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MY INBOX: FOLLOW-UP ADVICE TO READERS

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff
Smith, Fordyce-Ruff, & Penny
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I love receiving a new issue of *The Advocate* because after every issue a few readers will take the time to drop me an email about my latest article. I have my favorites. For instance, one reader (who was not my mom) wrote: “You have now written my favorite *Advocate* article ever!” High praise indeed.

I am not writing, however, to convince you that there are people who actually read my column. I’m writing because several readers sent me questions and comments and, though I try to respond to all of them, I thought the rest of you might have had some of the same questions, but not enough time to ask. So, in the interest of sharing, here are a few of my favorite follow-up discussions regarding essays from the last year.

Beginning sentences with conjunctions

One of my big pet peeves is when someone insists on grammar rules that simply aren’t rules. So, in the May 2011 issue, I addressed grammar myths, including beginning sentences with “and” or “but.” One reader wrote to inquire whether



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he could correctly begin a sentence with “so.” My response: “Thank you so much for writing me. I love to hear from the readers. Yes, you may feel confident that it is not an error to begin a sentence with ‘so.’ I caution you, however, that some readers find the tone of this very casual, so always consider your audience.”

Although my May essay addressed using “and” or “but” to begin a sentence, it is perfectly acceptable to use conjunctions to begin sentences. To heed the advice of *The Redbook*: “forget the idea that a conjunction should never start a sentence. Any writer can benefit from unlearning such baseless nonsense.”

Beginning sentences with “hopefully”

Every year I ask my in-laws for a new Chicago Manual of Style for Christmas, and I inevitably get a sweater. After an-



other year without a writing guide under the tree I wrote: “*Hopefully, that present is the newest edition of the Chicago Manual of Style!*” This appeared in my February essay on joining independent clauses. One reader wrote to tell me that AP style does not allow for the use of “hopefully” to begin a sentence and to see what my take on that issue was. My reply:

I agree that language sticklers dislike beginning sentences with “hopefully.” Technically, the adverb “hopefully” can modify a whole sentence, and so it is correct in some instances. Sentence adverbs have been common in English usage for about 500 years. Also, “hopefully” has meant “it is to be hoped” in standard English usage for some time now (around 400 years), although some language sticklers insist it means only “in a hopeful fashion.”

I dislike beginning a sentence with “hopefully” when it could create ambiguity. When, however, the context makes the writer’s meaning clear to the reader and when it is used in less formal settings (and I do hope to use a less formal style in my essays!), I personally have no objection to its use. Moreover, I agree with Bryan Garner that the argument that it is never correct to begin a sentence with “hopefully” is dead. I think, though, that my agreement is made with more enthusiasm than his reluctant admission.

So, by all means you can continue to avoid ever beginning a sentence with it, and I suggest not doing so in formal writing (like to a court).

HOPEFULLY, this has helped!

Dashes and colons: more advice

I frequently get questions relating to how to use “scary” punctuation marks (those that readers see, but don’t really know

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how to use), so I decided to provide some guidance. In the March/April issue I addressed creating emphasis in your writing by using punctuation.

One reader wrote to ask if I could address how to correctly form a dash (rather than a hyphen) and when to capitalize the word following a colon. I promised him that I would address the issue in a future essay, so here goes:

En dashes, em dashes, and hyphens (Oh my!)

There are three typed marks that can create confusion here: a hyphen (-), an en dash (–), and an em dash (—). Many writers have seen the different marks, but don’t understand the difference between them or don’t know how to form en and em dashes using their word processing program.

The traditional dash, or em dash, (—) is the longest of the three marks. Depend-

ing on your word processing program, you can find em dashes in the special character menu, or you can sometimes form one by typing two hyphens together without a space between them and the program will automatically convert this to an em dash. Em dashes are used to set off lists and create emphasis in your writing. Don't place spaces around an em dash—you join it to the words before and after.

An en dash (–) is found in the special character menu and is slightly longer than the hyphen. It is used to connect numbers (and occasionally words) and means “to.”

I will be on vacation from December 23, 2011–January 2, 2012.

The en dash used to be found only in typeset documents, so many writers continue to substitute the hyphen key.

A hyphen (-) is the shortest of the three marks. It is used to join certain compound words, such as modifiers: family-car doctrine, price-fixing contract.

Capitalization following colons

The “rule” here is somewhat up for debate. If what follows the colon is an independent clause (a complete, correct sentence), then you may choose to capitalize the first word. There are good arguments for both capitalization and non-capitalization. If you leave the first word lower case, the colon does a better job of relating the two independent clauses.

The witness started to get irritable: she was tired and wanted to go home.

Capitalization creates slightly more emphasis on the second independent clause.

The witness started to get irritable: She was tired and wanted to go home.

Whichever you choose, be consistent throughout the document. And if a phrase follows the colon, never capitalize the first word.

The defendant's trial was originally scheduled for October 25, 2011: ninety-three days after his arraignment.

Serial commas

Invariably, the punctuation mark that garners the most comments is the comma. Many readers have let me know how much they struggle with commas and have thanked me for the helpful tips.

Now, I made it known early on that I use serial commas (and I mentally insert them into lists when I'm speaking, so you could say I'm pretty committed to the idea of serial commas). One reader was not such a big fan of serial commas and asked me whether my recommendation to use serial commas as a bright line rule was appropriate.

I agree and acknowledge that, technically, it can be proper to create a list without placing a comma between the last two items. Indeed, many people believe that the conjunction used in the list takes the place of the last comma. In many instances, this is true. But when it is not correct, you can create unnecessary consternation:

I would like to thank my parents, Mother Teresa and the Pope.

In this example, not using a comma between the last two items in a list creates ambiguity. Did Mother Teresa and the Pope conceive me, or did I mean to thank four people: Mom, Dad, Mother Teresa, and the Pope? Without a serial comma the reader cannot know for sure.

Now you understand how leaving off a serial comma can create ambiguity, but you might still be wondering why I am so committed to using them in every list instead of just those that could create confusion. My answer: Better safe than sorry. Serial commas never create confusion, but omitting them (while technically proper in

some cases) can. My default habit of using serial commas saves me from an additional step in the editing process to ensure that I haven't created confusion with my comma usage (or non-usage in this case).

Conclusion

I hope that this shared mail-box of answers has addressed some lingering questions you may have had about grammar and usage but were afraid to ask. In the future please don't hesitate to let me know your thoughts and questions.

About the Author

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is a partner at Rainey Law Office. Her practice focuses on civil appeals. She was a visiting professor at University of Oregon School of Law teaching Legal Research and Writing, Advanced Legal Research, and Intensive Legal Writing and, prior to that, clerked for Justice Roger Burdick of the Idaho Supreme Court. While clerking for Justice Burdick, she authored *Idaho Legal Research*, a book designed to help law students, new attorneys, and paralegals navigate the intricacies of researching Idaho law. You can reach her at tfr@raineylawoffice.com.

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