

Misconceptions About Grammar and Writing

You've probably had the experience where something you thought was true turned out not to be. When that happens, it can be confusing and hard to process. But what happens when it is not your opinion that is disproven but, instead, something you thought was a fact? These supposed "facts" are common in writing, regarding "rules" about both grammar and essay structure. Let's take a look at some of the most common examples.

Common Grammatical Misconceptions

Ending a sentence with a preposition

Prepositions are words that show a relationship between nouns, commonly in distance, location, or time (for a refresher on this topic, please see our [Homegrown Handout](#)). Common prepositions include *to*, *by*, and *with*, but there are many more.

According to this "rule," you should not end your sentence with a preposition. Instead, you would have to rephrase the sentence so that the preposition is avoided or appears elsewhere. Thus, you could not write "he happened to stop by." Instead, you would have to rework the sentence to change the position of the preposition *by*. One possible revision would be, "he happened to stop by the house on his way to the store."

In reality, you can end a sentence with a preposition, and your sentence remains grammatically correct. In fact, if you strive to never end a sentence with a preposition, it can lead to some clunky and nonsensical constructions. For example, take the famous account of Winston Churchill's reaction to this "rule." To show its ridiculousness, Churchill supposedly reconstructed the phrasing of his frustration. Instead of reacting, "that is something I will not put up with," Churchill instead said, "that is something up with which I will not put." You can see how always following this "rule" can lead to confusing sentence constructions. If you encounter people who insist on this "rule," that is something you do not have to put up with. Yes, I ended my sentence with a preposition because I wanted to. Look, I did it again. Now, you can too.

Splitting an infinitive

Another outdated grammar "rule" says that you cannot split an infinitive (for a refresher on this topic, please see our [Homegrown Handout](#)). An infinitive occurs when you have the word "to" in front of a verb. Examples of this are, of course, endless, but could include "to sing," "to fly," or "to read." When you split an infinitive, you put something between the word "to" and the verb. Using our examples, this could look like "to unexpectedly sing," "to suddenly fly," or "to slowly read." We can dispel the misconception about split infinitives through two examples of a sentence with the same meaning. The first version of the sentence does not use a split infinitive while the second does.

Sample sentence without a split infinitive

I need to run back into my house quickly.

Sample sentence with a split infinitive

I need to quickly run back into my house.

Both versions of the sentence are examples of how to grammatically write a sentence. Yes, I did just split an infinitive in that sentence on purpose. Feel free to give it a try yourself!

Starting a sentence with “because”

Starting a sentence with the word “because” can yield a grammatically perfect sentence. To properly start a sentence with “because,” you have to understand dependent and independent clauses (for a refresher on this topic, please reference our [Homegrown Handout](#)). Dependent clauses are those that cannot stand on their own as sentences, but independent clauses can. The word “because” serves as the introduction of a dependent clause, meaning you need an independent clause to appear with it to make a grammatically correct sentence. Otherwise, you are left with a fragment. Some examples are provided below.

Example of “because” creating a sentence fragment

Because Geraldine bought her plane ticket before Thanksgiving.

This is an example of a fragment that starts with “because.” When you read it, you are left thinking about what happened as a result. Information is missing because we only have a dependent clause. It needs an independent clause to make it a complete sentence.

Example of a complete sentence starting with “because”

Because Maya went to bed early, she felt well rested in the morning.

This is a complete sentence that starts with “because.” The first part of the sentence, “because Maya went to bed early,” cannot stand by itself as a sentence. It needs something else to help support it. The second part of the sentence, “she felt well rested in the morning,” can stand by itself as a complete sentence. Coupled together, these two parts give a statement (Maya feeling well rested) and a reason for it (she went to bed early). Together, they form a complete sentence.

Run-on sentences are long

Run-on sentences are not always lengthy sentences. If a sentence is a run-on, all that means is that punctuation is missing between independent clauses. The length of the sentence is not a factor. Let us look at some examples of run-on sentences, both short and long.

Example of a short run-on sentence

I turn the light on I turn the light off.

This is a run-on sentence because it contains two independent clauses without punctuation between them. Both “I turn the light on” and “I turn the light off” can stand on their own as sentences. Therefore, you need punctuation between them. You could use a period and break them into two separate sentences, or you could use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (like “and”) to break them apart. Either of these options will prevent a run-on sentence.

Example of a longer run-on sentence

I want to learn how to ice skate the rink I go to has a lot of helpful instructors.

It is also possible, of course, for a run-on sentence to be longer. In the run-on sentence above, we have the same problem as with the short one: there are two independent clauses without punctuation between them. The first independent clause, “I want to learn how to ice skate,” is immediately followed by the second independent clause, “the rink I go to has a lot of helpful instructors.” To fix this run-on sentence, you could use a period and split the run-on into two sentences. You could also use a comma and coordinating conjunction between the two independent clauses.

Common Writing Misconceptions

How many paragraphs an essay should have

There is not a firm number of paragraphs that need to be in an essay despite some people saying five is the minimum (accounting for an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion). This structure makes sense for some essays, but what happens when you have more than three main arguments and thus need more than three body paragraphs? What happens when you need to write a 12-page paper or a lengthier graduate-level thesis? Think of structuring your essay around the material that you have—not structuring your evidence around how many paragraphs you “should” have. Please note that neither five-paragraph essays nor essays with more paragraphs are superior. When unsure, please consult with your professor to understand their requirements for the given assignment.

How long a thesis statement should be

A thesis statement is the main point/argument of your paper. If a thesis statement conveys a lot of information or presents a complex idea, it might require the use of more than one sentence. As you go into advanced levels of writing, it may become more common to have a thesis statement that is made up of more than one sentence. Please note that neither the one-sentence nor multi-sentence thesis statement is inherently superior. You need to consider the content of your intended thesis statement and structure it accordingly.

Activity

Applying what we learned about common grammatical misconceptions, rewrite the following sentences to break the “rules.”

1. In writing, some people argue there are certain rules with which you must comply.
2. Rooting for the San Francisco 49ers makes me want to cry uncontrollably.
3. SAP Center is known as the Shark Tank because the San Jose Sharks play there.
4. To emphasize a scoring play emphatically during the NBA Finals, Mike Breen yells, “Bang!”
5. Sharks fans love Macklin Celebrini because he quickly gave them a reason to stop wearing paper bags over their heads.

Answer Key for Activity

Please note that there will be variations of correct answers for this activity.

1. In writing, some people argue that there are rules that you must comply with. [ending a sentence with a preposition]
2. Rooting for the San Francisco 49ers makes me want to uncontrollably cry. [splitting an infinitive]
3. Because the San Jose Sharks play there, SAP Center is known as the Shark Tank. [starting a sentence with “because”]
4. To emphatically emphasize a scoring play during the NBA Finals, Mike Breen yells, “Bang!” [splitting an infinitive]
5. Because Macklin Celebrini gave them a reason to stop wearing paper bags over their heads, Sharks fans love him. [starting a sentence with “because”]

References

Watts, R. [RobWords]. (2025, February 1). *Grammar rules you can stop sticking to* [Video].

YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BccyQaNKXz8>