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# The Other Four-Letter Words

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## THE OTHER FOUR-LETTER WORDS

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

**B**y February, the winter doldrums have hit. I love all four seasons in Idaho, but I'm tired of short days. I long to play outside without several layers of clothing. I hope to someday feel my toes again. In fact, after coming inside and stripping off layers of wet clothing and drying off two large dogs, I'm ready to let a few four-letter words escape. (I don't, of course.) But, this instinct got me to thinking — what else makes me want to let four-letter words fly? (Bad writing, of course.)

Some struggles in writing come from pesky four-letter words. Not the kind that result from muddy dog prints on the wood floors — the kind that result from not being quite sure of the correct way to use certain words in our writing. So, to celebrate the shortest month of the year, I thought we could learn about some short, four-letter words that tend to give us fits: that, they, whom, data, and none.

### That

The most common question I receive about *that* is when it's necessary for a sentence. I think we writers feel tension because we have all heard the rule to omit *that* whenever possible to shorten our writing, but we don't know exactly when *that* is necessary.



For many of the common verbs of speech or thought — say, claim, hear, think, know, or believe — you can safely omit *that*. These verbs, called bridge verbs, don't carry any meaning beyond saying or thinking. Your ear probably tells you that omitting *that* after these verbs is fine.

*The plaintiff claimed that the defendant was negligent.*

*The plaintiff claimed the defendant was negligent.*

Other verbs that carry extra meaning beyond simple thought and speech tend to need the *that*. Take, for instance, the verb yell. This non-bridge verb means to say something in a particular way, and it sounds slightly odd if you leave out the *that*.



*She yelled he was dangerous.*

*She yelled that he was dangerous.*

Beyond sounding off, however, sometimes omitting the *that* creates a miscue for the reader. Transitive verbs, those that can take a direct object, need to be followed by *that* when there isn't a direct object in the sentence.

*The student acknowledged being a member of a minority might have helped him be admitted to law school.*

Because this sentence omits the *that* after *acknowledged* the reader takes the noun phrase *being a member of a minority* as a direct object. But once the sentence continues, the reader has to return to the beginning and re-parse the sentence. Including a *that* prevents this misreading.

*The student acknowledged that being a member of a minority might have helped him be admitted to law school.*

Omitting *that* with nouns can sometimes create miscues, too. With nouns, *that* can introduce adjective clauses or clauses that explain what the noun is. If the noun is followed by an adjective clause, it's fine to omit the *that*.

*The testimony [that] the defendant gave was not credible.*

But, if the noun is followed by a clause that explains the noun, omitting the *that* creates confusion for the reader.

*The court held the defendant was given credit for time served.*

In this example, it's unlikely the court actually held the defendant, so omitting the *that* creates a miscue for the reader.

*With nouns, that can introduce adjective clauses or clauses that explain what the noun is.*

*The court held that the defendant was given credit for time served.*

### They

This pesky pronoun creates headaches for legal writers when we replace a collective noun.

*The jury should not be misled about the witness's credibility when they consider her testimony.*

The *they* in this sentence is incorrect. Jury is a collective noun. Many common nouns in legal writing are groups of people who can function as one unit: jury, committee, appellate court, majority, board, team, family, audience, crowd, and number. The names of companies and corporations are also collective nouns. These nouns tend to function as a unit, so they are replaced by *it* instead of *they*.

*The jury should not be misled about the witness's credibility when it considers her testimony.*

## Whom

*Whom* is another pronoun that sometimes makes writers want to curse, but there is simple trick for remembering when to use *whom*. Before we get into examples, let's review a little grammar.

We use *whom* when we are referring to the object of a clause — the object is having the action in the sentence done to it.

*The judge sanctioned him for contempt.*

In this example, *him* is the object of the sentence. If you didn't know the gentleman's name, you would ask:

*Whom did the judge sanction?*

In fact, to know when to use *whom*, use this handy trick: If you could answer the question with him, use *whom* when forming the question. And remember, both him and whom end with "m."

## Data

*Data* can create confusion in our writing, too. Both "The data is correct" and "The data are correct" are standard usages. So, the problem with using *data* comes when we also have to use it in a sentence with a verb or replace it with a pronoun because *data* can be either a mass noun or a count noun.<sup>1</sup>

Quick refresher: Mass nouns are used for things that cannot be counted or numbered (like information). Mass nouns always take a singular verb. Count nouns, on the other hand, are distinct objects that can be counted and numbered (like facts). These nouns always take a plural verb.

So, because data can be both a mass noun and a count noun, it can correctly take both a singular and a plural verb. How you use it is a style and preference choice, although its use as a mass noun is more formal. But, if you use it as a mass noun, make sure to use a plural verb and replace it with a plural pronoun.

*The names of companies and corporations are also collective nouns. These nouns tend to function as a unit, so they are replaced by it instead of they.*

*Many of these data are useless because of their lack of specifics.*

And, if you use it as a count noun, make sure to use a singular verb and replace it with a singular pronoun.

*Much of this data is useless because of its lack of specifics.*

If, however, you begin a clause with data and drop the definite article, treat it as a count noun and use the singular verb and pronoun.

*Data over the last few years suggest the unreliability of eyewitness identifications.*

## None

Like data, *none* can be either singular or plural. To determine which to use, decide whether you are trying to say not one or not any. If you mean "not one," use a singular verb with none.

*None of the witnesses is present.*

Likewise, use a singular verb if *none* is followed by a mass noun.

*None of the water is polluted.*

If you mean "not any," use a plural verb with none.

*None of the facts are disputed.*

## Conclusion

Now that you can use these pesky little four-letter words correctly, go play in the snow. It will be gone soon enough, and I, for one, will long for the opportunity to go outside without wearing sunscreen on every inch of my skin.

## Sources

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For more advice on using mass nouns and count nouns correctly, see *Confusing Word Pairs*, The Advocate (Jan. 2012).

## About the Author

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