

“This fear of the stranded preposition seems to be unjustified based on modern grammatical advice.”

NEVER USE A PREPOSITION TO END A SENTENCE WITH

BY MARTHA FAULK

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As the title statement of the “rule” about prepositions illustrates, using a preposition can be a tricky proposition. Most English speakers do, at least occasionally, use a preposition “to end a sentence with.” But most careful writers—especially legal writers—worry about blundering into what might be perceived as an egregious grammatical error.

To Err or Not to Err

As a teacher of legal writing for many years, I’m always surprised by writers’ concern for this relatively small grammatical matter. My focus as an instructor is always upon larger impediments to effective legal writing, such as poor organization, long sentences, overuse of legal jargon, and true grammatical errors. Class participants, however, are usually concerned about prepositions at the end of a sentence, and they are often confounded to learn that such prepositional constructions are not grammatical errors.

Wayward Prepositions

Writers’ concern and confusion about the wayward preposition—also called the “stranded,” “delayed,” or “postponed” preposition—is certainly well founded. Legal writers, charged with vigorous representation of the interests of their clients, do not want to appear to be careless or unlearned. Thus, many writers prefer authoritative *proscriptive* rules that state usage to be avoided as well as *prescriptive* rules that tell us what to follow. Because *plain meaning* and *clear meaning* are important concepts in interpretation of the law, legal writers need rules to live by. (Consider, for example, that this sentence could be rephrased as “rules by which to live,” but then some of the emphasis would be lost.)

Fear and Uncertainty

So, it’s fear, then, or at least uncertainty, that makes writers avoid the preposition at the end of a sentence. This fear of the stranded preposition seems to be unjustified based on modern grammatical advice. In its survey of preposition usage, *The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage* says, “One of the most persistent myths about prepositions in English is that they properly belong before the word or words they govern and should not be placed at the end of a clause or sentence.”¹ Similarly, *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* asserts that the “preposition at the end has always been an idiomatic feature of English.”²

John Dryden’s Legacy

Where did these myths and misapprehensions come from? (Incidentally, you might note the naturalness of the wording in this question. A rearrangement of words to avoid using the preposition at the end would read awkwardly like this: From whence did these myths and misapprehensions come?) To answer the question, scholars agree that the 17th-century English poet and essayist John Dryden originated the myth in his essay on literary criticism titled *Defence of the Epilogue* (1672).³ Although we can’t be certain why Dryden developed the idea that the terminal preposition is an error, we can speculate that he was influenced by his knowledge of Latin grammar. In Latin, the preposition usually precedes its complement, typically a noun or pronoun.⁴

Dryden seems to have had an inordinate influence upon later grammarians. Noah Webster, in his 1784 grammar, reflected the view of his contemporaries by strongly disapproving of the terminal preposition.⁵ Working against this proscriptive notion, however, is evidence that the postponed preposition has been a regular feature of some constructions since Old English. “Evidently, the whole notion of its being wrong is Dryden’s invention,” according to modern grammarians.⁶

¹ H.W. Fowler, *The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage* 617 (R.W. Burchfield ed., 3d ed. 1996).

² *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* 765 (1989).

³ See Fowler, *supra* note 1, at 617.

⁴ See *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage*, *supra* note 2, at 764.

⁵ See *id.*

⁶ *Id.*

Typical Use of Prepositions

Usually, the preposition (*pre-position* meaning “placing before”) comes before its object in a phrase. Most often that object is a noun phrase or a pronoun. The preposition connects words together to show the relationship between words. Some examples of the regular use of the preposition in its usual place are as follows:

Here is a difficult issue *for you*.
Unfortunately, I left my umbrella *in the closet*.
She directed her attention *to the witness*.

Prepositions at the End

In some constructions, however, we place the prepositional object at or near the beginning of a clause.⁷ In the examples below, the preposition stays together with the verb, adjective, or noun with which it is associated:

“Wh” questions:

Who’s the envelope *for*?
What are you getting *at*?

“Wh” clauses:

These are people whom you would like to be associated *with*.
I wish I knew what you were thinking *of*.

Restrictive clauses introduced by “that”:

Here is the error [that] I told you *about*.
Surely it’s the verdict that he’s so angry *at*.

Infinitive structures:

Their last child was difficult to find a name *for*.
Some people find suburbia a boring place to live *in*.
The airport isn’t an easy place to get *to*.

Passive voice verbs:

In some families, money is never spoken *about*.
Yesterday, the plaintiff was operated *on*.
We all hate being laughed *at*.

Prescriptive Attitudes

It’s precisely because “we all hate being laughed at” that we often find ourselves rewriting sentences ending with prepositions. David Crystal, in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, discusses the prevalence of prescriptive attitudes toward language. “Prescriptivism,” he says, “is the view that one variety of a language has an inherently higher value than others, and that this ought to be imposed on the whole of the speech community.”⁸ Legal writers, especially, are concerned about correctness in language so as to

avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

That same concern, however, could lead to a rigid conformity to linguistic propriety and result in a turgid style. In the case of prepositions, a natural-sounding question such as “Who is the envelope for?” becomes the more formally correct “For whom is the envelope?” In addition to substituting the grammatically correct objective case *whom* for the nominative case *who*, we have repositioned the preposition to the beginning of the clause. Thus we have achieved more formality but lost the natural word flow, and, most of us would agree, produced a more turgid style.

Churchill’s Advice

Should we let formality be our guide? *Fowler’s Modern English Usage* recommends that “[i]n most circumstances, especially in formal writing, it is desirable to avoid placing a preposition at the end of a clause or sentence where it has the appearance of being stranded.”⁹ Legal writers may justifiably be as concerned about the appearance of grammatical impropriety as they are about the appearance of other kinds of impropriety.

If, however, this concern for grammatical rectitude results in an unnaturally twisted construction, then the writer should rewrite for naturalness. Winston Churchill, reacting to a sentence in a government report that clumsily avoided a prepositional ending, is said to have made this marginal comment: “This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put.”¹⁰

Still, we are left with those constructions where prepositions may or even must be placed at the end of the sentence, as the above examples illustrate. In those circumstances, common sense dictates that we avoid twisting our thoughts into unnatural utterances just for the sake of avoiding the stranded preposition. Churchill’s admonition gives us just the advice we are looking for.

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⁷ See Michael Swan, *Practical English Usage* 440 (2d ed. 1995).

⁸ David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* 366 (1995).

⁹ Fowler, *supra* note 1, at 619.

¹⁰ *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* 802 (Tom McArthur ed. 1992).

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