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### Grammar Confidential: Dispelling Common Writing Myths

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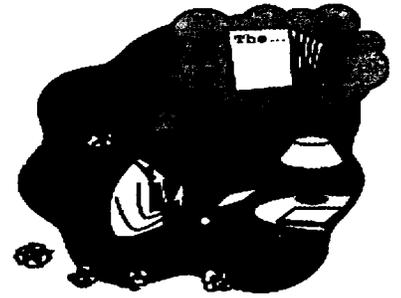
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# WRITER'S BLOCK

## GRAMMAR CONFIDENTIAL: DISPELLING COMMON WRITING MYTHS

BY DAVID H. SPRATT



Urban myths or shared folklore are a significant part of our common heritage. Much, if not all, of this folklore, is passed down from generation to generation without questioning its accuracy. Some can be tested or proved using common sense, e.g., it doesn't take much verification to see the wisdom of your mother's comment to "look both ways before crossing the street." (On the other hand, although as adults we see the fallacy of the expression, "step on a crack, break your mother's back, step on a line, break your mother's spine," some of us still find ourselves acting overly careful when walking down a sidewalk.) Other rules that survive through the years are much less reasonable and often steeped in fiction. Many of these rules relate to basic grammar. This column seeks to debunk many of the grammar "myths" that have gained a stronghold in our collective conscience.

### Urban Myth #1:

If you swallow a piece of chewing gum, it will take seven years to pass through your system. **False!**

Although gum resists the body's attempts at digestion, gum is eliminated as human waste the same way and at the same rate as anything else that we swallow.

### Grammar Myth #1:

Never Split an Infinitive. **False!**

Splitting an infinitive, while it sounds a bit draconian, is nothing more than placing one or more words between the word "to" and a verb. Probably the most-quoted example of a split infinitive can be traced to Star Trek: "To boldly go where no man has gone before." To split infinitives is something that strict grammarians like my high school English teacher and William Strunk, Jr. (at least in the early editions of *The Elements of Style*) would have abhorred. Modern grammar texts, however, including the later and online versions of Strunk and White, have abandoned this rule, and advocate splitting infinitives if doing so eliminates confusion, adds precision, or simply sounds better.

Merriam-Webster Online, in discussing the usage of split infinitives, states, "Even though there has never

been a rational basis for objecting to the split infinitive, the subject has become a fixture of folk belief about grammar. You can hardly publish a sentence containing one without hearing about it from somebody. Modern commentators know the split infinitive is not a vice, but they are loath to drop such a popular subject."<sup>1</sup>

"Wait," you might be saying, "you told us in your last column that we should always know our audience. If I am writing for someone who is a stickler for long-abandoned grammar rules, should I still split my infinitive and risk the wrath of my reader who now thinks I have made a grammar mistake?" My advice here is no different: know your reader and recognize that certain readers will be distracted when faced with a split infinitive. In short, there is nothing incorrect about refusing to routinely split infinitives unless this refusal results in a misplaced modifier or adds ambiguity to a sentence that would otherwise be clear (forgive my split, I couldn't help myself).

### Urban Myth #2:

Mikey from the Life cereal commercial died after eating Pop Rocks and drinking Coca-Cola. **False!**

We can all breathe a collective sigh of relief. John Gilchrist, the child actor who played Mikey, is alive and well. Pop Rocks when eaten with any type of carbonated beverage produce at most, an unwelcome burp.

### Grammar Myth #2:

Never Begin a Sentence with a Coordinating Conjunction (like "and," "but," or "or"). **False!**

Starting a sentence with a coordinating conjunction is not incorrect. Before doing so, however, consider whether your idea can be better expressed without resorting to such "deviant" behavior; often, a phrase that begins with a coordinating conjunction is really a sentence fragment, not a complete sentence. And given your likely audience and purpose, persuading or providing information to a court, client, or other lawyer, writing in complete sentences is preferable.

### Urban Myth #3:

Never go swimming within one hour of eating or you will get a severe, life-

threatening stomach cramp, causing you to drown. **False!**

According to internet urban legend websites (and again, you've got to love my sources), not one death has been reported where someone drowned simply as a result of going in the water too soon after eating.

### Grammar Myth #3:

Never End a Sentence with a Preposition. **False!**

This supposed "rule," unlike the other two, is less commonly quoted these days, due in some part to Winston Churchill, who mocked its absurdity, stating either "This is the sort of English up with which I will not put" or "This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put." The exact quote seems to be unverified, and the number of unsubstantiated variations on the quote continues to grow.

There are some readers, however, who still feel somewhat queasy when confronted with a dangling preposition. When ending a sentence with a preposition, ask yourself two questions: 1) does the sentence need the ending preposition or would the same point be made by deleting it? (If so, delete the dangling preposition); and 2) does revising the sentence to remove the dangling preposition to put it somewhere else make sense or does the revision sound as strained as Churchill's quote? (When the sentence becomes strained after trying to revise it, leave the dangling preposition.)

Future columns will likely deal with additional rules you learned from a long-dead English teacher. Let me know if there are any others I should be aware of. I hope I didn't shatter your world.

### NOTES:

1) <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/split%20infinitive>

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# VBA Rule of Law Project: Teaching the Teachers

The Virginia Bar Association Rule of Law Project and the Virginia Law Foundation hosted an event for more than 50 Virginia public school superintendents and administrators on Law Day, May 1, at the Virginia Holocaust Museum in Richmond. The four-hour program introduced the Project to a statewide audience of educators following the successful pilot program in middle school civics classes in the Roanoke Valley in February.

Moderating the event was Roderick B. "Rod" Matthews, ABA World Justice Project Commission member and member of the Virginia Holocaust Museum board of trustees and Virginia Law Foundation board of directors. Project chair and VBA immediate past president, G. Michael Pace, Jr., presented an overview of the Project to attendees, highlighting the need for a better understanding of the rule of law in public and private education in Virginia. Tim Isaacs, director of curriculum development for Roanoke City Public Schools, gave attendees a history of the Project and the benefits of the program to teachers and students, emphasizing the opportunity for collaborative learning. Dean Rodney Smolla from Washington & Lee School of Law presented a simulated oral argument before the Supreme Court, featuring the application of the rule of law in two fictitious scenarios which produced a lively debate among the educators who were anointed as temporary Supreme Court justices.

Participants were enthusiastic about bringing the program to their respective school districts for an October 2009 roll out date. Leaders of the Project thanked Jay M. Ipson, founder, president and executive director of the Virginia Holocaust Museum, and Jay M. Weinberg, secretary of the board of trustees of the Museum and an attorney with Hirschler Fleischer for their help with the program.

The Rule of Law Project has been recognized with an Award of Merit from the Virginia State Bar, and the Virginia Law Foundation has nominated the program for the National Conference of Bar Foundation's Award for Bar Foundation Excellence in Public Service Programming. This award recognizes a bar foundation for an innovative, imaginative program and/or grant award for public service projects in the legal arena, honoring a bar or law foundation for its creative response to important societal issues.

The VBA Rule of Law Project is funded by a grant from the Virginia Law Foundation. The Foundation promotes through philanthropy the rule of law, access to justice, and law-related education.



*School district representatives learning about the Rule of Law Project at the May 1st event.*

## Public School District Participants:

Albermarle County  
 Alexandria  
 Appomattox County  
 Bath County  
 Campbell County  
 Caroline County  
 Carroll County  
 Charles City County  
 Chesapeake  
 Chesterfield County  
 Fairfax County  
 Fauquier County  
 Hampton  
 Hanover County  
 Henrico County  
 Henry County  
 Madison County  
 Manassas  
 Martinsville  
 New Kent County  
 Norfolk  
 Pittsylvania County  
 Rappahannock County  
 Richmond  
 Roanoke County  
 Rockingham County  
 Salem  
 Shenandoah County  
 Spotsylvania County  
 Stafford County  
 Tazewell County  
 Virginia Beach  
 West Point  
 Williamsburg-James City County  
 York County



*L to R: Mary Ann Delano (president of the Virginia Law Foundation), Tim Isaacs, Mike Pace, Dean Rodney Smolla and Rod Matthews at the May 1st event.*