

New myths about English

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Keywords: Myths, English grammar, Terminal prepositions, Table and figure titles, Starting sentences with digits, Writing dates

My first 39 myths about English were published in *The Write Stuff* in a series of articles between January 2006 and January 2008.

The myths are mainly drawn from claims about English made by participants at my training events on the use of English in the scientific and medical context. Participants often tell me: 'An English native speaker told me that there is a rule that ...'. And native speakers of English often say: 'I learned that ...'. Because the teaching of rules about the use of English has been patchy since the mid-1970s in the two countries with the most native English speakers (the United Kingdom and the USA) – and I suspect also in other major English-speaking countries such as Canada and Australia – I do wonder where these 'rules' were learned.

Some of these 'rules' have remarkable staying power, and fighting against some of them is definitely a lost cause. But one problem with language is that writers seek the security of rules, whether the language they are writing is their first, second, or third language. While some languages have clear rules on grammar and structure, this is one security that English cannot offer. We have rules, of course, but there are many exceptions and unregulated areas. Those with English as a second language often know some of the real rules better than native speakers (e.g. how to use the apostrophe), while those with English as a first language are often unaware that the way they express something naturally is actually following a rule. A further problem is that different resources often contradict one another, both traditional reference works and Internet sites. We just have to live with this in English because of its widespread use in every field.

Myth 40 was published in *TWS* in December 2008; I repeat it here to incorporate it in the series. Myths 40–45 follow.

Myth 40: If you start a sentence with digits, the noun after the digits has to be capitalized.

Before going into this, I refer readers to the March 2006 issue of *TWS*, where I discussed the myth that you must not start a sentence with digits.¹

If you cannot bring yourself to start a sentence with digits, then you will not be faced with this problem because you will write *One hundred and twenty-one* for the example below.

Do you write: *121 patients were enrolled* or *121 Patients were enrolled*?

My simple answer is that you do not need to capitalize the word *patients* here, nor is there a rule that you must.

Myth 41: There is a rule in English that table titles have to go above tables and that figure titles have to go below figures.

First, this has nothing to do with English. It could just well apply to any other language. Second, who started this one? Many journals follow this pattern. But who says it is a rule? A figure caption could just as well be placed above a figure as below it, and I have often seen table captions below tables to no detriment.

Convention determines that in most publications table captions are above tables, and figure captions are below figures. I have often wondered why this is the case. One reason for putting figure captions below figures may be that they often contain a lot of explanatory information on the figure, such as keys to line styles and symbols, and comments on different parts of a multi-panel figure. This often extends over several lines and might look strange if positioned above the figure. But maybe it would only look strange because we are not used to seeing it above the figure. If you are preparing a publication, do what the target journal does. Regulatory documentation is probably subject to in-house style which should just be followed. Regardless of what you choose to do, be consistent in one document. It does not matter if different reports in a dossier follow different

conventions, but be consistent throughout the text of your Common Technical Document.

Myth 42: P (as in P-value) has to be italicised.

Respected style guides contradict each other on this one. P, p or *p* – it does not matter one jot, so any time spent discussing this is totally wasted. Do what your author, co-author, statistician, boss, or client wants or what is required by house style or your target journal. Enjoy the luxury of doing what you want if you have your choice – mine is ‘p’. And be consistent within one document.

Myth 43: The correct way to write the date is Sunday, April 1st, 2012.

There are many different ways of writing the date and different recommendations. I firmly come out in favour of Sunday 1 April 2012 and not what is in the title of this myth. You can read why in ‘Dating made easy’ published in TWS in 2006.² In brief, why complicate your text with two commas and an ordinal suffix when you can convey exactly the same information without?

Myth 44: Colons are always followed by capital letters.

Generally, in flowing text, a colon is followed by an uppercase letter in American English and a lowercase letter in British English. At least that is what we try to do on each side of the Atlantic. Our (the British) attempts often fail, however, and the capital letter after the colon is definitely creeping in. Is this really important? The answer is no. Try to be consistent if you have time. There are more important things in your text – and in life – than ensuring that you always capitalize a word after a colon. If you are not consistent about this in the middle of a sentence or paragraph in regulatory documentation, it is highly unlikely that you will be regarded as a sloppy writer or that your marketing authorization application will be turned down. You should, however, make the effort to be consistent in publications or medical communications documentation.

What probably will be noticed in any type of text – and could brand you as careless – is using introductory phrases for successive paragraphs and not consistently following these with capital or small letters. So do check that you have been consistent for this. For example:

Efficacy results: Overall survival was 2.4 ± 1.1 years in Group A and

Safety results: dose-limiting toxicity was observed in

In publication titles with parts separated by a colon, the word after the colon is usually capitalized whether in British or American English. This is determined by the publisher.

Myth 45: There is a rule that sentences must not end with prepositions.

The one thing that pleased me about this British participant’s claim is that he obviously knew what a preposition is! But internally I said ‘Oh dear, not again!’. I have dealt with old chestnuts before, and this one will just not go away.

The most popularly quoted objection to this is attributed to Winston Churchill: ‘This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I shall not put’ instead of ‘This is the sort of bloody nonsense which I shall not put up with’. As with many much used quotes, there are many variants around (see <http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/churchill.html>). Note also that the ‘undesirable’ version that does not avoid the terminal preposition actually finishes with two prepositions in this case (up with), thanks to the abundance of phrasal verbs in English. Such phrasal verbs are used very frequently when speaking or writing informally, and much less in formal writing, which means that they do not very often present a problem in our context. My empirical observation is that this is not something I change often when editing texts. (I nearly said *correct*, but in many cases it would be just *changing* and not *correcting*.)

For a general comment on this, I can do nothing better than quote Jack Lynch:³ Not ending sentences with prepositions is a

favourite bugbear of the traditionalists. Whatever the merit of this ‘rule’ – and both historically and logically, there’s not much – there’s a substantial body of opinion against end-of-sentence prepositions; if you want to keep the crusty old-timers happy, try to avoid ending written sentences (and clauses) with prepositions, such as *to*, *with*, *from*, *at*, and *in*. Instead of writing ‘The topics we want to write on’, where the preposition *on* ends the clause, consider ‘The topics on which we want to write’. On the other hand – and it’s a big other hand – old-timers shouldn’t always dictate your writing, and you don’t deserve your writing license if you elevate this rough guideline into a superstition. Don’t let it make your writing clumsy or obscure; if a sentence is more graceful with a final preposition, let it

stand. For instance, ‘He gave the public what it longed for’ is clear and idiomatic, even though it ends with a preposition; ‘He gave the public that for which it longed’ ... doesn’t look (or sound: AR) like English. A sentence becomes unnecessarily obscure when it’s filled with *from whoms and with whiches*.

As with many aspects of the use of English, this is an area where you have to use a bit of common sense. In scientific and medical texts, I think the above is good advice for publications and other non-regulatory documents. See whether you can avoid ending sentences with a preposition, by choosing perhaps a different verb. I appreciate that this is sometimes difficult because of phrasal verbs, but as I said above, these are used much more in informal writing. Regulatory documents (except for SmPCs and patient information leaflets) are different. Obviously they should convey their message clearly, but – as was discussed last year in the medical writing forum in *Linked-In* – if the message is clear, it is not necessary to spend hours searching for the most elegant formulation.

The differences between the spoken word and more formal modes of expression for the same idea are illustrated by the examples below.

What you might say when giving a talk (all sound perfectly good when speaking) or for emails:

[1a] *We were aware that the arthritis study was a project that we would have to do a lot of preparatory work for.*

[1b] *Here is the result we ended up with.*

[1c] *After many attempts, these were the concentrations we eventually made the samples up to.*

[1d] *This is the kind pressure from a government department that we will never give in to.*

More formal when writing:

[2a] *We were aware that the arthritis study was a project for which we would have to do much preparatory work.*

[2b] *We finally obtained this result: (‘with which we ended up’ is correct but sounds ridiculous)*

[2c] *After many attempts, the concentrations of the samples were eventually made up to the following:*

[2d] *We will never give in to this is the kind pressure from a government department (‘in to which we will never give’ is impossible)*

Avoidance of terminal prepositions by more extensive reformulation:

[3a] *We were aware that the arthritis study would require much preparatory work or We knew we would have to do much preparatory work for the arthritis study.*

[3b] *The final result was as follows:*

[3c] *After many attempts, the final concentrations for the samples were:*

[3d] *We will never bow to this kind of pressure from a government department.*

There are obviously many other variants for [2a–d] and [3a–d]. These simply illustrate the transition from less formal to more formal writing. Note also that [3a–d] are all much shorter than [1a–d] but retain the same message. Shorter is always better if there is no information loss.

References

1. Reeves A. Myths about English. TWS 2006;15(1):22–4.
2. Reeves A. Dating made easy. TWS 2006;15(1):25–6.
3. <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/writing/p.html#prepend> [accessed 8 January 2012].

Author information

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