

# Writing Rules You Can (And Should) Break

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Some of this content has been borrowed or modified from the following websites (among others):

<https://www.louiseharnbyproofreader.com/blog/fiction-grammar-is-it-okay-to-start-a-sentence-with-and-or-but>

<https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/articles/starting-a-sentence-with-however-right-or-wrong/>

We all have a few of these stuck in our heads, right? Those writing rules we learned long ago. The problem is, some of those rules were better suited to formal writing than to fiction writing. Or, some of those rules have changed. After all, rules *do* change over time. And, to be frank, some of those rules make have been wrong in the first place, or maybe they were misinterpreted by the people who taught them to us. Let's take a look at a few examples (there are many, many more than are described here).

Of course, you can always choose to *not* break these rules, and that's fine. But I have found that some of them have been getting in my way for years.

Did you see what I did there? I started that last sentence with the word *But*. And it's okay. Wow, that time I started a sentence with *And*. The horror!

## **Rule: Do not start a sentence with *But* or *And*.**

“There is a widespread belief—one with no historical or grammatical foundation—that it is an error to begin a sentence with a conjunction such as *and*, *but*, or *so*. In fact, a substantial percentage (often as many as 10 percent) of the sentences in first-rate writing begin with conjunctions. It has been so for centuries, and even the most conservative grammarians have followed this practice.” -- *Chicago Manual of Style Online, 5.203 (Chicago University Press)*

I am beginning with this one because it has flustered me over the years. Until I recently decided to simply ignore this “rule,” I would often convolute sentences to try to avoid starting them with *And* or *But*. But never again!

This doesn't mean it's wise to break this “rule” willy-nilly. You should do it when it strengthens your writing. Here are FIVE good reasons to start sentences with *But* or *And*:

### **1. To make dialogue more natural**

Dialogue needs to feel real. When we talk in real life, conjunctions are often the first words out of our mouths. You simply cannot write realistic dialogue without doing this.

Example: “**But** you said you were coming with me?”

Example: “**And** that's how you ended up soaking wet?”

### **2. To make the reader feel closer to the narrator**

Remember, *dialogue* is a character's speech. *Narrative* is the character's thoughts and experiences (narrative is not a disembodied voice, it is the viewpoint of a person). With first-person POV narrative, it's fairly easy to feel close to the character. But with third-person POV narrative, it's more challenging. It helps to write this narrative the way the character actually speaks. The goal is to make third-person narrative not seem like third-person.

Example from Blake Crouch's *Recursion*:

Meghan's brain broke because of him. She is dead because of him. Hotel Memory needs to end.

**But** that would most likely only get him killed.

### 3. To create tension and suspense

This one is best explained by starting with an example (from Ludlam's *The Matlock Paper*):

The police station was at the south end of the town of Carlyle, about a half a mile from the campus, the section of town considered industrialized. Still, there were trees along the streets. Carlyle was a very clean town, a neat town. The trees by the station house were pruned and shaped.

**And** Carlyle was also something else.

Do you see how this one-paragraph sentence starting with *And* builds suspense?

### 4. To connect separate sentences in a dramatic way

Another one best explained starting with the example (from Linwood Barclay's *Parting Shot*):

As far as Cory could figure, the only living witness to his crimes was Carol Beakman.

He was nearly back to the cabin.

It seemed clear what he had to do.

**And** he'd have to do it fast.

This last sentence (which is also its own paragraph), could have been added to the previous sentence:

It seemed clear what he had to do, and he'd have to do it fast.

But that would not be nearly as dramatic, right? In the original text, the word *And* connects the two paragraphs yet it adds drama to the narrative statement. And it is more revealing about the way the character thinks (remember, narrative is a character's thoughts).

### 5. To interrupt the narrator's thoughts in a suspenseful way

This example is from David Rosenfelt's *New Tricks*:

Certainly the fact that a man who was soon to be a murder victim experimenting in any way with his own DNA is at least curious, and something for me to look into carefully if I stay on the case.

**But** a nurse comes in and asks me to quickly come to Laurie's room, so right now everything else is going to have to wait.

See how the word *But* interrupts the narrator's (the character's) thoughts? This adds drama, making it obvious to the reader that we do not yet know what the character was about to decide.

## Rule: Do not start a sentence with *However*.

This "rule" actually used to be in the old *Strunk and White*, (at least for some instances of using the word). However, all *modern* usage guides now say that rule was unreasonable (see what I did there?). Basically, there's nothing wrong with starting sentences with *However*. However, you must punctuate correctly! It comes down to when to use a *comma* and when to *not* use a comma.

**When you do **not** follow *However* with a comma**, you are saying "in whatever manner," "to whatever extent," or "no matter how." For example, Winston Churchill said:

"However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results."

On the show *House*, Dr. Foreman said:

"However bad you think you're going to be in that room, not being there is worse."

**When you **do** follow *However* with a comma**, the word becomes a connector. You are using the word in place of *Nevertheless*. I would argue that it's better to put *However* at the beginning of a sentence

instead of burying it somewhere in the middle because it tells the reader right off the bat what you are saying (usually you are about to state an exception to what you said in the previous sentence). Example from Spock (yes, the *Star Trek* Spock):

“I intend to assist in the effort to reestablish communication with Starfleet. However, if crew morale is better served by my roaming the halls weeping, I will gladly defer to your medical expertise.”

If you absolutely don't want to put *However* at the beginning of a sentence, you could simply insert a semicolon before *however* instead of a period (personally, I avoid using semicolons):

“I intend to assist in the effort to reestablish communication with Starfleet; however, if crew morale is better served by my roaming the halls weeping, I will gladly defer to your medical expertise.”

### **Rule: Do not split infinitives.**

Basically, this “rule” means you should add anything between *to* and its verb.

Example: “To boldly go...” instead of “To go boldly...” or “Boldly to go...”

This “rule” has a long and confusing history, and it didn't even show up at all until it was suggested in an anonymous article in 1834. The author claimed that keeping the *to* and the verb next to each other is what good authors did.

The thing is, good authors have been splitting infinitives for centuries, and they still do it today. In fact, George Bernard Shaw said, “Every good literary craftsman splits his infinitives when the sense demands it.”

Like many good writers, the writer of the intro to *Star Trek* knew that “To boldly go where no man has gone before” is the most powerful way to make this statement.

### **Rule: Do not end a sentence with a preposition.**

I might ask, “What is this rule for?” but that would be violating the rule. Instead, I should ask, “For what is this rule?”

Hmm... you see? Not such a good rule at all (unless you are Yoda). In the English language, ending sentences with a preposition is perfectly normal and perfectly fine.

So, where did the “rule” come from? Or should I say, “From where did this rule come?”

It originated in the 1600s when scholars were trying to emulate Latin as the model for literary purity. But Latin and English are *really* different languages.

*The Chicago Manual of Style* says this:

The traditional caveat of yesteryear against ending sentences or clauses with prepositions is an unnecessary and pedantic restriction. And it is wrong. As Winston Churchill is said to have put it sarcastically, “That is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put.”

Which do you prefer: “*It's nothing to worry about,*” or “*It's nothing about which to worry*”?

The answer is obvious, right?

But is this sentence acceptable? “*Where's she at?*”

Or this one? “*Want to go with?*”

Well, these aren't considered proper English. However, they are examples of regional dialects, and there's nothing wrong with using them in your characters' dialogue.