



Flash

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Grammar's Dirty Little Secret

Listen, we're going to let you guys in on a little secret: You can really put your commas anywhere. Grammar's all a big sham.

Oh, the fancy doctors of English and keepers of the language must bristle to hear such a claim! But it's true. Tell us this sentence doesn't make sense: Down stairs; I walked, for in those dow'n stairs there was— A drink of a beverage and I drank it~milk*

Where are your rules now, fancy men?

Also, just think back to all the school children who got their knuckles rapped for split infinitives and ending sentences with prepositions, only to find when they grew up that those were no longer grammar errors. So, they developed early-onset arthritis for nothing. Or think of the cub reporter who got reamed out in front of the entire press pool by a cigar-chomping editor for leaving the hyphen out of "email" and making "website" one word. That kid gets little comfort from the AP Stylebook's new rules changes while he is cashing his unemployment check.



Everett Collection
Charles Ruggles, 1937

The origins of "grammar" are as shady as you would expect. Samuel Johnson, along with other agents of the Crown, needed to devise a way of communicating with one another in unbreakable code. The solution that was seized upon was a complex and contradictory series of "rules" for writing involving periods, commas, colons and end-blights that would ensure that written communication was so arcane that only the most highly educated men could ever possibly do it "correctly." This had the added benefit of shaming any member of the middle or lower classes with aspirations of upward mobility who couldn't possibly grasp all the nuances of these made up and arbitrary rules.

N.b.: The use of end-blights was banned in 1800 by the Treaty of Ingolstadt, before all records of both the treaty and the punctuation mark were removed from public records. The proper usage of the mark is now known to only a few dedicated historians and a handful of conspiracy theorists on the Internet.

Ever since the invention of grammar, rules that should be fixed and unchanging have proved malleable and inconstant. Many rules have been created out of political expediency, as with the use of the article "an" before nouns beginning with "h," like "historic," which was the result of the Great Cockney Appeasement of 1866. More recently, helping verbs were created during the liberalization of grammar in the 1960s, and currently, in the House of Representatives, a bill has been proposed to replace them with "pulling-up-by-your-bootstraps verbs" in grammar textbooks nationwide. Also, to this day, The Association for Proper Periods (APP) is one of the biggest lobbyist groups in Washington and has successfully arranged to have no sentence in any congressional bill exceed seven words. This law tripled period use overnight.

What's worse, many things we hold dear in the English language are completely made up and make no

sense when you think about them. Consider: The large intestine and the punctuation mark named after it look completely different. In fact, because no one could figure out how to use colons properly, they have been entirely co-opted by the emoticon set.

On the positive side, grammar rules played a critical role in World War II. Squadrons of British cryptographers worked themselves to exhaustion discovering the real reason behind the deployment of the umlaut, which turned out to be code for Hitler's twin Yorkshire terriers and their schedule for walksies. Toward the end of the war, en-dashes and em-dashes provided a way of transmitting Manhattan Project lunch orders in code.

The way things are headed, English will eventually evolve into a language without vowels, as they will be entirely replaced by the letter h: Sthrt prhcthchng yhr vhwvl rhmhvhl skhlls nhw hnd hmp rhss yhr frhhnds.

And you know, in China? They don't even have grammar. Think about it.

You can find further evidence of the decline in the English language, and the death of print media in general, in the Bureau Chiefs' new book, "Write More Good: An Absolutely Phony Guide," available from Three Rivers Press on April 5 in what remains of finer bookstores everywhere.

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