



## U3AM at Home

### HOW MUCH DO YOU REMEMBER FROM SCHOOL DAYS?

#### How did grammar rules come about?

Grammar is how we organise our sentences in order to communicate meaning to others. Do you remember being taught you should never start your sentences with “And” or “But”?

But what if your teachers were wrong and there are lots of other so-called grammar rules that we’ve probably been getting wrong in our English classrooms for years?

#### 1. You can’t start a sentence with a conjunction

Let’s start with the grammatical sin we have already committed in this article. You can’t start a sentence with a conjunction.

Obviously you can, because we did. And we expect we will do it again before the end of this article. There, we knew we would!

Those who say it is always incorrect to start a sentence with a conjunction, like “and” or “but”, sit in the prescriptivist\* camp.

However, according to the descriptivists\*\*, at this point in our linguistic history, it is fine to start a sentence with a conjunction in an op-ed article like this, or in a novel or a poem.

It is less acceptable to start a sentence with a conjunction in an academic journal article, or in an essay for your child’s high school English teacher, as it turns out. But times are changing.

#### 2. You can’t end a sentence with a preposition

Well, in Latin you can’t. In English you can, and we do all the time.

Admittedly a lot of the younger generation don’t even know what a preposition is, so this rule is already obsolete. But let’s have a look at it anyway, for old time’s sake.

According to this rule, it is wrong to say “Who did you go to the movies *with*?”

Instead, the prescriptivists would say “*With* whom did you go to the movies?”

We're saving that structure for when we're making polite chat with the Queen on our next visit to the palace.

It is good to know how to structure your sentences for different audiences. It is a powerful tool. It means you usually feel comfortable in whatever social circumstances you find yourself in, and can change your writing style according to purpose and audience.

That is why we should teach grammar in schools. We need to give our children a full repertoire of language so that they can make grammatical choices that will allow them to speak and write for a wide range of audiences. Perhaps it's time, to ditch those old Englishmen who wrote a grammar for their times, not ours. If you want to understand what our language can do and how to use it well, read widely, think deeply and listen carefully. And remember, neither time nor language stands still - for any of us.

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\*A prescriptivist believes that books about language should describe how language is really used, rather than giving rules to follow saying what is correct and not correct.

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## TEST YOURSELF...

### Grammar is about this sort of stuff:

- Do I put a comma before *and*?
- What's the difference between *if* and *whether*?
- When are you supposed to use *commas*?
- Does *Nth* have a capital letter ?
- *Effecting or affecting*?
- Does my comma go *in or outside the inverted commas*?
- *Double or single speech marks*?
- The difference between a *hyphen and dash*?
- When do you use *square brackets*?
- The difference between *in to and into*
- *Who or whom?*...do we need to know this now?

All these and more will be answered over the weeks ahead.

Trish Taylor & Lula Black – THE WRITTEN WORD

**SOURCES:**

Craig Shives Grammar Rules.

*Misty Adoniou, The University of Canberra.*