Grammar Rules

From the Prescriptive Period
Table of Contents

• Don’t use double negatives
• Don’t use ‘ain’t’
• Don’t split a preposition from its phrase
• Don’t split an infinitive
• Shall vs Will
• Who vs Whom
• Lay is transitive, lie is intransitive
• Don’t use ‘hopefully’ to mean ‘I hope’
• Subject verb agreement
• Parallelism
Don’t use double negatives

• The rule once stated “Two negatives cancel each other out”
• Just like math: \((-2)\times(-3)=6\) it was thought that two negatives language also cancel each other
• Double negatives come from Latin languages, of which English is not
• Double negatives are non-standard and marked which implies a negative connotation of the user
Examples

• *You won’t get no job with that attitude.
  • You won’t get a job with that attitude.
  • You will get no job with that attitude.
• *There isn’t nobody who likes sardines.
  • There isn’t anybody who likes sardines.
  • There is nobody who likes sardines.
Don’t use ‘ain’t’

• There was no conjunction for ‘I am not’ so users of Old English created this
• Nowadays, the meaning of ‘ain’t’ has spread to ‘is not’
• ‘Ain’t’ is also non-standard
• ‘Ain’t’ is used regularly depending on the region and subculture of an individual
Examples

• *I ain’t tired.
  • I am tired.
• *She ain’t hungry.
  • She isn’t hungry.
• *They ain’t going to move.
  • They aren’t going to move.
Don’t split a preposition from its phrase

• Prepositional phrases consist of: [preposition] + [noun phrase (optional)]
• Since it is a complete phrase, Prescriptivists thought it would be best to keep the phrase together
• The preposition should come before the noun, as stated in its name: pre-position
Examples

• *Where are you at? – Boost Mobile
  • At where are you?
  • Where are you?
• “[Dangling prepositions] is the sort of pedantry up with which I will not put.”
  – Winston Churchill
Don’t split an infinitive

• No word should come between the infinitive marker ‘to’ and the uninflected verb form that follows
• This rule again is based off the Latin model; however, in Latin, infinitives in Latin consist of one word where in English, they consist of two
Examples

• *I want to completely understand the problem.
  • I want to understand the problem completely
• *John wants to win; he doesn’t want to almost win.
  • John wants to win; he doesn’t want just barely to lose.
Shall vs. Will

• Use shall with first person, use will with second and third
• Prescriptivists claim that shall and will have nothing to do with emphasis, they are merely conjugated words with the same form
• Interestingly, this rule confuses even experts
Examples

- *I will* leave around 8:00 pm.
- *I shall* leave around 8:00 pm.
- *Shall* no one help me?
- *Will* no one help me?
Who vs Whom

- Whom and who are both pronouns substituting for a person
- Whom is used in the subject
- Who is used for the object
Examples

• *Who* is the owner of this book?
  • *Whom* is the owner of this book?
• *Whom* did you speak to yesterday?
  • *Who* did you speak to yesterday?
  • Although it appears that the pronoun who/whom is in the subject place, there was a wh- movement on the original sentence “you spoke to who yesterday”
Lay is transitive, lie is intransitive

- Lie, meaning ‘to recline’, cannot be used with a direct object
- Lay, meaning ‘to put’, must be used with a direct object

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present Tense</th>
<th>Past Tense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lie</td>
<td>Lay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lay</td>
<td>Laid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Examples

• *Lay down and rest.
  • Lie down and rest.
• *Lie down that book and come with me.
  • Lay down that book and come with me.
• *Yesterday the kids laid down and rested.
  • Yesterday the kids lay down and rested.
• *Yesterday the landscaper lay down the bricks.
  • Yesterday the landscaper laid down the bricks.
Don’t use ‘hopefully’ to mean ‘I hope’

- Since ‘hopefully’ is an adverb, it should modify the verb
- Prescriptivism only prohibits the use of the word ‘hopefully’, not similar words: frankly, truthfully, confidentially, evidently, obviously, unfortunately, etc.
Examples

• *Hopefully, it won’t rain tomorrow.
  • I hope it won’t rain tomorrow.
  • The prisoner entered the room hopefully.
Subject – verb agreement

• In a simple subject and verb sentence, it is easy to check agreement
• Whenever the phrase is more complicated, the verb should agree with the “head noun” of the subject phrase (as opposed to the final noun)
Examples

• This is broken.
• These are broken.
• *The memory requirements for each program is listed in Table 2.
  • The memory requirements for each program are listed in Table 2.
Parallelism

- Items in a series should be of the same grammatical form
Examples

• *The parliament **addressed** the kind, and **has been prorogued** the same day.
  • The parliament **addressed** the kind and **was prorogued** the same day.
• *Discharging fireworks, shark fishing, flying stunt kites, or disturbing sea animals are prohibited.
  • Discharging fireworks, fishing sharks, flying stunt kites, or disturbing sea animals are prohibited.
References


• The Purdue OWL Family of Sites. The Writing Lab and OWL at Purdue and Purdue U, 2008, Web. 8 Feb, 2012.