

***uninterested / disinterested*** *Uninterested* = bored; *disinterested* = impartial (*a disinterested referee*). The distinction is eroding but still enforced in careful prose.

***affect / effect*** Verb *affect* (influence), noun *effect* (result); rarer: verb *effect* (bring about — *effect change*), noun *affect* (psychology: emotional state).

***lie / lay*** *lie–lay–lain* (no object); *lay– laid–laid* (takes an object): *I lay down at noon; I laid the book down.* The past of *lie* being *lay* causes the confusion — memorize the two full paradigms.

***its / it's, your / you're, their / they're / there*** Not usage debates — plain spelling errors with outsized reputational cost.

***i.e. / e.g.*** *i.e.* = that is (restates); *e.g.* = for example (samples). Both take a following comma in AmE style and are confined to parentheses and notes in formal prose.

**Dangling modifiers, comma splices, agreement** The genuinely grammatical core — Chapters 28, 27, and 25.

## 29.4 The grammar of good sentences

Beyond correctness, a handful of grammatical habits does most of the work of "good style":

1. **Put characters in subjects and actions in verbs.** ✗ *The collapse of the bridge was due to the failure of the inspectors to detect corrosion.* → ✓ *The bridge collapsed because the inspectors failed to detect corrosion.*
2. **Keep subject and verb close.** Long interruptions between them are where readers get lost (and agreement errors breed — Chapter 25).
3. **End sentences on the news** (end-focus, Chapter 24).
4. **Prune throat-clearing:** ✗ *It is important to note that*, ✗ *the fact that*, ✗ *in terms of*, ✗ *there is a need for* — each usually deletable.
5. **Vary sentence length deliberately.** A short sentence after long ones lands like a verdict. Like this.
6. **Prefer the concrete verb** to verb + nominalization: *decide* not *make a decision*, *examine* not *conduct an examination of* — unless the nominal serves cohesion (Chapter 20).

## Exercises

**Exercise 29.1** Rule, convention, or zombie?

Classify each "rule" and justify in one sentence.

1. Never begin a sentence with *because*.
2. Use *fewer* with count nouns in formal writing.
3. Never split an infinitive.
4. A pronoun must agree with its antecedent.

5. Do not use contractions in a legal contract.

**Exercise 29.2** Word choice

Choose the form expected in careful edited prose.

1. The witness (implied / inferred) from the smoke that the fire had started earlier.
2. There were (less / fewer) applicants this year.
3. The mediator must remain (uninterested / disinterested).
4. Yesterday I (lay / laid) awake for hours.
5. The policy will (affect / effect) thousands of tenants.
6. If the goalkeeper had reacted faster, we (may / might) have won.

**Exercise 29.3** Style surgery

Rewrite for characters-as-subjects, actions-as-verbs, and end-focus.

1. It is important to note that a reduction in costs was achieved by the new team through the elimination of redundant processes.
2. There is a possibility of the occurrence of delays due to the implementation of the upgrade of the system this weekend.
3. The rejection of the proposal by the committee was a disappointment to the applicants.