



WANT TO
PROMOTE
CLEAR
WRITING
IN YOUR
WORKPLACE?

BREAK A FEW RULES

By John Sturtevant
Business Communication Coach

Crusty old school teachers once told their students never to end a sentence with a preposition. But that so-called rule is a myth.

Many people are stuck on archaic rules of writing they learned in grammar school. Those rules influence how they write on the job. The problem is that written and spoken language evolves over time. What used to be an acceptable writing style now often sounds confusing or outdated.

For example, my 89-year-old mom says "I shan't," which is a contraction of "shall not." To me, that sounds like a phrase from the 18th century. To her, it's a normal part of her vocabulary. She's been saying it since she was a child. I don't even include shall in my vocabulary.

Then there's my 16 year-old son. Here's part of his vocabulary:

Yo, #YOLO, LOL, bae, idk, ;-).

I wouldn't use those phrases with my colleagues. But I would use them with my son. It's his language and it helps us communicate.

Clear writing is alive and well

Don't fret, we're not doomed to a future of communicating in snippets of 140 character tweets. People still love to write eloquent 150,000 word novels. And people still love to read them. But tweets are definitely a lively part of our vocabulary. Like it or not, tweets and texting are here to stay, until a new technology takes their place.

And that kind of social media communication is vital. Think about the amazingly powerful effect Twitter had on the revolution in Egypt in 2011. One of the organizers wrote:

"(we use) Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world."

If you plan to work in city government or the private sector for another decade or so, your future coworkers are about 14 years old right now. They'll soon be in your workplace using a language that might sound like gobbledygook to you. Unless you're willing to break a few rules you learned, and keep up with change.

I'm not saying you must start using Snapchat and Instagram to communicate with your constituents.

But you'd be wise to be aware of how those apps dramatically affect the way people communicate.

Even the experts don't always agree on the rules – literally.

Some "rules" were never rules at all, rather more like urban legends.

In the classic grammar guide, *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White acknowledge that eighth-grade teachers once instructed their students to never end a sentence with a preposition, but the authors say:

"Not only is the preposition acceptable at the end of the sentence, it is more effective in that spot than anywhere else."

In fact, that preposition rule, like many other grammar rules your eighth-grade teacher drilled into your head, is a remnant of Latin grammar. It doesn't apply to modern American English. The structures of the two languages are very different.

Take the word literally for example. How do you respond when your co-worker Amanda says, "I, like, literally died when my boss caught me playing Words With Friends at my desk."

You might roll your eyes and say, "No, Amanda, you didn't literally die. You're literally alive, standing here telling me this."

Well, it turns out that Amanda may be more literal than you think.

Take a look.

The Chicago Manual of Style says:

"Literally means 'actually; without exaggeration.' It should not be used oxymoronically in the figurative sense..."

The *Associate Press Stylebook* agrees: "Figuratively means in an analogous sense, but not in the exact sense. Literally means in an exact sense."

Two reliable reference sources must be right, right?

Not necessarily.

Webster's New World College Dictionary contradicts them:

"Literally is often used as an intensive to modify a word or phrase that is being used figuratively."

My preference is to use literally when I mean actually, rather than sort of. But that's not based on a rule. It's based on my desire to be clear to my reader above all else.

For more enlightenment on grammar rules, get this wonderfully useful book: *Grammar Snobs Are Great Big Meanies*.

How do you write clearly if the rules are elusive and evolving?

Heed John Sturtevant's Golden Rule of Business Writing: Be Clear. Above all else. If you get mired in the muck of rules, you'll likely confuse and annoy your readers.

Here's a great example of confusing and annoying government jargon:

"The Department of Labor has been notified that you did not receive the warrant listed on the attached Affidavit of Lost or Destroyed Warrant Request for Replacement, form F242."

Here's an example of clear writing: "Did you receive your Department of Labor check? The Treasurer's Office informed us that a check we sent you was not cashed."

Clear writing is showing your reader your ideas.

Writing is a process of putting down symbols that represent a mix of ideas, emotions, logic, reasoning, perspective, and opinions.

You can't see your reader's facial expressions or body language. Your reader can't ask for clarification. And you often don't know much about your reader, or how much he or she knows about your topic.

One way for you to avoid confusing bureaucratic writing is to imagine yourself walking side-by-side with your reader. You see something, and you direct your reader to see it too. As if you are pointing out a landmark, or a Pileated Woodpecker while on a walk.

If you think of writing this way, it can actually make writing easier. We never struggle to point out something to someone next to us. Your goal in writing is to help your reader recognize something they'd be able to see, if they were looking in the right place.

So if you want to improve the quality of writing that flows from your office, be willing to break a few rules. And imagine you're walking down the street with people in your community, pointing out all the amazing sites your city has to offer. ★

John Sturtevant provides communication skills training for organizations around the world. Learn more at www.JohnSturtevant.com. Contact John at 713-861-9992 or john@johnsturtevant.com.