

Exercise: Have writing rules changed since you were in school?

If you ever feel like the rules you were taught for writing correctly have changed or are being ignored, you're right! Writing rules have changed, and plain language has hastened that change. Plain language writers use a natural writing style, which means that they occasionally break or ignore a writing rule a strict grammarian would obey.

Here's a quick, fun quiz on the old rules for writing correctly. Read each item then choose "Still a rule" or "Out of date." When you're finished, take a look at the answers on the following page.

Take the "Still a rule?" Quiz

Still a rule	Out of date	Rule
		1. Never split an infinitive. Example: <i>These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission—to boldly go where no man has gone before.</i>
		2. Never begin a sentence with <i>but</i> or <i>and</i>. Example: <i>But researchers found no relation between job stress and the onset of diabetes symptoms.</i>
		3. Never end a sentence with a preposition. Example: <i>Building inspectors had to enforce regulations many construction companies were unaware of.</i>
		4. Never begin a sentence with <i>because</i>. Example: <i>Because many countries produce similar products, they use advertising to distinguish their brands.</i>
		5. Never write a one-sentence paragraph. Example: <i>The National Flood Insurance Program provides affordable insurance to property owners, renters, and businesses, and it encourages communities to adopt and enforce regulations for managing floodplains.</i>
		6. Never refer to the reader as <i>you</i>. Example: <i>When you apply for a credit card, you give a credit issuer permission to access your credit reports and credit scores.</i>





Writing in Plain Language

with Leslie O'Flahavan



Still a rule	Out of date	Rule
		7. Never use contractions in business writing. Example: <i>The procurement team won't issue a purchase order before funds for the project have been allocated.</i>
		8. Never use a double subject. Example: <i>I myself prefer to schedule an online meeting.</i>

Answers to the “Still a rule?” Quiz

Still a rule	Out of date	Rule
		<p>1. Never split an infinitive.</p> <p>Example: <i>These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission—to boldly go where no man has gone before.</i></p> <p>This rule is out of date. It's OK to split an infinitive. In this sentence, the infinitive is “to go,” and it's split by “boldly.” However, it's also OK to avoid splitting the infinitive. In this sentence, you could write “to go boldly.”</p>
		<p>2. Never begin a sentence with <i>but</i> or <i>and</i>.</p> <p>Example: <i>But researchers found no relation between job stress and the onset of diabetes symptoms.</i></p> <p>This rule is out of date. It's OK to begin a sentence with the conjunction “but” or “and.” Avoid beginning lots of sentences in the same paragraph that way, however. That habit could be annoying.</p>
		<p>3. Never end a sentence with a preposition.</p> <p>Example: <i>Building inspectors had to enforce regulations many construction companies were unaware of.</i></p> <p>This rule is out of date. It's OK to begin a sentence with the conjunction “but” or “and.” Avoid beginning lots of sentences in the same paragraph that way, however. That habit could be annoying.</p>
		<p>4. Never begin a sentence with <i>because</i>.</p> <p>Example: <i>Because many countries produce similar products, they use advertising to distinguish their brands.</i></p> <p>This rule is out of date. Actually, this isn't even a rule. Anyone who told you it was wrong to begin a sentence with “because” was incorrect. It's always been OK to begin a sentence with “because” if you pair the dependent clause (the group of words beginning with “because”) with an independent clause to form a complex sentence.</p>

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Still a rule	Out of date	Rule
	✓	<p>5. Never write a one-sentence paragraph.</p> <p>Example:</p> <p><i>The National Flood Insurance Program provides affordable insurance to property owners, renters, and businesses, and it encourages communities to adopt and enforce regulations for managing floodplains.</i></p> <p>This rule is out of date. It's OK to write a one-sentence paragraph. A super-short paragraph can draw the reader's attention, provide commentary, or offer an explanation. Avoid writing lots of one-sentence paragraphs, however. That habit will make your document fragmented.</p>
	✓	<p>6. Never refer to the reader as you.</p> <p>Example: <i>When you apply for a credit card, you give a credit issuer permission to access your credit reports and credit scores.</i></p> <p>This rule is out of date. It's a firmly held plain language principle to address your reader directly when doing so helps your reader understand the content more easily. Not only is it OK to refer to your reader as "you," it's a good idea in many situations.</p>
	✓	<p>7. Never use contractions in business writing.</p> <p>Example: <i>The procurement team won't issue a purchase order before funds for the project have been allocated.</i></p> <p>This rule is out of date. It's OK to use contractions in business writing, though you might want to avoid doing so in a super formal document. We use contractions when we speak in business settings, so it's OK to use them in many types of business writing, especially email.</p>
✓		<p>8. Never use a double subject.</p> <p>Example: <i>I myself prefer to schedule an online meeting.</i></p> <p>This is still a rule. Double subjects may sound OK when you're speaking, but you should avoid using them in business writing.</p>