

Misusing 'however' enfeebles sentences

The Court of Peeves, Crotchets & Irks continues its autumn assizes with a petition from Marian Oakleaf of Burnsville, N.C. She asks for guidance on the use of "however" in the sense of "on the other hand," "nevertheless" or "but."

The court will lay down this general rule: Never, without the most compelling reason, begin or end a sentence with "however" in the sense aforesaid. This is what we are talking about:

□ "Sampras had hoped to capture a 12th career Grand Slam. However, he came up lame and went home empty."

□ "Rafter learned from such Australian icons as Laver and Newcombe. Philippoussis learned from nonprofessional coaches, however."

Limp! Feeble! Sentences ought to have some muscle in them, but the dangling "however" is pure flab. The court will not enjoin the use of the adverb in every construction,



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but will urge writers to ask themselves if a floating "however" truly is necessary.

Consider: "The Dutch explorers made the 17th century Holland's Golden Era. In the 18th century, however, Holland suffered a gradual decline."

Consider: "Many critics praised his technique. Some, however, found fault."

Consider: "Benjamin said he was confident the bond issue would carry. If it fails, however, he will scale down the proposal and try again."

The court finds those anemic "however's" largely useless. The sentences would be better off without them. Nothing at all, of course, is wrong with, "However the vote goes, hundreds of property owners eventually will be dispossessed."

Louise H. Catalano of Denver moves for an order clarifying the use of "among" and "amongst," and suggests that the court decree "among" for plural objects of the preposition and "amongst" for singular objects. The court wants to think about that.

The court will agree that there certainly are times when "amongst" works better than "among": "Amongst the rubble, two hotdog stands seemed to be untouched." Or, "Amongst the clergy, applause for the bishop's proposal was noticeably mild."

Webster's Dictionary of English Usage approves Mark Twain's reference to going "way up the Ohio amongst the free states." Webster's sees nothing amiss in, "Amongst other things, the biography is about the care and feeding of cats" and "That opinion is almost universal amongst teachers of Spanish." The court is not persuaded that "amongst" works well with plural objects. In these instances the court prefers "among the free states," "among other things" and "among teachers of Spanish."

Betty Jo McHenry of Eugene has the court stumped. She asks for an order on the order of adjectives. She inquires: "Why do we say the big, red ball, and not the red, big ball?" The court has no idea, but agrees that it is more euphonious to admire the tall blond woman than the blond tall woman.

Do readers know of any guideline or rule on the order of adjectives? The court would appreciate citations of current and exemplary usage. The court also could use citations of exemplary and current usage.

Edith J. Barba of Anderson, S.C., asks the court to ban the "to" in such constructions as, "Wild bees are helping to pollinate orchards." She regards the "to" as superfluous, and offers in evidence, "Psychics help pet owners to get a new leash on life" (from USA Today) and "Jones' saga helped Americans to get to know Clinton very well"

(from the Greenville, S.C., News).

The court denies her motion. As a general rule, economy is as desirable in prose composition as it is in a family budget, but we don't have to be skimpy. The petitioner cites an ad for a pill that will cause us to live longer: "TMG can help to restore normal, youthful levels of DNA methylation." She quotes an article of U.S. News & World Report about organizations "that help to tie together communities."

Would we have better, more economical sentences if we advertised that "TMC can help restore" and if we praised organizations "that help tie together"? Invoking the goals of both clarity and cadence, the court rules in favor of unpruned infinitives - to restore, and to tie together.

A reader asks an injunction against the statistically average person in such constructions as, "The average person moves about 12 times during his or her lifetime." Injunction granted! The court rhetorically inquires, "What's an average person?" The court supposes it is a person who moves an average of 12 times in his lifetime. Sounds plausible.

On that mathematical note, the court will recess.

To split or not to split

A couple of years ago, Oxford University Press brought forth its American Dictionary and Language Guide. In a press release, the publisher called attention to the editors' comment on split infinitives:

"Splitting an infinitive means putting an adverb between 'to' and the verb form itself. It has been condemned as ungrammatical for centuries, probably on the model of classical Latin, in which the infinitive is a single word and cannot be split. But distinguished writers and speakers have been splitting infinitives since the 14th century, and today it is considered not only permissible, but preferable for clarity in many situations."

This sensible heresy set off a gratifying hullabaloo. Newsweek magazine quoted a typical reaction from Samuel Pickering, a professor at the University of Connecticut: "I do not dine with those who split infinitives."

The gentleman must dine alone a good deal of the time, for the Oxford editors were right on target. Considerations of both clarity and euphony often will persuade the careful writer to split away. Consider a few examples.

Writing in USA Today in February, columnist Walter Shapiro said: "Normally, a new administration faces intense pressure to rapidly fill the vacant slots in the organizational charts of the Cabinet departments." If Shapiro had not placed the "rapidly" where he put it, what were his alternatives? He could have recast the sentence to say that a new administration faces intense pressure "rapidly to fill" the vacant slots, but this would have resulted in a stilted sentence. Or he could have



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moved the adverb to right field, "faces intense pressure to fill the vacant slots in the organizational charts of the Cabinet departments rapidly." Surely there is no improvement there.

This is from an editorial in USA Today: "School districts are watching Miami this week as the nation's fourth-largest school system puts the finishing touches on an ill-conceived program to randomly drug-test its high school students." The alternatives are randomly to drug-test the high school students, or to drug-test the high school students randomly. Split away!

This is from National Review: "It is extremely rare for the speaker of the House to actively co-sponsor legislation." A clumsy recasting would give us "actively to co-sponsor legislation" or "to co-sponsor legislation actively." No improvement there.

This is from The New York Times: "A regional court of the Presbyterian Church dealt a setback today to conservatives trying to categorically ban gay marriages and the ordination of gays." No good purpose would be served by putting the adverbial cart before the horse: "trying categorically to ban." The writer positioned "categorically" correctly.

Splitting is not always the best way to go. This is from The Washington Post: "One of the owners of a Fairfax City day-care center was charged with a criminal offense yesterday as state officials said they will seek to immediately shut down the center." My inclination as a copy editor would be to shift the adverb to the end: "state officials said they will seek to shut down

the center immediately."

This is the general rule. Keep the parts of a verb together unless there is a compelling reason for keeping them apart. Cadence provided a compelling reason for Star Trek "to boldly go where no man has gone before." There was no compelling reason for a contributor to USA Today to recall that President Clinton "made it illegal for current Medicare patients to privately contract with their doctors." He would have had a tighter sentence if he had written "to contract privately."

This is a sentence from The New York Times: "Any decision to permanently ground the Concorde would have deep financial implications for the two airlines that run it." Would you revise the sentence or leave it unchanged?

From columnist George F. Will: "One reason people organize is to collectively exercise their First Amendment right of free speech pertinent to politics." The adverb was vital to the sense of the sentence. It would have been awkward to place it before "exercise," and it would have been weakened the sentence to put it at the end. Will had it right.

To split or not to split? That is the question, and there is no bright-line rule to guide us. The best advice is simply to be aware of the sensitive infinitive and to treat it with tender care.

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BOOKS

ALBANY (OR) DEMOCRAT-HERALD, CORVALLIS (OR) GAZETTE-TIMES

A semi-lament for 'whom'

“Who are we kidding?” asked the novelist Ron Carlson. Writing in *The New York Times*, he was reviewing Annie Proux’s latest collection of short stories from Wyoming. Never mind all that. The question is, should Carlson have inquired rhetorically, “Whom are we kidding?”

Over the past 25 years many editors have inquired about the poor health of “whom.” The answer has changed very little: The dear old pronoun is dead, but it won’t lie down. Now comes a letter from the Rev. Dean E. Feldmeyer, pastor of the United Methodist Church in Wilmington, Ohio. He is an occasional contributor to the *Wilmington News Journal*. He writes:

“While I grant that there is a proper place for ‘whom,’ I submit that it is a place determined more by rhythm and tempo, by a



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finely tuned ear, than by a slavish devotion to some often archaic rules of grammar. On two recent occasions my editor squashed my crisp prose with the imposition of a burdensome ‘whom.’

“I asked, ‘Who Would Jesus Torture?’ He emended it to, ‘Whom Would Jesus Torture?’ In my closing line I prayed that ‘We will always be a nation of immigrants, no matter who our leaders are.’ His closing line: “... no matter whom our leaders are.”

What about it, you language mavens? The com-

plainant’s second Horrid Example is horrid indeed: The “to be” verbs cannot take a direct object, so the closer was rightly “no matter who our leaders are.” I believe reader Feldmeyer was right on his first complaint also. His rhetorical question loses its punch when “who would torture” is pedantically changed to “whom would torture.”

Surely there is a residual place for “whom” in such familiar contexts as a notice “to whom it may concern.” We are not going to pray “for who the bell tolls.” I wouldn’t rewrite the psalm to ask, “Of who shall I be afraid?” Otherwise, it’s bye-bye.

Let us move along to an unrelated topic. The *Wall Street Journal* just launched a monthly magazine. Its editor in chief, Tina Gaudoin, addressed an appeal to “you, the reader.” She buttered us up: “You are smart, well-read, discerning about what you

consume, opinionated and generous.” Right on! The sentence calls to mind one of the maxims of my first editor nearly 70 years ago. This was the editor/historian Douglas Southall Freeman. He gave us this instruction:

“In any unenumerated series, place the longest element last.”

Under Dr. Freeman’s rule, the appeal would have been to you prospects who are “smart, well-read, opinionated, generous, and discerning about what you consume.” It’s a little dog trick, easily mastered — and in this instance it would have gained some pizzazz by ending on an accented syllable. Try it. You might like it!

From somewhere in Cyberspace, Stacey Anonymous asks about the number of “family,” i.e., is it always a singular noun? She much prefers “her family were from Sarasota” to “her family was from Sara-

sota.” All my dictionaries insist upon the singular construction, but I dunno. My ear does not rebel at “Her entire family are ...” but I yield. If her hypothetical family WAS from Sarasota, they lived in a lovely town.

Apologia pro bonera magna sua: A couple of weeks ago (Sept. 7) I quoted a godawful sentence from a restaurant critic in Oregon. Then, to soften the shaft, I closed by purposely saying that not all writers can be as perfect “as me.” Big boner. Thirty readers have rained their calumny upon me. Someday I will learn not to clown around. Look, everybody! The “as me” was writ sarkastick! Really, truly! Cross my heart! I will not do it again. At least, not any time soon.

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Plurals, singulars and all that jazz

Alan Riding, a travel writer for The New York Times, filed a feature story from Germany in March. He commented

that by 2010, Berlin could become a city of museums: "A dazzling array of new and refurbished museums are to offer a wealth of art comparable to that found in New York, London and Paris." In that sentence, the Times' man in Berlin chose the plural "are to offer" instead of the singular "is to offer."

Another Timesman, William Safire, wrote a Fourth of July piece last year. He said: "Our independence and our prosperity gives us the opportunity to lead the world by our example." In that sentence, Brother Safire opted for the singular "gives us the opportunity" rather than the plural "give us the opportunity."



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'... the conflict between grammatical agreement and notional agreement is not so easily resolved.'

In order not to hold you quivering in suspense, I will disclose my bystander's vote. I would have written that the dazzling array of museums WILL offer or IS to offer a wealth of art. In my view, our independence and our prosperity GIVE us the opportunity – but the conflict between grammatical agreement and notional agreement is not so easily resolved.

You will have surmised correctly that today's topic is "agreement," specifically the agreement of subject and predicate. No one is going to write, "Three golfers WAS on the 18th green." Those guys WERE in the bar.

Beyond that elementary agreement of noun and verb lies a grammatical swamp. We sink into such arcane areas as "notional agreement" and "formal concord." Some respected commentators will contend that both Timesmen were right: The

subject that appears to be singular (array) is actually a plural in disguise; and the subject that appears to be plural (independence and prosperity) actually is a singular in drag.

Webster's Dictionary of English Usage (DEU) devotes more than seven pages to agreement in its various forms. The entry on subject-verb agreement begins with a line from Robert Service's ballad, "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." I used to know the thing by heart. "A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute saloon." Here the subject appears to be "bunch," which usually functions as a singular noun, e.g., "That bunch of bananas is too small." On reflection it is apparent that the boys, not the bunch, were whooping it up. A plural, please.

A number of perplexing examples come (comes?) to mind. "A rash of stories in the

Chicago media have reported a rise in gang warfare." ... "A crew of pirates were paraded in chains along the Battery." ... "A conglomeration of auto manufacturers is announcing price increases in August." The DEU sensibly recommends that when a collective noun (rash, crew, conglomeration) is followed by a plural noun (stories, pirates, manufacturers), the sense is normally plural and the verb should be plural as well.

A different problem is presented by the compound subject. Bill Safire's sentence provides a contemporary example: "Our independence and our prosperity gives (give?) us the opportunity ..." The DEU goes back to a 16th-century writer who said of two other writers, "Scoffing and girding IS their daily bread." In the King James Bible (Daniel 5:14), the translators wrote that "light and understanding and excellent wisdom IS found in thee."

My ear tells me that these boxcar subjects would be happier with plural verbs. "Scoffing" and "girding" are firmly coupled. I would leave them hitched. But maybe not always. E.L. Doctorow said in

"Loon Lake" that "The name and address of the grocery was painted on the slats." My ear at first told me the name and address WERE painted, but now I'm uncertain. Maybe the name and address properly WAS painted. As a copy editor, how would you handle a simple maxim, "Time and patience is necessary"? Should it be ARE necessary?

Try your hand on these tormentors from the DEU: "A drama or an epic fill (fills?) the mind." ... "Acting, singing or reciting are (is?) forbidden them." ... "What are (is?) honor or dishonor to her?" The sentences come from Matthew Arnold, H.G. Wells and Henry James – certainly no slovenly fellows.

How do you handle this familiar construction? "One out of 10 sophomores are unable to change a lightbulb." Are unable? Is unable? When the question is "agreement," the first agreement is easy – the topic of agreement is a matter on which the experts disagree.

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Taming the wild comma

Not long ago I ended one of my scholarly dissertations with an admonitory word: "Let us think upon these things, and go in peace."

Remarkably, that gentle valedictory provoked a flood of letters. (Well, eight letters.) In a sense it was much adieu about nothing, for my correspondents were not appalled by the dissertation. They were appalled by the comma — that is, the little squiggle after "things." "Absolutely wrong!" cried a teacher in North Carolina. A reader in Seattle was aghast: "You have torn asunder two independent clauses!"

Very well. That was my comma, I liked the friendly fellow. He added a necessary quarter-rest to the coda. It's a matter of tempo. To end a mock-serious



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column I wanted a mock-solemn pause — largo, if you please, and not allegro.

Let us talk today of commas. Their employment is loosely governed by idiosyncratic publishers, crotchety editors and the writers of manuals of style. All of them agree that in the realm of punctuation, commas serve important aims of clarity and cadence. My own rule is drawn metaphorically from the practice of two Virginia ladies long ago. They had a firm guide for social occasions during Lent: They would have a drink only if they really needed one. So it is with commas. Throw in a comma only when you really need one.

A writer's ear is essential to a writer's art. We must *hear* the words we write. In many instances, the sound of a sentence read aloud will govern its punctuation. An introductory phrase, such as "in many instances," generally will demand a comma. Other times it won't. If the cadence is slow, the flag is red, white, and blue. If we're marching briskly, it's red, white and blue.

Comma, in; comma out.

Kim Moore, an editor at Harvest House Publishers, asks about the punctuation in this hypothetical sentence: "I fed the dog, then the cat." One school of thought looks at the comma after "dog" and teaches alternatives: "I fed the dog and then the cat," or "I fed the dog; then I fed the cat." Or, "I fed the dog, and then I fed the cat." Obviously we're talking about a remarkably patient cat, but no matter. I would go back to the hypothetical "I fed the dog, then the cat." The sentence is unequivocally clear, and it falls more trippingly from the tongue. Keep it.

A year ago I heard from a Maryland attorney, Irwin R. Kramer. His rule — generally a good one — is to insert a comma "where the reader would naturally take a breath." He liked the commas in this exemplar: "During the defendant's testimony, we discovered that, in 1997, he was convicted of cocaine possession in the Circuit Court of Baltimore City." I would recast the choppy sentence

and leave at least two commas out:

"During the defendant's testimony, we discovered that in 1997 he had been convicted in the Circuit Court of Baltimore City of possession of cocaine."

Constant Reader in Seattle also loves the surplus comma. A photo identified "the late Bob Hope, who for decades entertained U.S. troops overseas." Constant Reader would have edited the caption to read, "the late Bob Hope, who, for decades, entertained U.S. troops..." Aaargh!

In "The Copyeditor's Handbook" (University of California Press), editor Amy Einsohn offers sensible rules for the comma, but she cuts us some slack. After we have mastered the do's and don'ts, she says, "we need to ask ourselves whether the presence or absence of a comma will best serve the writer's purpose and the reader's needs." In my view, that says it all. Or: In my view that says it all. Your sentence, your comma, your call.

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