



# The Friendly Editor

*The Friendly Editor welcomes letters from others interested in language. Please write to Don Bush, 6609 Hillgrove Drive, San Diego, CA 92120.*

DON BUSH, COLUMN EDITOR

## Strange Rules

BY DON BUSH, FELLOW

It's commonly thought that good writing—especially good technical writing—is a matter of following a set of intricate grammatical rules. But this axiom may not necessarily hold true.

Rules are strange. Perhaps the most commonly cited rule in technical writing is the one governing the relative pronouns *which* and *that*. Writers are exhorted to use *that* with restrictive pronouns and *which* with those that are nonrestrictive. Restrictive pronouns distinguish some object from others (for example, “the ball that was yellow”), whereas nonrestrictive pronouns describe the ball itself (“The ball, which was yellow, . . .”), with a comma preceding *which*.

This rule is frequently violated, which is not so odd, because it is comparatively recent and imposes a strange stricture on what used to be considered perfectly good English. It emerged in the first part of the twentieth century in a book called *The King's English* by the brothers Henry and Francis Fowler (Oxford University Press, 1906). The Fowlers evidently thought that the rule imposed a desirable “order” on our language beyond the requirements of clear communication.

Whereas the rule indeed follows conventional English idiom most of the time, it is frequently ignored in today's writing. This is especially so, I have noticed, in scholarly writing, which often seems to see a desirable authority in the word *which* and allows it to overrule the Fowlers' edict.

Good writers avoid any edicts at all which they think are awkward, stilted, or pedantic.

**Authors have a wide choice when it comes to grammar, not just a single set of “correct” rules.**

### “Optional” Rules

Besides the *that-which* dichotomy, there are many other rules which, while common and extremely well known, are frequently violated simply because they don't reflect normal idiom. Following them makes the writing sound pedantic or unnecessarily ornate to the native speaker. A fairly extensive list of optional rules is given in *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity & Grace*, by Joseph M. Williams (HarperCollins, Fourth Edition, 1994).

First mentioned by Williams as an “optional” rule is the split infinitive. Yes, that's a rule violation, but conventional usage generally prefers saying “to barely conceal the fact,” rather than “barely to conceal the fact,” or “to conceal the fact barely.”

As noted by Williams, “The split infinitive is now so common that when we avoid splitting, we invite notice, whether we intend to or not.”

### Shall-Will

The optional rule regarding *shall* and *will* is so seldom observed it is almost

obsolete. Writers are urged to use *shall* in the first person future tense, as in “I shall go to the party,” and *will* in the second and third person. Then, conversely, they are asked to use *will* in first person to mean strong intention and *shall* in second and third person.

Almost no one observes this rule completely, although its correctness is indisputable. Actually, most of us cheat a little by omitting the first two letters and simply adding *'ll* to many of our verbs.

### Whom

The word that is perhaps the most branded for its stilted correctness is the object pronoun *whom*. It has almost become a joke, and some insist that it's going out of the language. This is certainly not true, because we will always have *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

### Ending a Sentence with a Preposition

We must not forget that perhaps our most common error is ending a sentence with a preposition. This rule has great standing, because the word *preposition* inherently means “pre-position.” So how can it ever come last?

It does, frequently, as in “Where did you come from?” Is it better English to say, “From where did you come?” or perhaps “From where came you?” No.

### The Subjunctive Mood

Perhaps the greatest opportunity we have to sound super-correct is in the subjunctive mood. “As the subjunctive slowly sinks into the sunset of linguistic history,” writes Williams, “it gives a sentence a faintly archaic and therefore formal glow.”

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### Cold Calls

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thinking, ‘Earn, baby, earn!’ Right now, I don’t think I can afford the luxury of waiting for work to come to me. Cold calls might broaden my client base. Maybe I could even charge a bit more if I concentrated on private companies and took on fewer nonprofits.”

*Celebrate your successes.* Many independents say they don’t make calls because of their fear of rejection. Early in my process, I had two rejections, but they were so polite and respectful that I didn’t wither. And to balance those two rejections, I had two huge successes: HR managers who said, “You know, we’ve been talking about writing training for a long time. Why don’t you come in and show us your stuff?”

### Opening the Floodgates

Whatever your comfort level with cold calls, there is no doubt that this tactic can be productive. Elkins said she obtained her biggest and oldest client via a cold call. Bowerman swears by cold calls: “Cold calling does work. It may not be working for you, but you simply cannot even come to that flawed conclusion until you’ve done a TON of it . . . stick with it a little longer, the floodgates [will] open” (*Seconds*, p. 87). I believe cold calls are the fastest way to obtain work, certainly faster than networking and other passive forms of marketing. Bowerman stresses that cold calls aren’t absolutely necessary—you can build your business more slowly—but they can be an immense help.

Whether or not you receive a flood of business from your cold calls, you’ll

definitely learn more about your market, your product (service), and yourself. Once I overcame my fear, started applying discipline and organization to the process, and asked for help, I started to see my marketing seeds sprout and grow.

And my garden? I have so many tomatoes and zucchini, neighbors avert their eyes when I walk toward them with a bowl of harvest in my hands. ❶

### SUGGESTED READINGS

Bowerman, Peter. *The Well-Fed Writer*. Atlanta: Fanove, 2000.

———. *The Well-Fed Writer: Back for Seconds*. Atlanta: Fanove, 2005.

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The subjunctive uses a slightly different tense structure from the indicative (principally *were* instead of *was*) and applies to statements that are wishes, or that are doubtful or contrary to fact, as in, “I wish he were here.”

### Imagined Errors

Williams reserves a special section for what he calls “The Bêtes Noires,” or rules that he says are “largely capricious, with no foundation in logic, history, etymology, or linguistic efficiency.”

He heads the list of supposed errors with the use of *like* instead of *as*, as in “Write like you talk.” Right behind that is *different than* rather than *different from*, as in, “These numbers are different than the others.” Very few of us today take the trouble to use *different from*.

Williams’ third bête noire is the familiar *hopefully*, as in, “Hopefully, the matter will be resolved soon.” The claim that “the matter does not hope” is not valid. Therefore, *hopefully* can definitely be used attributively, like other introductory words, such as *candidly*, *seriously*, *frankly*, *honestly*, *sadly*, or *happily*.

Williams readily allows the use of *fi-*

*nalize*, although I’m sure he doesn’t like it to be overused, as it is in many technical papers.

He also thinks that we have gotten a bit oversensitive to prohibiting “absolute” words like *perfect*, *unique*, *complete*, or *final* to be modified by *quite*, *more*, or *very*. Even the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution talks about “a more perfect” union.

### Authors’ Choice

It’s quite clear that authors have a wide choice when it comes to grammar, not just a single set of “correct” rules. And this choice is not rigid. It follows the way educated people speak when they are trying to influence people. The key word is choice.

Thus, Williams is not saying that rules do not matter. They do. But they vary with different authorities, and over the years they change.

Certainly, it’s well for authors to know a wide range of rules. But the chief discipline is not grammar, but rather idiom—the way educated people speak and write. This is what we need to learn to communicate effectively. ❶

### Minneapolis

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Downtown Stillwater offers antiques galore, an antiquarian book lover’s paradise, and diverse gift stores.

This small town hosts a logging and railroad museum, and many unique Victorian bed and breakfast inns. Ride the Minnesota Zephyr dinner train, board an old-fashioned paddlewheel boat for a river boat tour, or take the city trolley tour to learn about local outlaws, logging tycoons, and the beautiful architecture of the town. To plan your day or make reservations, visit [www.stillwatertraveler.com](http://www.stillwatertraveler.com) and [www.ilovestillwater.com](http://www.ilovestillwater.com).

The city of Rochester is probably most famous as the home of the world-renowned Mayo Clinic. It is seventy-six miles southeast of the Twin Cities. Take a tour of the Mayo Clinic, visit the restored and refurbished William Dee Log Cabin (dating back to 1862) and the traditional one-room Hadley Valley School House, and walk around the George Stoppel Farm. For more information about the area, visit [www.rochestercub.org](http://www.rochestercub.org) and [www.rochestermn.com](http://www.rochestermn.com), or for information on the Mayo Clinic, try [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org). ❶