

Grammar Is Dead, Long Live Grammar Nerds

Jen Doll Jun 20, 2012 *THE ATLANTIC WIRE*

Some of us never forget the first sentence we conjugated*. Others of us are, like, LOL, WTF? Conjugation? Unfortunately, it appears the LOLers are encroaching, ruining everything that is good and holy, i.e., grammar. A terrifying piece in *The Wall Street Journal* by Sue Shellenbarger reveals that employers are cringing each time they hear their staffers say something ungrammatical and not-smart sounding—not only cringing, but also imposing fines for offenses ranging from saying like, you know, all the time to combining there and are into the totally incorrect there's to things far worst, like ginormos, mortifying typoze.

There's a growing problem in Amercia, as evidenced by the reality of Amercia. People can't spell. They can't write. They barely even know where to put a semi-colon. Gone are the days when we clustered about Grandmother's knee to ask, in our wee tot voices, "What's an em-dash, Granny? How is it different from an en-dash, or our dear friend, the hyphen?" There's a rising group of people unwilling to participate in the always rousing debate over the serial comma simply because they have no idea what it even is. Our hearts hurt.

The *Journal's* Shellenbarger explains that it's not just our imagination: Language usage is changing. At the same time that grammar skills are getting worse, we're in an expanding grammatical free-for-all, in which "language is evolving so fast that old rules of usage are eroding." What to do, what to do? As is common in this day and age, most immediately everyone should blame the Internet, social media, and all that newfangled technology that's ruined, like, everything.

But even as managers struggle, embarrassed that their flocks are so slangy and grammar-rules poor, which they say creates bad impressions, ruins marketing materials, and hinders communication, there is an up side, at least for the endangered species that actually know grammar, like the late, wonderful-sounding Lu Burke of *The New Yorker*.

Yes, it's tempting to feel depressed if you're the only one in an office who cares about a typo. Or if you, at home, reading along online, feel grievous dismay when you stumble upon a mistaken conjugation. It's tempting to shout, "What idiots!" or to raise your fist to the sky and shake it (fist, not sky). But the fact is, you have just proved your import to the world. You are superior. You know grammar.

Here are a few of our favorite copy and grammar life rules, used to assert our English nerd dominance over others. This list is by no means exhaustive. Please, tell us your own:

1. It's is the same thing as "It is." If you're not saying "it is" but you've got an apostrophe in there, you're clearly worthless and nothing you have to say will be taken seriously by anyone. Similarly, your is not you are; you're is. Too and to are different, too! Isn't this fun? Update: Yes, as many have emailed, "It's" may also mean "It has." But those who mess up the apostrophe generally don't need to be confused by that right off the bat. Baby steps!

2. Pay attention to your figures of speech. Oh, these are the most fun to make fun of. Yes, you shouldn't mock the foreign exchange student who's just mastering a second or third or fourth language (how many do you speak, after all?). But the native English speaker who announces that you need to "Nip it in the butt"? Oh, the laughs that should ensue!

3. Bad pronouns are bad. As Mrs. Smith taught us in the 7th grade, pronouns may be small, but they are as important as anything else. When you are attempting to put two of them together, for example, "Me and him went to the store" here's a quick check. Subjects are subjects and objects are objects, and "me and him" is always wrong. Don't know what we're talking about? You fail.

4. Canadian geese do not exist.

5. When in doubt, look it up. Merriam-Webster.com is extremely helpful, and sometimes just Googling is, too. Don't shout your moronic question over a cubicle wall—it only makes you sound moronic, especially if no one is sitting on the other side. Fact: Despite what you've been told your whole life, there is such a thing as a stupid question.

6. Don't use whom instead of who to sound smart. The reverse whilst occur, marketh our words.

7. A tip for modern times: Never text your boss, because autocorrect will foul something up. But if you do, and it does, always blame it on autocorrect. Related, if the person you like is texting you terribly illiterate missives, that is a red flag and they should be judged. They should also be judged for putting an e in judgement. And I should be judged for using they instead of he or she here.

8. Be free with your dangling participles so we can rail upon you for your mistake, which, if we're really up on our nerd cred, we refer to as a dangler. Here is an example of one: "After being whipped fiercely, the cook boiled the egg." The cook was not whipped! (Unless he was, and who are we to judge?) The point is, you have a clause describing a noun that's not the noun you intended. Rephrase to avoid such mistaken interpretations, unless you want to be scolded or laughed at.

9. Here's another example of why grammar and spelling matter. Check the URL.

10. Hang in there and this, too, shall pass. It could, after all, be worse. For example, per Shellenbarger :

In workplace-training programs run by Jack Appleman, a Monroe, N.Y., corporate writing instructor, "people are banging the table," yelling or high-fiving each other during grammar contests he stages, he says. "People get passionate about grammar," says Mr. Appleman, author of a book on business writing.

This leads me to a final point. Messy grammar is a bit like having a messy apartment. It's something that grammar nerds care about deeply, as do clean freaks with their sanctimony about their perfectly appointed habitats. But when your roommate is someone who doesn't care, not at all, you're going to be the one running around cleaning up after him, and he'll never really understand why you're so adamant that everything be spick-and-span. If you find yourself living with a person like that, don't ask him to proofread anything. Do it yourself, and then lord it over him.

Also, I have no idea what the first sentence I conjugated was, but I love the serial comma with all my aching copy-nerd heart.

*Update: All of the commenters here prove that grammar is not dead, not in the slightest. And, as Edward Saslow informed me by email (and as numerous of you commented), "One conjugates a verb; one parses a sentence; and, for completeness, one declines a noun or pronoun." Long live grammar nerds who will correct me when I do wrong, like conjugating instead of diagramming. I count on you guys!

This Embarrasses You and I*

Grammar Gaffes Invade the Office in an Age of Informal Email, Texting and Twitter

By SUE SHELLENBARGER

When Caren Berg told colleagues at a recent staff meeting, "There's new people you should meet," her boss Don Silver broke in, says Ms. Berg, a senior vice president at a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., marketing and crisis-communications company.

"I cringe every time I hear" people misuse "is" for "are," Mr. Silver says. The company's chief operations officer, Mr. Silver also hammers interns to stop peppering sentences with "like." For years, he imposed a 25-cent fine on new hires for each offense. "I am losing the battle," he says.

Employers say the grammar skills of people they hire are getting worse, a recent survey shows. But language is evolving so fast that old rules of usage are eroding. Sue Shellenbarger has details on Lunch Break. Illustration: John S. Dykes.

Managers are fighting an epidemic of grammar gaffes in the workplace. Many of them attribute slipping skills to the informality of email, texting and Twitter where slang and shortcuts are common. Such looseness with language can create bad impressions with clients, ruin marketing materials and cause communications errors, many managers say.

There's no easy fix. Some bosses and co-workers step in to correct mistakes, while others consult business-grammar guides for help. In a survey conducted earlier this year, about 45% of 430 employers said they were increasing employee-training programs to improve employees' grammar and other skills, according to the Society for Human Resource Management and AARP. How's Your Grammar?

"I'm shocked at the rampant illiteracy" on Twitter, says Bryan A. Garner, author of "Garner's Modern American Usage" and president of LawProse, a Dallas training and consulting firm. He has compiled a list of 30 examples of "uneducated English," such as saying "I could care less," instead of "I couldn't care less," or, "He expected Helen and I to help him," instead of "Helen and me."

Leslie Ferrier says she was aghast at letters employees were sending to customers at a Jersey City, N.J., hair- and skin-product marketer when she joined the firm in 2009. The letters included grammar and style mistakes and were written "as if they were speaking to a friend," says Ms. Ferrier, a human-resources executive. She had employees use templates to eliminate mistakes and started training programs in business writing.

Most participants in the Society for Human Resource Management-AARP survey blame younger workers for the skills gap. Tamara Erickson, an author and consultant on generational issues, says the problem isn't a lack of skill among 20- and 30-somethings. Accustomed to texting and social networking, "they've developed a new norm," Ms. Erickson says.

At RescueTime, for example, grammar rules have never come up. At the Seattle-based maker of personal-productivity software, most employees are in their 30s. Sincerity and clarity expressed in "140 characters and sound bytes" are seen as hallmarks of good communication—not "the king's grammar," says Jason Grimes, 38, vice president of product marketing. "Those who can be sincere, and still text and Twitter and communicate on Facebook—those are the ones who are going to succeed."

Also, some grammar rules aren't clear, leaving plenty of room for disagreement. Tom Kamenick battled fellow attorneys at a Milwaukee, Wis., public-interest law firm over use of "the Oxford comma"—an additional comma placed before the "and" or "or" in a series of nouns. Leaving it out can change the meaning of a sentence, Mr. Kamenick says: The sentence, "The greatest influences in my life are my sisters, Oprah Winfrey and Madonna," means something different from the sentence, "The

greatest influences in my life are my sisters, Oprah Winfrey, and Madonna," he says. (The first sentence implies the writer has two celebrity sisters; the second says the sisters and the stars are different individuals.) After Mr. Kamenick asserted in digital edits of briefs and papers that "I was willing to go to war on that one," he says, colleagues backed down, either because they were convinced, or "for the sake of their own sanity and workplace decorum."

Patricia T. O'Conner, author of a humorous guidebook for people who struggle with grammar, fields workplace disputes on a blog she cowrites, Grammarphobia. "These disagreements can get pretty contentious," Ms. O'Conner says. One employee complained that his boss ordered him to make a memo read, "for John and I," rather than the correct usage, "for John and me," Ms. O'Conner says.

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Christopher Telano, chief internal auditor at the New York City Health and Hospitals Corp., has employees circulate their reports to co-workers to review for accuracy and grammar, he says. He coaches auditors to use action verbs such as "verify" and "confirm" and tells them to write below a 12th-grade reading level so it can be easily understood.

Mr. Garner, the usage expert, requires all job applicants at his nine-employee firm—including people who just want to pack boxes—to pass spelling and grammar tests before he will hire them. And he requires employees to have at least two other people copy-edit and make corrections to every important email and letter that goes out.

"Twenty-five years ago it was impossible to put your hands on something that hadn't been professionally copy-edited," Mr. Garner says. "Today, it is actually hard to put your hands on something that has been professionally copy-edited."