In the Service of *Good Writing*

Women and Girls Often Go Boldly, but They Are Never Female Men

By Laurie Thomas, MA, ELS

The people who don't want children to study grammar in grammar school make one important point: some traditional grammar rules can be ignored, and some should definitely be violated. For example, some influential grammarians of the past claimed that it was wrong to split an English infinitive, yet they insisted that it was OK to use grammatical gender in English in a way that misrepresents biological sex. In other words, if you follow these old rules, you can end up with sentences that are not only awkward but misleading. As medical editors and writers, we must think carefully about which of the rules of grammar to follow and which to relax or ignore.

In the early 20th century, some stylebook authors would have been horrified by this phrase from the prologue of the television show *Star Trek*: "to boldly go where no man has gone before." Why would that phrase have offended them? Would they have pointed out that there were bold women on the *USS Enterprise* and that no women had ever been to those places either? No. They would have objected to the adverb *boldly* being uttered between *to* and *go*. The infinitive was split. In contrast, they would have found it perfectly OK to ignore women and girls or to refer to them as men. However, women and girls are often bold, and they often go somewhere, but they are never female men.

In 1908, H. W. Fowler argued that "The split infinitive is an ugly thing...; but it is one among several hundred ugly things."[1] In contrast, the *Chicago Manual of Style*'s 16th edition states, "It is now widely acknowledged that adverbs sometimes justifiably separate an infinitive's to from its principal verb."[2] English infinitives are made up of two separate pieces—an infinitive marker (to) and the stem of the verb. If an adverb is modifying that infinitive, why not tuck the adverb between the infinitive marker and the stem? Good writers do it all the time. The meaning of "to boldly go" is clear, and the alternative phrasings sound clumsy. Of course, a good writer would avoid putting too many words between the infinitive marker and the stem, but a single adverb can fit in there nicely.

The writers of the *Star Trek* franchise did eventually correct the problem with the gender and age referent in "where no man has gone before." Starting with *Star Trek: the Next Generation*, the infinitive phrase became "to boldly go where no one has gone before." I'm glad that the infinitive remains boldly split.

To understand the problem with grammar rules, you must understand the grammatical structure of the rules themselves. There are two kinds of grammar rules: descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptive rules describe. They are statements of fact about how the language is typically used. As in other statements of fact, the main verb in a descriptive rule is in the indicative mood. Descriptive rules may explain whether a certain kind of construction is common or rare, but they do not express value judgments or attempt to influence usage. In contrast, prescriptive rules prescribe. They are actually commands (do this, don't do that!). Thus, the main verb in a prescriptive rule is in the imperative mood. Unfortunately, the way that we express the mood of verbs in English is often unclear. For example, the auxiliary verb *may* is sometimes used to express probability and sometimes used to grant permission. Thus, it could be used to describe or prescribe.

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In English, the way in which the imperative mood is expressed depends on whether the command is positive or negative. In a positive command, the imperative mood is expressed by using the stem of the verb. Notice that the subject of the verb (you) is implied: "(You) go!" Sometimes the emphatic *do* is used: "(You) do go!" The negative imperative is formed by putting the words "do not" (or the contracted form, *don't*) in front of the stem of the verb: "(You) don't go!" Modal auxiliary verbs, such as *shall*, *should*, and *must*, can also be used to express commands. Notice that the statement "you must not split infinitives" uses the modal auxiliary verb must to express a command. The King James Version of the Bible uses the verb *shall*, as in "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" in the Ten Commandments.

Commands are not statements of fact. Instead, they represent expressions of value judgments and attempts to influence someone else's behavior. Since commands aren't statements of fact, they cannot have a truth value. They cannot be true, and they cannot be false. A command may be wise or foolish, practical or impractical, but it can't be true or false. When I encounter a command, whether it is phrased with a verb in the imperative mood or with a modal auxiliary verb, I automatically ask myself who is issuing that command, and for what purpose? Why shouldn't I split infinitives? Why should I follow any of the other rules I find in grammar books?

Prescriptive rules can serve two purposes. One is to help you say what you mean—accurately, precisely, and unambiguously. The other is to make your writing sound better, to prevent it from grating on someone's ear. Often, the usage notes in the dictionary can help you decide whether good writers follow a particular rule. If the rule doesn't improve clarity and if great writers see no need to follow it, I generally ignore it—unless it's required by the house style of a particular publisher. In other words, a prescriptive rule is just someone's opinion of what you should or should not do. You'll have to decide for yourself whether to comply.

Laurie Endicott Thomas is the author of Not Trivial: How Studying the Traditional Liberal Arts Can Set You Free.

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