

SWEAT 

THIS

Real Rules vs. Grammar Myths

NOT
THAT! 

As editors, we work to ensure writing is accurate, clear, factual and correct. But it can be easy to get hung up on “rules” of language that are nothing more than peeves or shibboleths – and that only serve to distract us from more serious errors.

By now we all know that it’s OK to split infinitives, end sentences with prepositions, begin sentences with conjunctions, and use the passive voice and sentence fragments judiciously. But there are other oddly persistent language “rules” that editors need not worry about.

Sweat this: Personal pronouns

Subject pronouns: I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they

Object pronouns: me, you, him, her, it, us, you, them

Common mistake: The boss assigned *Julie and I* to the project. I love that picture of *Brett and I* at the beach.

Tip: Take the noun out and the pronoun’s case is clear: The boss assigned *me* to the project. I love that picture of *me* at the beach.

Not that: Who/whom

Following “it” and “you,” “who” is on the way to losing its case marking. Anymore, “whom” is used only directly following a preposition: *To whom* it may concern. Hypercorrection – using “whom” where “who” really is correct, as in “The man, *whom* police say robbed three Kwik-E-Marts last week...” – leads to sentences that are both stuffy and wrong.

Tip: When in doubt, use “who.”

Not that: Epicene “they”

English has long been in need of a gender-neutral third-person pronoun, and over the years academics and grammarians have invented dozens of them and tried to introduce them into the lexicon. Real people have simply used “they.” For centuries. But it’s a plural, some say, and we can’t use a plural as a singular. Sure we can: look at “you.”

Sweat this: Homophones

Free reign. Sneak peak. Your crazy.

Nothing says “sloppy” like using the wrong word of a sound-alike pair. Spell-check won’t flag these, so editors need to.

Not that: Synonyms

Because English is a wanton borrower of words from any language it meets, we have a rich trove of synonyms to choose from. Sometimes synonyms possess different shades of meaning, and sometimes people have invented and enforced differences where none actually exist, as in these examples:

Rise/increase

Done/finished

More than/over (also older than/over)

Last/past (as in “for the last seven years...”)

Sweat this: Apostrophes

What looks even sloppier than using the wrong word? Apostrophe errors: it's and its, making a plural with an apostrophe, leaving an apostrophe out of a contraction. Errors are everywhere, and it's up to editors to get apostrophes right.

Not that: The serial comma

Style guides exist for a reason. Follow your workplace's style on the serial comma and be done with it. Rewrite to ensure clarity. (Also realize that AP style does not ban the serial comma – it allows it where needed for clarity, so take as broad or as narrow an interpretation of that guideline as you like.)

Sweat this: Dangling participles

When you have a participial lead-in clause that doesn't modify the subject of a sentence, confusion or awkwardness ensues: *Having finished my report*, the boss took it home to read. The boss finished your report? No, you did.

Fix: *After I finished my report*, the boss took it home to read.

Not that: Fused participles

“The chef was tired of *him making* a mess in the kitchen every morning” or “The chef was tired of *his making* a mess in the kitchen every morning”? Either. The –ing form can be a participle, in which case “him” is fine, or it can be a gerund, in which case “his” is fine.

Sweat this: Jargon, dummy subjects and smothered verbs

Jargon is the bane of clarity, and can be a sign that a speaker or writer is trying too hard to impress. Make sure terms are clear and easily understood by readers.

Example: We're going to upramp our efforts to onboard new hires more quickly.

Fix: We're going to try to get new employees in place more quickly.

Dummy subjects occur when an empty phrase, usually “there is” or “it is,” pushes the real subject back and makes a sentence needlessly wordy.

Example: *There is* one topic the lawmakers didn't cover: speed limits.

Fix: The lawmakers didn't cover one topic: speed limits.

Smothered verbs happen when a perfectly good verb gets replaced with a wordier verb-noun phrase.

Example: Police *conducted an investigation of* the robberies.

Fix: Police *investigated* the robberies.

Not that: “Verbing” on principle

Just because a noun has been “verbed” doesn't mean it needs to get spiked. English has lots of ways to form new words: one of them is simply to shift parts of speech. The difference between jarring and acceptable? A few decades. “Contact” and “host” used to be frowned upon as verbs, but have stuck around long enough that replacements – “play host to” – sound stilted.

Sweat this: The reason is because

This is just redundant.

Not that: “Since” meaning “because”

“Since” has had a causal sense for nearly a millennium.

Not that: “Due to”/“Because of”

Which one can go only after a “to be” verb? Don't waste time racking your brain over this one – either is clear. (However, “due to the fact that” can usually be replaced by the far less wordy “because.”)