

# WORDS WORDS WORDS

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Deadline for the next issue is September 23rd, 2004.

# On being not (exactly) in error

by Terri Palmer, assistant professor, York University, Toronto

After various classes:

*Student:* "Oh, professor, can you tell me if this is true? A high school teacher of mine told me that if you start out a list with 'first,' 'second,' 'third,' and so on that you can't end it with 'last' or 'finally.' Is that true?"

*Me:* "Um ... I don't really think it matters that much."

*Student:* "Professor Palmer, is it true that you should never split an infinitive?"

*Me:* "That's just a holdover from people trying to make English act like Latin. 'To boldly go where no man has gone before'—no, that's fine."

*Student:* "Professor, what about 'got'? The word 'got'—is it proper usage? Can I use that in a paper, as in 'I have got a cold'?"

*Me:* "Err, I don't think most people would care, though it's usually an intensifier—'I've really got to leave now'—and isn't seen as much in formal usage. But it should be fine to use it in a formal paper, if not so common as in daily conversation."

Later that term:

*Me:* "Man, I keep getting these questions! The poor kids must have had a million different

teachers with a million different sticks up their butts. 'Can I end a sentence with a preposition, can I split an infinitive' ... "

*Colleague:* "Gah! I hope you told them not to split infinitives! I hate that! I'm always marking that off on papers!"

I've always been a good student of the English language, and a good textual mimic as well. Not only could I reproduce standard written English without much training, I remembered the rules when I was taught them. I also could tell which rules weren't generally observed, but rather an oddity that drove only some people nuts: not ending sentences with prepositions, not distinguishing between "that" and "which," etc.

When I started teaching, however, I found out that it wasn't so easy for my students. For them, it seemed all the rules were important, including the rules I thought stupid, and sometimes the stupid rules seemed more logical to them than the rules I thought important. And the rules mattered—a lot—and only one answer could possibly be right; they weren't taking this ambiguity crap about "that" and "which," and God help you when you got to commas.

Much worse, sometimes they

would have absorbed what they thought was a rule but that was actually wrong and that involved something that did matter. For many of my students, "He gave a party for Ted and I" seems grammatically correct. They've heard people they respect saying things like that, you see, and were told as kids not to say "Me and him are going to the store." So "I," "he," "she," "we," and "they" are the correct thing in all cases, right? Or at least they sound better. Right?

So how do my students know which are rules and which aren't? It doesn't help to brandish *The Little, Brown Handbook* or *The Chicago Manual of Style*, both of them now going on a thousand pages. It doesn't reassure my students to know that I still check usage manuals (indeed, I did so while writing this). It doesn't help when the rules say such things as "Do not use commas with ... a short quotation that is merely one element in the sentence, not the substance of the sentence." That's the rule I looked up in regards to the fourth-from-last sentence in the paragraph above, and I want to know the same thing my students would: How substantive?

It also doesn't help that every English professor I know has a list of things that drive him or her nuts and that every one of those lists is different. Better yet, even though we know that many of the rules are the arbitrary

impositions of nineteenth-century grammarians, we still have very strong feelings about matters of usage. For instance, I don't mind the phrase "he or she," but someone I know calls it a "barbarous neologism." I'm easy on "that" versus "which," only demanding that students not use "that" in a non-restrictive clause, but I have colleagues who change every restrictive "which" to a "that." Lest you think I have no semi-rational tics, however, I have to admit that a misused "less" will drive me nuts—less money, fewer dollars, dammit—and I know some of my colleagues don't care about the distinction. I can't stand it when people capitalize every noun that has a pretense of being an official title, so of course I start shouting at my monitor every time I get e-mail from my colleagues that refers to "the English Department" and not "the Department of English," its actual title, or "the English department." And so on.

Then there're the rules I break on purpose. I really should have used "I" instead of "me" in the exchanges I started the piece with, for instance, but it sounded stuffy to me in this situation. I don't use "whom" when I'm sitting in a bar since I don't want to get punched. I worry about commas but still often leave out those a purist would insist on because I don't like using too many commas.

And so on—again.

That's the problem, really: As we all know, not only are there millions of rules, there's a set of meta-rules, rules that tell when the various rules apply and when they explicitly don't. And one of the big rules is that everyone is driven nuts by something, and that it's better to be safe than sorry. And that, of course, leads me into a discussion of audiences and rhetoric and the ten thousand situations one can end up in—which, while fascinating, never cheers my students up as much as I mean it to.

Now that I think about it, it's not cheering me up much, either.

In fact, I think I'll go lie down.

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That's it for now.  
Good luck on your exams,  
and we'll meet again after  
the summer break.  
Remember that the dead-  
line for the next issue is  
September 23rd.