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To Boldly Go – An Analysis of Split Infinitives

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## ABSTRACT

“...*to boldly go where no one has gone before.*” –Star Trek

This paper will attempt to investigate the use of the prescriptive English grammar rule that likes *to persistently insist* that the italicized words I just typed are not a correct usage of grammar. To accomplish this I will first investigate and detail the opinions of various English grammar sources on the rule of split infinitives. These sources will include the *Oxford Guide to English Grammar*, *Cambridge Grammar for IELTS*, *APA Guide for Counselling Students’ Writing Style*, *Microsoft Word English Grammar*, “The Pedant” recurring Times column, and the highly popular *Grammarist.com*. Furthermore, I will use the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the British National Corpus, and the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) to do a series of searches across contemporary, spoken, American, British, online, and academic language sets. These searches will consist of ten simple two-part split infinitive phrases, the preposition *to* with a range of adverbs, plus a following base verb collocate. For example: [*to usually*] + [*base verb*]. From the search results, I will describe where this prescriptive grammar rule is still being observed and by whom. Finally, I will provide a brief analysis of why I think I obtained the results I did.

Keywords: *prescriptivism, descriptivism, infinitive, corpus*

### To Boldly Go – An Analysis of Split Infinitives

As outlined in the above abstract, split infinitives can be a highly contentious grammatical issue. Indeed, even the term “split infinitive” is actually a misnomer as most modern linguists separate English verbs into two categories “bare infinitives” (i.e. sit, eat, drink), and “to-infinitives” (i.e. to sit, to eat, to drink). A “split infinitive” happens when a word, usually an adverb, is placed in between the “to” and the “base” form of the verb (i.e. *to carefully organize*, *to really want*) (Curzan, A. Adams, M. 2012, pp. 155). Virtually zero modern grammarians would tell you that split infinitives are “incorrect” grammar, as it has been sufficiently proven that this rule comes from Latin and was added into English during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Schmitt, N. Marsden, R. 2006, pp. 68). Still, most grammarians advise against its use, especially in academic and formal writing, as it can make the author appear uninformed, especially to pedants. In the following section, I will detail the differences regarding this troublesome grammatical feature among various usage and grammar guidebooks.

### Usage Guides and Grammar

The *Oxford Guide to English Grammar* states that, “Split infinitives are common usage, although some people regard them as incorrect. In general, it is safer to avoid them if you can, especially in writing” (Eastwood, J. 2002, pp. 146). In addition, it states that sometimes it may be necessary to split an infinitive, “to show that the adverb modifies it [i.e.] *The government is planning to **secretly** test a new and more powerful weapon.* This makes it clear that we mean... the test is secret (not just the plan)” (Eastwood, J. 2002, pp. 146). This stands in stark contrast to the *Cambridge Grammar for IELTS*, which does not even list splitting an infinitive as a possible

verb construction while emphasizing that English normally places adverbs after the verb except in cases of describing frequency (Hopkins, D. Cullen, P. 2007, pp. 82, 134-136). Despite both of these books being of clear British origin, they do not seem to agree on this grammar point; I will touch upon possible reasons for this discrepancy in the following analysis section.

Next I will examine a style guide recommended for the American Psychological Association (APA) format that I am writing in now, the *APA Guide for Counselling Students' Writing Style*, in addition to the *Microsoft Word English Grammar* (American and Academic Styles). This should provide an interesting contrast to the previously mentioned British grammar authorities. While the official APA guide does not mention anything that I could find about split infinitives in its 6<sup>th</sup> edition, Dr. Evelyn Biles, writing for the *APA Guide for Counselling Students' Writing Style*, suggests that split infinitives are a “pet peeve” that should be avoided “whenever possible” (Biles, E. n.d., pp. 5). Similarly, the *Microsoft Word English Grammar* suggests we “consider revising” split infinitives for “clarity or conciseness” (Microsoft, 2016, Split Infinitive Grammar Rule). Thus, it seems clear that in formal academic writing in the United States, splitting infinitives is highly discouraged though not “incorrect” per se.

Finally, I will describe here the perspectives of a well-known anti-pedant, Oliver Kamm and the hugely popular *Grammarist.com* concerning the splitting of infinitives. Oliver Kamm bluntly states the following about split infinitives, “...there are things that are touted by pedants as rules, yet... never have been part of the grammar of Standard English. Prohibitions on split infinitives...have absolutely no effect on prose except to clog it up and make it stilted (Kamm, O. 2015, pp. 1). *Grammarist.com* seems to agree with Kamm’s dismal view of the split infinitive taboo stating clearly that, “...there is no rule against using split infinitives in English” while

cautioning that we should not, “...ruin a perfectly clear and natural-sounding sentence just to adhere to an arbitrary antisplitting rule”. Particularly, the website suggests that split infinitives are useful when “...the adverb needs emphasis or wouldn’t work anywhere else in the sentence” (Grammarist.com, n.d.); this is very similar to what the *Oxford Guide to English Grammar* advocates.

## **Corpora**

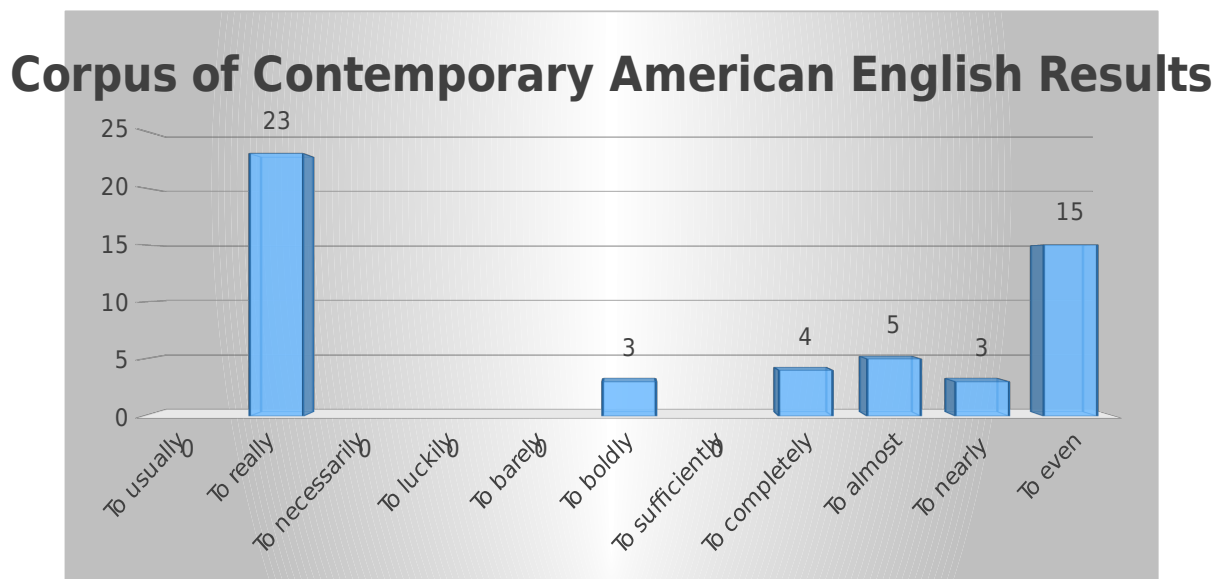
As mentioned previously, I have used three distinct corpora, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the British National Corpus (BNC), and the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) to search the same ten split infinitives. For example, one search I performed was to put the words *to really* in the search bar while selecting one base verb collocate to follow the words. This search produced a list of 20 base verbs that follow the statement *to really*, and shows the frequency of their use with 23 instances in COCA, as shown in Appendix A. In this section, I will provide a detailed description of my findings for all search criteria.

## **Corpora Results**

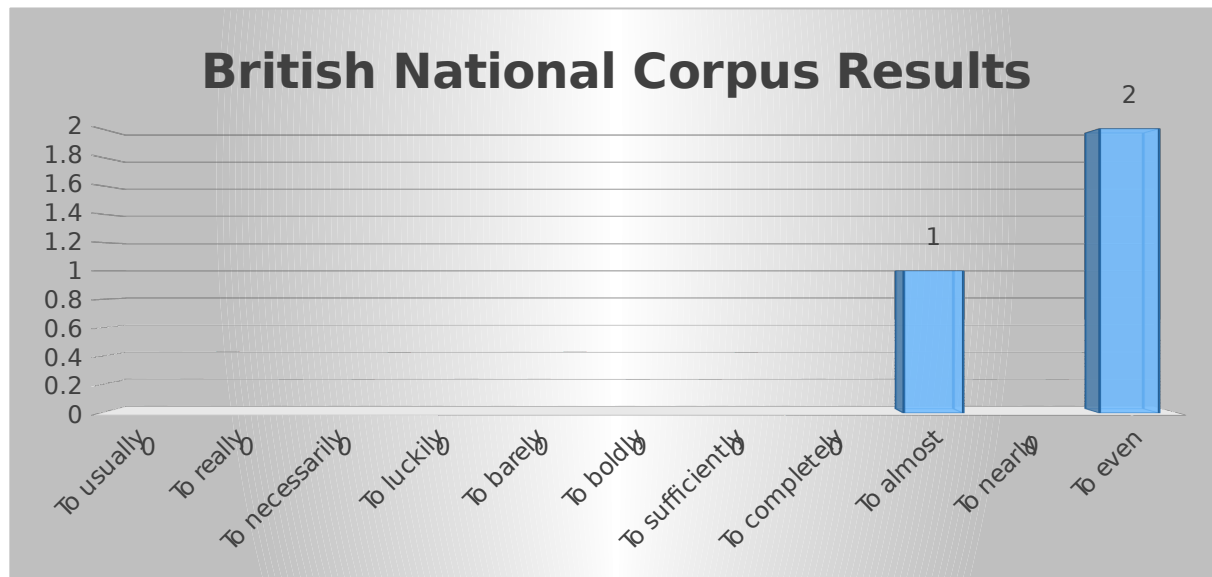
As I used 30 search criteria across three different corpora it would be unfeasible here to document each result with a table such as the one in Appendix A; thus, I have distilled much of the data from my search results into a more manageable and easily readable bar graph format. This will allow me to present more information in a shorter space, while still permitting the display of a select few graphs from the corpora search databases.

**The search results within COCA were existent yet minimal.** There are a few instances of certain split infinitives within the COCA database, *to really + base verb* being by far the most predominant, with *to even + base verb* in a close second, the former with a frequency of 23 and the latter with a frequency of 15. Within my ten search criteria, I arrived at 53 instances of split infinitives within COCA as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: COCA results of all search criteria**



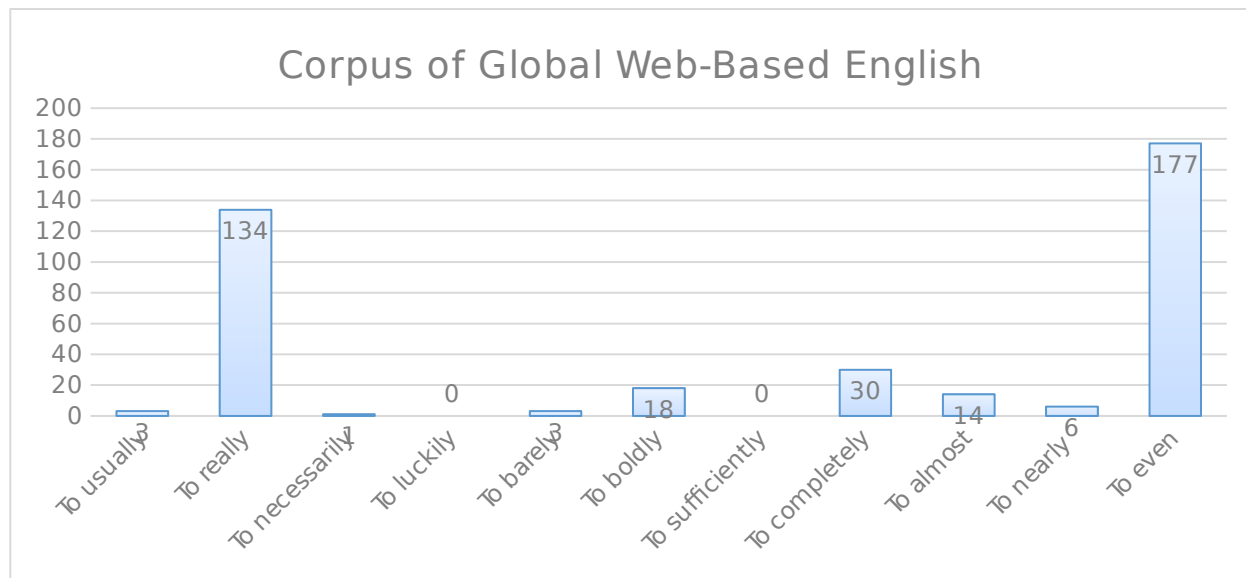
**The search results within the BNC were far less than COCA.** While COCA seemed to have a minimal quantity of split infinitives, the BNC only had three instances of split infinitives within their database; most surprisingly, none of these instances included *-ly* adverbs (i.e. *really*, *boldly*, *completely*), the adverbs so commonly used to split infinitives in American discourse. By contrast, within the British discourse, the instances of split infinitives were limited and dissimilar, encompassing the phrases *to even think*, *to even attempt*, and *to almost sever*, as indicated by Table 2.

**Table 2: BNC results of all search criteria**

The search results within GloWbE were the highest of the three corpora. Based on the previous results, I had no expectations that the results from the GloWbE search would be any different; I could not have been more incorrect as the same ten search criteria produced 386 results. As is evident in Table 3, only two phrases, *to luckily* + *base verb* and *to sufficiently* + *base verb*, produced zero results. This, while the most frequent two split infinitives in this database, are *to even* + *base verb* with 177 instances, and *to really* + *base verb* with 134 instances; that is 80.57% of all the split infinitives in the database that come from just these two phrases. The most numerous instances after that are phrases like *to completely* + *base verb* with 30 instances, *to boldly* + *base verb* with 18 instances, and *to almost* + *base verb* with 14 instances.

**Table 3: GloWbE results of all search criteria**





Most interesting, is the distribution across location of *to even* + *base verb* and *to really* + *base verb* as shown in Appendix B and C. These tables demonstrate not only the percentage of frequency, but also the number of times that these split infinitive phrases occur in different dialects of English worldwide, with the United States having the most instances, and countries like Ghana, Philippines, Canada, and Sri Lanka having the highest percentages of usage. In the following section, I will attempt to analyze some of the data this research provides.

### Analysis

In light of the antiquated prescriptive rule against the use of split infinitives and the diverse descriptive results from the corpora-searches, there are a couple ideas that I would like to propose in this section to try to explain these two perspectives on language. First, it seems the American discourse, academic, public, online, or otherwise, is the most likely to abandon this rule, especially in the case of *to really* + *base verb*. Conversely, it seems the BNC and the results for Great Britain within the GloWbE database show a society divided. While the BNC has only

three instances of split infinitives across its whole database, the GloWbE database clearly shows Great Britain in second place for split infinitive usage, right behind the United States. Second, there seems to be a clear discrepancy between the ways people express themselves online versus academically or professionally, with people generally using split infinitives much more liberally in an online setting.

### **COCA compared with BNC**

As is clear from Tables 1 and 2, the differences between British and American academic and professional discourses regarding the split infinitive rule are slight, though extremely glaring. The COCA results clearly show that, while not used extensively, certain forms of split infinitives are more frequent in COCA in comparison with the BNC. Curiously, the BNC had zero instances of *-ly* adverbs, only showing results for *to even + base verb* and *to almost + base verb* out of my ten search criteria. *To even + base verb* seemed to be the only common ground between the BNC and COCA with two instances in the former and fifteen instances in the latter. While both American and British discourses acknowledge the social stigma attached to split infinitives in their grammar guides, the Americans seem much more willing to disregard this rule, while both societies seem nearly equal in their willingness to disregard this rule when communicating on the Internet.

### **GloWbE compared with COCA and BNC**

Why the culture of the internet has developed itself into being more liberal in many aspects of discourse is an interesting sociolinguistic question that unfortunately I do not have

space to delve into here; however, I can provide a couple ideas that might be worth researching more in the future. The Internet's permissiveness in extending languages' boundaries is not limited to grammar, but includes the use of controversial and diverse topics, word choice, word count, and spelling. Indeed, the anonymity of the Internet, at least until recently, perhaps gave users a feeling that they would not have negative personal repercussions for their choices in using the many elements of discourse that I just outlined. Consequently, this has provided a safe space where people can test the boundaries of their identities without fear of persecution; part of that boundary testing seems to be in the form of breaking once highly esteemed, though admittedly not true, traditional rules of English grammar.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have outlined the linguistic and grammatical debate surrounding the controversial split infinitive in the English language. I have claimed that while splitting infinitives is not looked upon favorably in most academic settings, their use can be appropriate for certain situations. The corpora search results provided a diverse set of data that showed a higher frequency of split infinitives in COCA than the BNC by twenty instances. Additionally, the GloWbE results had a much higher frequency of split infinitives than both COCA and BNC combined, with 386 total instances, 93.69% of all found instances of split infinitives in my search criteria across all three corpora. This provides evidence for not only how the linguistic revolution of the Internet has fast tracked language mutability; but also conversely, it shows how formal institutions, grammar criteria, and prescriptivist tendencies in language, whether trying to or not, help to slow this same language morphing process. Indeed, the age-old prescriptivist versus

descriptivist debate will go on, even more vehemently now perhaps because of the Internet's ability to influence all languages on an ever-quicker and widespread scale.

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**Appendix A: Results of a COCA search for *to really* + one base verb collocate**

CREATE	3
STINK	2
UNDERSTAND	1
THANK	1
COMMUNICATE	1
CHECK	1
BUILD	1
BALANCE	1
ASK	1
RUIN	1
PROTECT	1
PROLONG	1
LOVE	1
LIVE	1
LET	1
LEARN	1
HEAR	1
GROW	1
FIGHT	1
DISCUSS	1
TOTAL	23

**Appendix B: GloWbE results of *to even* + *base verb* organized by country of origin**

SECTION	ALL	US	CA	GB	IE	AU	NZ	IN	LK	PK	BD	SG	MY	PH	HK	ZA	NG	GH	KE	TZ	JM
FREQ	176	47	19	32	9	6	6	8	7	4	1	5	3	6	5	5	5	7	0	0	1
PER MIL	0.09	0.12	0.14	0.08	0.09	0.04	0.07	0.08	0.15	0.08	0.03	0.12	0.07	0.14	0.12	0.11	0.12	0.18	0.00	0.00	0.03

**Appendix C: GloWbE results of *to really* + *base verb* organized by country of origin**

SECTION	ALL	US	CA	GB	IE	AU	NZ	IN	LK	PK	BD	SG	MY	PH	HK	ZA	NG	GH	KE	TZ	JM
FREQ	134	32	8	26	4	9	7	5	0	0	5	4	2	7	6	3	3	3	5	1	4
PER MIL	0.07	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.04	0.06	0.09	0.05	0.00	0.00	0.13	0.09	0.05	0.16	0.15	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.12	0.03	0.10