WORD COUNT WRITERS TALK ABOUT WRITING

Killing the Zombies: Split Infinitives, "Hopefully," and Singular "They"

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This summer, I've been looking at zombie rules, false grammar rules taught and followed slavishly with little thought. In June, I set the record straight on how to use _between_ and _since_. Then last month I knocked down false rules concerning _none, and, and however_.

Today, I'll kill three final zombies: the split infinitive, _hopefully_, and singular _they_. They're style rules — albeit awkward ones — that are lumbering around as grammar rules.

Zombie Rule: Don't Split an Infinitive Verb.

This zombie dictates that you not separate the _to_ from the infinitive form of a verb:

> We should study grammar <u>to understand</u> writing better.

Together they are one verb, you see, and they shouldn't be separated. End of discussion.

This zombie seems to have risen up when 18th-century grammarians tried to make English look more like Latin. Since Latin doesn't split its infinitive verbs, neither should English. The trouble is that an infinitive Latin verb is one word.

From this zombie can a related one: _Don't split verb phrases_. Yet in English we position the modifier next to the thing it modifies:

> We should study grammar <u>to</u> better <u>understand</u> writing.

These days a lot of usage experts will tell you that it's OK to split your verb but will then spend several paragraphs trying to convince you to avoid it whenever you can. You can safely ignore them. Or you can ignore them safely. Whichever produces the correct meaning and emphasis for your sentence.

Zombie Rule: Don't Use _Hopefully_ as a Sentence Adverb.

An adverb modifies verbs. But it can also modify adjectives, other adverbs — and sentences.

> Truthfully, I didn't study for the exam.

Yet a zombie rule has risen up, disallowing _hopefully_ as a sentence adverb, as in:

> Hopefully, I passed the exam anyway.

Maybe the problem is that _hopefully_ as a sentence adverb is just too new for some people. Although _hopefully_ dates back to the 17th century, its first usage as a sentence adverb was in 1932, according to _Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage_, and it didn't really catch on until the 1960s.

English speakers and writers embraced _hopefully_ as a sentence adverb rather quickly (at least as far language changes are concerned), and when that happens, defenders of the language will rise up.

Those defenders declared that *hopefully* could only mean "in a manner full of hope" and not "it is to be hoped." But it's a funny thing about words and their meanings: if enough people use a word to mean something new, that definition can stick and become legitimate. Which is just what happened to *hopefully*.

Even the recalcitrant *Associated Press Stylebook* now accepts *hopefully* as a sentence adverb (thanks, John McIntyre). Hopefully, you will too.

Zombie Rule: Don't Use *They* for a Singular Person.

They and its related forms, *their* and *them*, have long been used to refer to one person of an unknown gender:

> Each student should bring their book to class every day.

But like the other rules in this article, suddenly the usage, often referred as singular *they*, became popular. Defenders of the language cringed and cried, "This we will not accept! A writer should know his grammar better!"

Why do people have such a hard time with *they* being used in the singular? They don't have a hard time with *you* being both singular and plural. *They*, *their*, and *them* have been used regularly for singular nouns as far back as 1523. And with the social pressure not to use *he*, *his*, and *him* for all singular nouns, male or female, singular *they* is gaining more usage and attention.

As with split infinitives, usage experts are slowly coming around to the idea that singular *they* is grammatical. Yet they will spill lots of ink to convince you not to use it. A writer should feel free to ignore them and use singular *they* if they desire and if it works in their sentence.

Interested in learning about more zombie rules? Let me know, and I may revisit the topic in the future.

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