

A Few Myths About Sentences Or Things you might want to unlearn to help you edit

"Never start a sentence with *and* or *but*."

There's no such grammatical rule. And it is done all the time. In some situations, starting a sentence with *and* or *but* is inappropriate, and by all means use the technique sparingly. But a full sentence starting with *and* or *but* is still a legitimate sentence.

"Keep your sentences short and simple."

Often complex thoughts demand complex sentences. And you're writing for readers who can handle complex sentences - if they are clear sentences. Your teachers aren't fifth-graders anymore.

Edit your sentences so that they are only as long as necessary to suit the purpose. You do this by editing out unnecessary words - words that don't carry much meaning - and by rephrasing sentences so that the subject is up front, at the beginning of the sentence.

A good way to spot longer-than-necessary sentences is to skim for sentences that begin with *There is*, *There are*, and *It is*. These word groups signal that you're holding off getting to the point for a moment. Reconsider these sentences; rephrase them beginning with the subject of the sentence so you can edit out the *there is*. If the sentence sounds more direct, more to the point, use the new version. If you want to slow the reader down a little, use the original.

A good approach is to vary sentence your length, using long and short sentences. This prevents a monotonous feel to the reading. But, again, you need to make choices about sentence length in light of what you're saying in the sentence and what you want the sentence to do. If you're trying to connect complex causes and effects, or pull together an argument while making sure you've qualified everything carefully, a longish sentence can do it. A short one following helps. (Re-read that passage to see the effect.)

"Never use passive sentences. Write 'John eats rocks,' not 'Rocks are eaten by John.'"

Compare the two sentences about John. Notice how the verb is sandwiched between *are* (it can be *is* or any form of *be* in other cases) and *by*. That's how to spot a passive: Skim for a verb sandwiched between a be-verb and the word *by*.

It's up to you to decide whether a passive sentence is appropriate in the given context: given what you're writing, who you're writing for, and what you want to do. Passive sentences tend to sound very formal, but most readers can see through the formality if it's phony. But in some kinds of writing, such as formal lab reports and some business memos, passive sentences are used quite

often to take the focus of the sentence off the do-er and put it on what was done to what.
Compare:

I measured the flexibility of the spring by applying 100 gms of pressure laterally using a Bork-Stephens torque device.

with

The flexibility of the spring was measured by applying 100 gms of pressure laterally using a Bork-Stephens torque device.

Both are legitimate sentences. The second is more likely to be found in a lab report because it carries a guise of objectivity.

Two problems to be aware of in using passives:

They make the sentence longer and can create errors because passive sentences quickly become overly - and unnecessarily - complex.

They allow you to dodge responsibility. You can get around admitting "I made a mistake" with a passive "Mistakes were made." Good readers will see through this trick, so make your choices wisely.

"Good writers never make mistakes. They can sit down and knock off a perfect paper in one pass."

Many people pretend to this, but it doesn't hold up in court. When you become really familiar and comfortable with a particular kind of writing, or a particular situation of writing - such as writing essay exams or business memos - you reach a point where you can write a first-draft-perfect version. But when you're in a new kind of situation, writing to a new audience, writing in a new form, or dealing with new and complex ideas, might find yourself puzzled and confused, and you'll probably have to write a number of drafts as you work the paper slowly into shape. This is not an "error," nor a sign that you're "doing it wrong." It is a normal process of learning. Give yourself time when encountering a new kind of writing task.

"There's one best way of writing a paper, of getting it right."

Like the myth that "Good writers never make mistakes," this one hides a complex truth. If there were One Best Way, a Magic Formula, a Secret Key to Writing Well, we would tell you what it is and you would follow that formula and that would be the end of *that* problem.

Writing is simply not efficient, if by "efficient" we mean "easy" or "proceeding quickly along a single path," or "proceeding by formula or recipe." Writing is one of the most complex cognitive activities human beings engage in. It's not like arithmetic. It's easily as complex and demanding as high-level mathematics or theoretical physics. At each point - at each word, each sentence, and as you entertain each idea or consider just what might go next - there are choices to be made;

and each choice influences other choices. We make many of these choices unconsciously or by habit - remembering a spelling, for instance - which lightens the mental load. But we still make choices, consider implications, posit alternatives, and try to decide what choice to make all along the line. Writing is not like following a well-worn track, it's more like cutting the brush to create the track as you go. That's work. And there's no guarantee that you'll discover something at the end of the path you cut.

Still, if you don't start, you'll never get there.

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