

# 7 [Grammar](#) Rules You Really Should Pay Attention to

Semicolons should be used rarely, if at all. And beware [dangling](#) modifiers!

By [Ben Yagoda](#) | March 14, 2013

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These rules were not meant to be broken. Think Stock/iStockphoto

## I

recently wrote [an article](#) for *TheWeek.com* about bogus grammar "rules" that aren't worth your time. However, there are still plenty of [legitimate](#) rules that you *should* be aware of. Not following them doesn't make you a bad person or even (necessarily) a bad writer. I'm sure that all of them were broken at one point or another by [Henry James](#), Henry Adams, or some other major author named Henry. Moreover, grammar is one of the least pressing problems when it comes to the poor state of writing today. In my new book, *How to Not Write Bad: The Most Common Writing Problems and the Best Ways to Avoid Them*, things like wordiness, poor word choice, awkwardness,

and [bad spelling](#) — which have nothing to do with grammar — take up the bulk of my attention.

Nevertheless, anyone who wants to write in a public setting has to be aware of grammar. (And I'm concerned with *writing* here; talking is a whole different ballgame.) If you make these errors, you're likely to be judged harshly by an editor you want to publish your work; an [executive](#) who, you hope, will be impressed enough by your [cover letter](#) to hire you; or a reader you want to be persuaded by your argument. In each case, there's a pretty easy workaround, so better safe than sorry.

### 1. The subjunctive

This one is pretty simple. When you're writing about a non-true situation — usually following the word *if* or the verb *wish* — the verb *to be* is rendered as *were*.

So:

\* *If I ~~was~~ were a [rich man](#).*

\* *I wish I ~~was~~ were an [Oscar Mayer](#) wiener.*

\* *If [Hillary Clinton](#) ~~was~~ were president, things would be a whole lot different.*

If you are using *if* for other purposes (hypothetical situations, questions), you don't use the subjunctive.

\* *The [reporter](#) asked him if he ~~were~~ was happy.*

\* *If an intruder ~~were~~ was here last night, he would have left [footprints](#), so let's look at the ground outside.*

### 2. Bad parallelism

This issue comes up most often in lists, for example: *My friend made salsa, guacamole, and brought chips*. If you start out by having *made* cover the first two items, it has to cover subsequent ones as well. To fix, you usually have to do just a little rewriting. Thus, *My friend made salsa and guacamole and brought chips to go with them*.

### 3. Verb problems

There are a few persistent troublemakers you should be aware of.

\* *I'm tired, so I need to go ~~lay~~ lie down.*

\* *The [fish](#) ~~laid~~ lay on the counter, ~~fileted~~ and ready to broil.*

\* *Honey, I ~~shrank~~ shrank the kids.*

\* *In a fit of pique, [he](#) ~~sunk~~ sank the toy boat.*

\* *He ~~seen~~ saw it coming.*

(The last three are examples of verbs where people sometimes switch the past and participle forms. Thus, it *would* be correct to write: *I have shrunk the kids*; *He had sunk the boat*; and *He had seen it coming*.)

### 4. Pronoun problems

Let [S](#) take a look at three little words. Not "I love you," but *me*,

*myself* and *I*. Grammatically, they can be called object, reflexive, and subject. As long as they're by themselves, object and subject don't give anyone problems. That is, no one who's an adult native English speaker would say *Me walked to the bus stop* or *He gave the book to I*. For some reason, though, things can get tricky when a pronoun is paired with a noun. We all know people who say things like *Me and Fred had lunch together yesterday*, instead of *Fred and I*... Heck, most of us have said it ourselves; for some reason, it comes trippingly off the tongue. We also (most of us) know not to use it in a piece of writing meant to be published. Word to the wise: Don't use it in a job interview, either.

There's a similar attraction to using the subject instead of object. Even Bill Clinton did this back in 1992 when he asked voters to *give Al Gore and I* [instead of *me*] *a chance to bring America back*. Or you might say, *Thanks for inviting my wife and I*, or *between you and I*... Some linguists and grammarians have mounted vigorous and interesting defenses of this usage. However, it's still generally considered wrong and should be avoided.

A word that's recently become quite popular is *myself* — maybe because it seems like a compromise between *I* and *me*. But sentences like *Myself and my friends went to the mall* or *They gave special awards to Bill and myself* don't wash. Change the first to *My friends and I*... and the second to *Bill and me*.

### **5. The 'dangling' conversation**

In a class, I once assigned students to "review" a consumer product. One student chose a bra sold by Victoria's Secret. She wrote:

*Sitting in a class or dancing at the bar, the bra performed well.... Though slightly pricey, your breasts will thank you.*

The two sentences are both guilty of dangling [modifiers](#) because (excuse me if I'm stating the obvious), the bra did not sit in a class or dance at the bar, and "your breasts" are not slightly pricey.

Danglers are inexplicably attractive, and even good writers commit this error a lot... in their first drafts. Here's a strategy for smoking these bad boys out in revision. First, recognize sentences that have this structure: MODIFIER-COMMA-SUBJECT-VERB. Then change the order to: SUBJECT-COMMA-MODIFIER-COMMA-VERB. If the result makes sense, you're good to go. If not, you have a dangler. So in the first sentence above, the rejiggered sentence would be:

*The bra, sitting in a class or dancing at a bar, performed well.*

Nuh-uh. The solution here, as it often is, is just to add a couple of words: *Whether you're sitting in a class or dancing at the bar, the bra performs well.*

### **6. The semicolon**

I sometimes say that when you feel like using a semicolon, ~~lay~~ lie down till the urge

goes away. But if you just can't resist, remember that there are really only two proper uses for this piece of punctuation. One is to separate two complete clauses (a construction with a subject and verb that could stand on its own as a sentence). *I knocked on the door; no one answered.* The second is to separate list items that themselves contain punctuation. Thus, *The band played Boise, Idaho; Schenectady, New York; and Columbus, Ohio.*

Do *not* use a semicolon in place of a colon, for example, *There is only one piece of punctuation that gives Yagoda nightmares; the semicolon.*

## 7. Words

As I noted in my [previous article](#), the meaning of words inevitably and perennially change. And you can get in trouble when you use a meaning that has not yet been widely accepted. Sometimes it's fairly easy to figure out where a word stands in this process. It's become more common to use *nonplussed* to mean not bothered, or unfazed, but that is more or less the opposite of the traditional meaning, and it's still too early to use it that way when you're writing for publication. (As is [spelling](#) *unfazed* as *unphased*.) On the other hand, no one thinks anymore that *astonish* means "turn to stone," and it would be ridiculous to object to anyone who does so. But there are a lot of words and expressions in the middle. Here's one man's list of a few meanings that aren't quite ready for prime time:

- \* Don't use *begs the question*. Instead use *raises the question*.
- \* Don't use *phenomena* or *criteria* as singular. Instead use *phenomenon* or *criterion*.
- \* Don't use *cliché* as an adjective. Instead use *clichéd*.
- \* Don't use *comprised of*. Instead use *composed of/made up of*.
- \* Don't use *less* for count nouns such people or miles. Instead use *fewer*.
- \* Don't use *penultimate* (unless you mean second to last). Instead use *ultimate*.
- \* Don't use *lead* as past tense of *to lead*. Instead use *led*.

I hesitate to state what should be obvious, but sometimes the obvious must be stated. So here goes: Do not use *it's*, *you're* or *who's* when you mean *its*, *your* or *whose*. Or vice versa!