

# Grammar Rules

From the Prescriptive Period

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# Don't use double negatives

- The rule once stated “Two negatives cancel each other out”
- Just like math:  $(-2)*(-3)=6$  it was thought that two negatives language also cancel each other
- Double negatives come from Latin languages, of which English is not
- Double negatives are non-standard and marked which implies a negative connotation of the user

# Examples

- \*You **won't** get **no** job with that attitude.
  - You **won't** get a job with that attitude.
  - You **will** get **no** job with that attitude.
- \*There **isn't nobody** who likes sardines.
  - There **isn't anybody** who likes sardines.
  - There **is nobody** who likes sardines.

# Don't use 'ain't'

- There was no conjunction for 'I am not' so users of Old English created this
- Nowadays, the meaning of 'ain't' has spread to 'is not'
- 'Ain't' is also non-standard
- 'Ain't' is used regularly depending on the region and subculture of an individual

# Examples

- \*I **ain't** tired.
  - I **am** tired.
- \*She **ain't** hungry.
  - She **isn't** hungry.
- \*They **ain't** going to move.
  - They **aren't** going to move.

# Don't split a preposition from its phrase

- Prepositional phrases consist of: [preposition] + [noun phrase (optional)]
- Since it is a complete phrase, Prescriptivists thought it would be best to keep the phrase together
- The preposition should come before the noun, as stated in its name: pre-position

# Examples

- \*Where are you **at**? – Boost Mobile
  - At where are you?
  - Where are you?
- “[Dangling prepositions] is the sort of pedantry up with which I will not put.”  
– Winston Churchill



# Don't split an infinitive

- No word should come between the infinitive marker 'to' and the uninflected verb form that follows
- This rule again is based off the Latin model; however, in Latin, infinitives in Latin consist of one word where in English, they consist of two

# Examples

- \*I want **to** completely **understand** the problem.
  - I want **to understand** the problem completely
- \*John wants to win; he doesn't want **to** almost **win**.
  - John wants to win; he doesn't want just barely **to lose**.

# Shall vs. Will

- Use shall with first person, use will with second and third
- Prescriptivists claim that shall and will have nothing to do with emphasis, they are merely conjugated words with the same form
- Interestingly, this rule confuses even experts

# Examples

- \*I **will** leave around 8:00 pm.
  - I **shall** leave around 8:00pm.
- \***Shall** no one help me?
  - **Will** no one help me?

# Who vs Whom

- Whom and who are both pronouns substituting for a person
- Whom is used in the subject
- Who is used for the object

# Examples

- \***Who** is the owner of this book?
  - **Whom** is the owner of this book?
- \***Whom** did you speak to yesterday?
  - **Who** did you speak to yesterday?
  - Although it appears that the pronoun who/whom is in the subject place, there was a wh- movement on the original sentence “you spoke to who yesterday”

# Lay is transitive, lie is intransitive

- Lie, meaning 'to recline', cannot be used with a direct object
- Lay, meaning 'to put', must be used with a direct object

Present Tense	Past Tense
Lie	Lay
Lay	Laid

# Examples

- \***Lay** down and rest.
  - **Lie** down and rest.
- \***Lie** down that book and come with me.
  - **Lay** down that book and come with me.
- \*Yesterday the kids **laid** down and rested.
  - Yesterday the kids **lay** down and rested.
- \*Yesterday the landscaper **lay** down the bricks.
  - Yesterday the landscaper **laid** down the bricks.



# Don't use 'hopefully' to mean 'I hope'

- Since 'hopefully' is an adverb, it should modify the verb
- Prescriptivism only prohibits the use of the word 'hopefully', not similar words: frankly, truthfully, confidentially, evidently, obviously, unfortunately, etc.

# Examples

- \***Hopefully**, it won't rain tomorrow.
  - I **hope** it won't rain tomorrow.
- The prisoner entered the room **hopefully**.

# Subject – verb agreement

- In a simple subject and verb sentence, it is easy to check agreement
- Whenever the phrase is more complicated, the verb should agree with the “head noun” of the subject phrase (as opposed to the final noun)

# Examples

- **This is** broken.
- **These are** broken.
- \*The memory **requirements** for each program **is** listed in Table 2.
  - The memory **requirements** for each program **are** listed in Table 2.

# Parallelism

- Items in a series should be of the same grammatical form

# Examples

- \*The parliament **addressed** the kind, and **has been prorogued** the same day.
  - The parliament **addressed** the kind and **was prorogued** the same day.
- \***Discharging fireworks, shark fishing, flying stunt kites, or disturbing sea animals** are prohibited.
  - **Discharging fireworks, fishing sharks, flying stunt kites, or disturbing sea animals** are prohibited.

# References

- Parker, Frank and Riley, Katherine. Grammar for Grammarians. Chicago: Parlay Press, 2006. Print.
- The Purdue OWL Family of Sites. The Writing Lab and OWL at Purdue and Purdue U, 2008, Web. 8 Feb, 2012.