



# 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 really just peeves or shibboleths – and that only serve to distract us from more serious errors.

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

### 1 Sweat this: Agreement

Singular nouns take singular verbs and singular pronouns.

**Common mistake:** The museum argues that it is Mr. Hemingway’s legacy — not the cats — that *serve* as the main attraction.

**Fix:** The museum argues that it is Mr. Hemingway’s legacy — not the cats — that *serves* as the main attraction.

- **Tip:** Take the “in-between” out and the agreement is clear: The museum argues that it is Mr. Hemingway’s legacy that *serves* as the main attraction.

**Example:** The restaurant rolled out *their* new summer menu. The business is building *their* new headquarters in Kansas City.

**Fix:** The restaurant rolled out *its* new summer menu. The business is building *its* new headquarters in Kansas City.

- **Tip:** Look at the verb. If it’s singular, make sure your pronoun is, too.

### 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. Everyone understands. But it’s a plural, some say, and we can’t use a plural as a singular. Sure we can: look at “you.”

### 2 Sweat this: Personal pronouns

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

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

**Example:** I love that picture of *Brett and I* at the beach. Between *you and I*, I

think this project is crazy. The boss assigned *Julie and myself* to the project.

**Fix:** I love that picture of *Brett and me* at the beach. Between *you and I*, I think this project is crazy. The boss assigned *Julie and me* to the project.

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

**Remember:** Reflexive pronouns (the “-self” ones) must refer back to the subject of the sentence.

### Not that: Who/whom

Following the pronouns “it,” “you” and “what,” “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, made his first court appearance Friday.” – leads to sentences that are both stuffy and wrong.

- **Tip:** When in doubt, use “who.”

### 3 Sweat this: Homophones

Free reign. Sneak peak. Cause and affect.

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

- **Tip:** When in doubt, look it up.

### Not that: Synonyms

Because English wantonly thieves 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:

- Rise/increase
- Done/finished
- Right/correctly
- More than/over (also older than/over)
- Last/past (as in “for the last seven years”)

### 4 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.

- **Tip:** If there's (there is) an apostrophe in something other than a proper noun, say it as two words and see whether it still makes sense.

### 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.)

### 5 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.

**Example:** *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.

- **Tip:** When you have an “-ing” lead-in, double-check that it “sticks to” the subject.

### Not that: Fused participles

Also called “genitive with a gerund.”

Is it “After years of the *NFL disputing* evidence that connected football to chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a top official for the league for the first time acknowledged the link.”

or “After years of the *NFL's disputing* evidence that connected football to chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a top official for the league for the first time acknowledged the link”?

Either is OK. The -ing form can be a participle, in which case “NFL” is fine, or it can be a gerund, in which case “NFL's” is fine. The focus shifts slightly depending on your choice: The possessive focuses on the action; the participle focuses on the subject.

### 6 Sweat this: Jargon

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.

- **Tip:** Think of the audience. Is the jargon shorthand they will all understand, or is it needlessly buzzword-ish or befuddling?

### 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 the part 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.

### 7 Sweat this: Dummy subjects and smothered verbs

*Dummy subjects* occur when an empty phrase – usually “there are,” “it is,” “this is” and so on – pushes the real subject back and makes a sentence needlessly wordy.

**Example:** *There is* one factor the committee overlooked: cleaning costs.

**Fix:** The committee overlooked one factor: cleaning costs.

Such constructions are not always a problem, but can be.

- **Tip:** Make sure the antecedent is clear, and see whether the sentence would be clearer with a more direct construction.

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

**Example:** Burdett Loomis *conducted a lecture on* the 2016 presidential campaigns.

**Fix:** Burdett Loomis *lectured on* the 2016 presidential campaigns.

### Not that: Passive voice on principle

Just because a sentence is in passive voice doesn't mean it's wordy or vague.

Sometimes the thing or person the action is being done to is more important and should start the sentence.

### 8 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” vs. “Because of”

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

### 9 Sweat this: Foreign words or phrases

If you use one, make sure it's: a) spelled right, b) used correctly, and c) clear to your readers.

### Not that: Foreign grammar

If a word or phrase has entered the English lexicon, it belongs to us now and does not have to strictly adhere to the conventions of its original language. So, don't sweat accent marks, case endings or articles.