

## **Mistaking style issues for errors**

Should you use italics for movie titles? Do you put full stops inside or outside quotation marks? Is the Oxford comma for all lists ... or just some lists? Should that ellipsis have had a space on either side of it?

1. The correct answer to each of these questions is “it depends”. In other words, they’re style decisions. In writing, as in fashion, you just have to figure out the style that’s appropriate to your situation and apply it consistently. Unfortunately, many of us spend our professional lives being corrected by people who believe the style guide they once saw on their nanna’s bookshelf is *The Official Grammar God’s Eternal English Rule Book*.

### 2. Mistaking ye olde conventions for rules

Beyond style decisions, most of the things people mistake for “rules” in grammar and punctuation are just conventions that crawled out of the swamp at some point and got a foothold, either in a school curriculum or as a recommendation in a 19th- or 20th-century grammar screed.

Don’t start a sentence with a conjunction? That’s never been a rule. True story. If anyone tries to start trouble with you about this, hand them the *Chicago Manual of Modern Style*:

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’.

And then finish them off with the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage*: “Everybody agrees that it’s all right to begin a sentence with ‘and’.”

What about ending a sentence with a preposition? Avoiding this has never been a rule, either. As Winston Churchill said: “This is the kind of nonsense up with which I will not put.”

### 3. Over-correcting

You: “Hey, mum. Me and Tim are going to the milk bar.” Your mum: “You mean, ‘Tim and I are going to the milk bar.’”

When you’ve spent your childhood receiving slaps on the wrist for using “me”, you spend your adult life replacing every “me” with an “I”. That’s over-correcting.

Grammatically, “me” is always the right choice when you need an objective pronoun. You wouldn’t say, “Hey, Tim, want to come to the milk bar with I?” or, “The CEO will be interviewing I next Thursday”. (Unless your friend’s name is I, which wouldn’t actually surprise us. We met a kid named Better the other day.)

### 4. Capitalising things because they feel Important

Modern tribes: the grammar pedant

Random capitalisation is a slippery slope. If everyone put a capital on everything they thought was important, we’d live in a city full of Sausage Sizzles and Footy Tipping and Pop Up Shops and Flat Whites. Tone it down, team. Capitals can’t be decided via a Dennis Denuto-esque “It’s the vibe of the thing” logic, because everyone has a different vibe.

Let’s stick to what we can all agree on: capitals to start sentences and capitals for proper nouns. Is a job title a proper noun? That’s a can-of-worms decision for your style guide.

### 5. Misplacing or confusing your pronouns

Pronouns stand in for other nouns, including people’s names. It’s nice to give people the pronoun “who”, and save the pronoun “that” for everything else. For instance, “the guy who won the footy tipping” arrived in “a car that bloody well breaks down all the time”.

What about animals? Many people like “who” for animals – but it does feel weird for spiders: “Have you seen the funnel-web who’s been lurking on the ceiling all week?”

Also make sure your reader can easily understand which noun your pronoun is standing in for, or you'll put many innocent pooches at risk.

#### 6. Using the wrong modifier

Modifiers can be single words, phrases or clauses. They're optional elements that are inserted to change the meaning of the words around them. There are three kinds of modifier error, ranging from the confusing to the hilarious.

A squinting modifier modifies two things at once: "Cycling up hills quickly tones your thighs." Wait, should I ride quickly, or will my thighs tone up quickly?

A misplaced modifier modifies the wrong thing: "The food truck served tacos to customers in boxes." Wow. Did they have much elbow-room in there?

A dangling modifier ends up modifying the wrong thing because the thing it's trying to modify isn't there: "Having studied for the exam, my coffee machine was a welcome sight." Full on. Coffee machines are getting smarter by the minute!

#### 7. Which or that?

Whether it's "which" or "that" depends on whether you want to listen to the convention police. You're not wrong if you ignore it, but the convention is to reserve "which" for non-defining relative clauses ("The couch, which has a stain on it, is dirty"), and "that" for defining relative clauses ("Here is a couch that has a stain on it").

Ecuador's radical grammar pedants on a mission to correctly punctuate graffiti

To translate from High Grammarian, if it's between commas or after a comma, err on the side of "which".

#### 8. Creating run-on sentences

Independent clauses are great don't mash them together. Just a little grammar joke for you.

When you've got two main clauses in a sentence, you'll need something in between – and a comma doesn't qualify. Independent clauses are great; try joining them with a semicolon. Independent clauses are great but don't mash them together. If you subordinate one clause to the other, you can totally use a comma. See what we did there?

#### 9. Freaking out about apostrophes

When you're not sure about apostrophes, your natural instinct is to put them everywhere.

Understandable. But this can lead to strange-looking plurals such as banana's and peach'es, and (at least 50% of the time) the wrong it's.

Remember: don't put an apostrophe in "its" unless you mean "it is". Things get difficult with possessive apostrophes only because style guides differ on how to form the possessive when singular nouns end in "s". If your name is Chris and you're opening a cafe, most non-American style guides will tell you to name it Chris's Cafe. But some American style guides (including AP Stylebook) will recommend Chris' Cafe.

Definitely don't freak out and name it Chris,s Cafe.

#### 10. Not going with the flow on contemporary usage

How longeth wilt thou persist with "amongst" and "whilst"? Yea though thine prose doth ring fanciful, long hath the "st" lain banish'd 'pon the pebbl'd shore. (These days, it's always "among" and "while".)

The Good Copy is holding Greatest 'its – an apostrophe workshop – at the NGV Melbourne Art Book Fair on Saturday