

The old 'new' rules for language

 By [Tiffany Markman](#) 15 Jan 2013

In response to one of my [tirades about execrable language usage](#), a client gently reprimanded me: "Language is feeling - not a spreadsheet." Which got me thinking about whether I'm a [prescriptivist](#) and whether that's a good thing for a) a copywriter, b) a writing trainer and c) someone who was born after 1980, ie is still young-ish.



Here's my list of old 'new' language rules for 2013: things that have evolved over the last few years, things pro writers are using in certain contexts and things you will see more and more in today's writing, now that you know what to look for. [Please note: the items below are to be used only in light of the *mini-disclaimer** at the bottom.]

1. And

One of the things you'll notice in 2013, now that I've highlighted it, is more sentences starting with "And". Obviously it applies to certain situations only (you shouldn't do it in a proposal to your bank), but many clients are requesting a looser, more rhythmic, more conversational approach to copy, and this includes beginning sentences with conjunctions. ("But" and "because" are other sometime-sentence-starters, but can be more dangerous in terms of conveying intended meaning.)

2. Prepositions

Winston Churchill is renowned in nerd circles for his tongue-in-jowl assertion that ending a sentence with a preposition is 'something up with which I will not put'. This lovely phrase shows the awkwardness that can arise when preposition (the little words that link words to each other, such as "with", "to", "in") are kept from the end of the sentence. How much neater is, "That is something I will not put up *with*"? Again, now that you know what to look for, you'll see more "This is the direction we'll go *in*" and less "the direction in which we'll go". Thank goodness. Whiches are clumsy.

3. Who/whom

My mother-in-law, a world-famous professor in applied English language studies, regularly teases me for my adherence to some old-fashioned grammatical norms, insisting that languages must evolve. She adores SMS lingo, for instance, while I hate it. And the old 'new' rule about choosing 'who' over 'whom' reminds me of her because it's an instance of deliberately using the 'wrong' way to achieve clarity.

In short, in the past we used "who" for the person doing the action and "whom" for the person the action was done to. "To whom am I speaking?" and "Who is calling?" But today, it's "Who am I speaking *to*?" Bottom line: you'll seldom see "whom".

4. Split infinitives

The favoured geek example of a split infinitive is "**To boldly go** where no man has gone before" (*Star Trek*). Back when English was new and basing its rules on Latin and other 'Romantic' languages, you couldn't do that - insert an adverb such as "boldly" - without getting into trouble. But the origin of that rule is that, in Latin, French, etc, the infinitive form of a verb ("to" + go, for example; "aller" in French) is one word. You can't split it. Well, in English, these days, you can - provided that doing so *adds to the clarity of your message*, as in, "It is hard to really like stiletto heels."

5. I vs me

Thanks for inviting Bizcommunity and I onto your screen. This sentence may look correct, but it should read, "...inviting Bizcommunity and me". And yet, there's something in most of us that resists using "me" - maybe because it sounds child-like. In my speech, I'm guilty of using "I" incorrectly because it feels more elegant, so I'm going to cite my defence the wisdom of [Bryan A Garner of *The New York Times*](#):

"Sometimes, a usage will spread that is new, illogical and strikes commentators as tasteless. But if, over time, it becomes widespread among a critical mass of good writers and is accepted by many good editors, we must acknowledge a new rule. We must be descriptivists, in other words [people who try to describe language as it is used, not as it should be used]."

6. Made-up words

People make up words every day. I don't mean words that then become common, such as 'googling'. I mean words that are used once, and then (possibly) never again. Such as "mini-disclaimer", "sometime-sentence-starter" and "tongue-in-jowl" as used by me elsewhere in this article. Granted, this form of creative licence is most often used by confident writers, but it is spreading and we will see more of it this year, I predict.

***Mini-disclaimer:** Why have rules for writing? Two reasons, and they're linked: **consistency** to achieve **clarity**. But rules for the sake of rules make no sense. So here I'm advocating being aware of how the old rules have recently changed and using the 'new' ways where appropriate you want to. 'Appropriate' depends on your audience and the message.

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