

Myths...and Rules That Changed When You Weren't Looking

Many of us grew up learning the rules of grammar and typing from textbooks and teachers in elementary school. And rules being rules, who would think they would change? Well, somewhere along the way some got tweaked here and there.

1. Placing periods and commas inside quotation marks

Chances are that you were taught that the position of all punctuation in relation to a closing quotation mark depends on if it belongs to the quoted material or to the sentence. This used to be the case, but usage related to periods and commas has changed in the United States. Except in rare cases where confusion may occur, a period and comma always appear inside a closing quotation mark.

2. Placing the apostrophe in possessive names ending in “s”

Those of us who were taught the above quotation mark rule also learned that making a name ending in “s” possessive required the apostrophe *after* the “s” rather than before it. Although some usage books still recommend the traditional handling of names ending in “s,” it is becoming more acceptable to treat the possessive of these names the same way as other names. This is a welcome change, as it is more intuitive in light of how we pronounce them.

3. Ending a sentence with a preposition

This rule, although still prevalent, is often ignored in favor of less awkward phrasing. Many prefer to avoid a sentence like *He finally told us from where he came* in favor of *He finally told us where he came from*.

4. Putting two spaces after a period

Traditional typing instruction teaches us to put two spaces following a period; however, this is not the practice with traditional and desktop publishing, where just one space is used. With the ease of emulating the look of typeset documents on a personal computer, the convention of just one space after a period is favored.

5. Splitting infinitives

An infinitive is the “pure” form of a verb. In English, it’s the word *to* followed by a verb. Although strict grammarians reject the idea of inserting a word in the middle of the infinitive, the tendency to avoid awkward wording often prevails to complement the occasional use in spoken English.

© 2005 The Linguistic Edge. All Rights Reserved.

To request permission to reprint or excerpt this article, please contact permissions@linguisticedge.com. The information presented in this article is intended to be accurate and authoritative information on the subject matter covered. It is provided with the understanding that The Linguistic Edge assumes no liability whatsoever in connection with its use.

