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Spring Cleaning Part II

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Spring Cleaning Part II
Tenille Fordyce-Ruff

This spring I’ve been busy cleaning out my closets and organizing my garage. I’ve also turned my attention to catching up on my reading — perusing writing blogs I haven’t visited in ages and diving into wonderful articles on legal writing.

Aside from learning, and reading some truly wonderful writing, one of the joys of all this reading is that I’m reminded of “rules” that great writers have thrown away. So once again, in the spirit of spring-cleaning, let’s look at some writing “rules” you can jettison to the trash heap.

We are all good

How many times have you paused when someone asks how you are to figure out if you should respond with “I am good” or “I am well”? The confusion as to your response comes because good is an adjective and well is an adverb, and we all learned that you need to use an adverb to modify a verb.

I run poorly.

The rule is all good and well for action verbs, but doesn’t apply to a linking verb. Linking verbs (to be, to seem, to appear) describe a state, not an action. These verbs can take adjectives. Thus, it’s perfectly acceptable to write that someone is good.

He smells good. (He showered and has on cologne.)

He smells well. (He has an acute sense of smell.)

She feels bad. (She has regret.)

She feels badly. (Her fingertips don’t work correctly.)

Quick! Writer better

Last summer, the legal writing professor listserv was atwitter discussing Weird Al’s new song and video “Word Crimes.” The video shows the singer adding an “ly” to street signs so they now read Drive Slowly.

Turns out, Weird Al isn’t a grammar expert. We likely all learned that adverbs end in “ly” and like Weird Al, believe those pesky road signs contain a grammatical error. Oh, but wait.

There is a class of adverbs known as flat adverbs. These words function as adverbs without the “ly.” Some flat adverbs have no “ly” form, some function the same in both the flat and the “ly” form, and some have distinct meanings depending on which form you use.

Here’s a helpful chart on the next page.¹

Get over it already

At some point, you were likely taught that when discussing quantity you should use more than and when discussing spatial dimensions you should use over.

She has written more than 40 writing articles.

She can walk over 20 miles in a day, even if she runs poorly!

Most grammar guides long ago got over this distinction. The Chicago Manual of Style no longer subscribes to this “rule,” and the Associated Press announced last year that it was ditching the distinction.
So feel free to write, “She has tried over 50 cases” (if that’s true). Unless, of course, your writing needs to be more formal or you believe your audience might still follow this “rule” keep the distinction between more and over.

Who is that?

Turns out that using that to refer to a person is perfectly correct. Yep, you read that right: Both of these sentences are correct.

She’s a crazy lady who loves to write about writing.

She’s a crazy lady that loves to write about writing.

Now, you don’t have to never use who to refer to a person. In fact, feel free to continue to do so. Just recognize that the choice between who and that is a matter of style, not a “grammar rule.”

Conclusion

I’m heading back to my reading. I hope you enjoyed these tips and can use them to clean up your writing.2

Sources


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Same Meaning</th>
<th>Distinct Meanings</th>
<th>No “ly” form</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bright: This word is interchangeable with brightly in sentences such as “The stars shine so bright on moonless nights.”</td>
<td>Clean: This usage is distinct from the -ly form: The idiomatic expression “Come clean” doesn’t have the same sense as the literal phrase “Come cleanly shaved.”</td>
<td>Far: This flat adverb has no -ly form: “You will go far in life.”</td>
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<td>Deep: This term can be interchangeable with the -ly form (“Breathe deeply” and “Breathe deeply” are identical in meaning), but it also has a distinct idiomatic usage: “Go deep.”</td>
<td>Close: The flat form and the normal form have related but different meanings: “Keep close,” but “Keep closely arrayed in formation.”</td>
<td>Fast: Fast is another flat adverb with no normal equivalent: “Run fast.”</td>
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<td>Quick: This flat adverb is interchangeable with its normal equivalent: “Come quick” and “Come quickly” mean the same thing.</td>
<td>Flat: The flat and normal senses of this term are similar, but distinct: “I was turned down flat, but I was flatly refused.”</td>
<td>Soon: This flat adverb has no -ly equivalent: “Come again soon.”</td>
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<td>Sharp: Sharp and its normal form are interchangeable (“Dress sharply,” or “Dress sharply”), but there’s also a distinct flat-form meaning: “Show up at eight o’clock sharply.”</td>
<td>Hard: Hard and its -ly form are highly distinct in meaning: “I hit it hard” is almost the opposite of “I hardly hit it.”</td>
<td>Tough: This adverb is also without a normal version: “Hang tough.”</td>
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<td>Slow: Slow and slowly are interchangeable: “Drive slow” and “Drive slowly” mean the same thing.</td>
<td>Kind: Kind and kindly have slightly different roles: “Be kind,” but “Think kindly of her.”</td>
<td>Right: Right and rightly have different senses: “Do right,” “Stay right there,” or “He aimed right for the target,” but “You are rightly upset.”</td>
</tr>
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Endnotes


About the Author

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