‘And,’ ‘but’ at the beginning? Why not?

By Matthew Salzwedel
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It’s not easy to learn how to write well. But often it’s what novice writers think they know about writing that stunts their development. Consider the widespread belief that it’s always wrong to split infinitives or end sentences with prepositions or begin sentences with *And* or *But*. Not one of these grammar “rules” has historical or grammatical support, yet many writers cling to and defend them as God-given truths.

Let’s dismantle one of these grammar myths here — the shibboleth that you can’t begin a sentence with the coordinating conjunctions *And* or *But*. No matter what your third-grade English teacher told you, for hundreds of years excellent writers have used them to great effect. And there’s no reason why you can’t too.

Beginning sentences with *And* or *But* isn’t new

According to the “Chambers Dictionary of Etymology,” the conjunction *and* first appeared in Old English around A.D. 700, and *but* was first documented as a conjunction around 1390. In “The Canterbury Tales” (ca. 1393–1400), for example, Chaucer began many of his sentences with *And* and *But*. Bryan Garner also points out in “Garner on Language and Writing” that Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) began more than 20 percent of his sentences with conjunctions, and William Shakespeare, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, and Mark Twain, among others, also found nothing wrong with it.

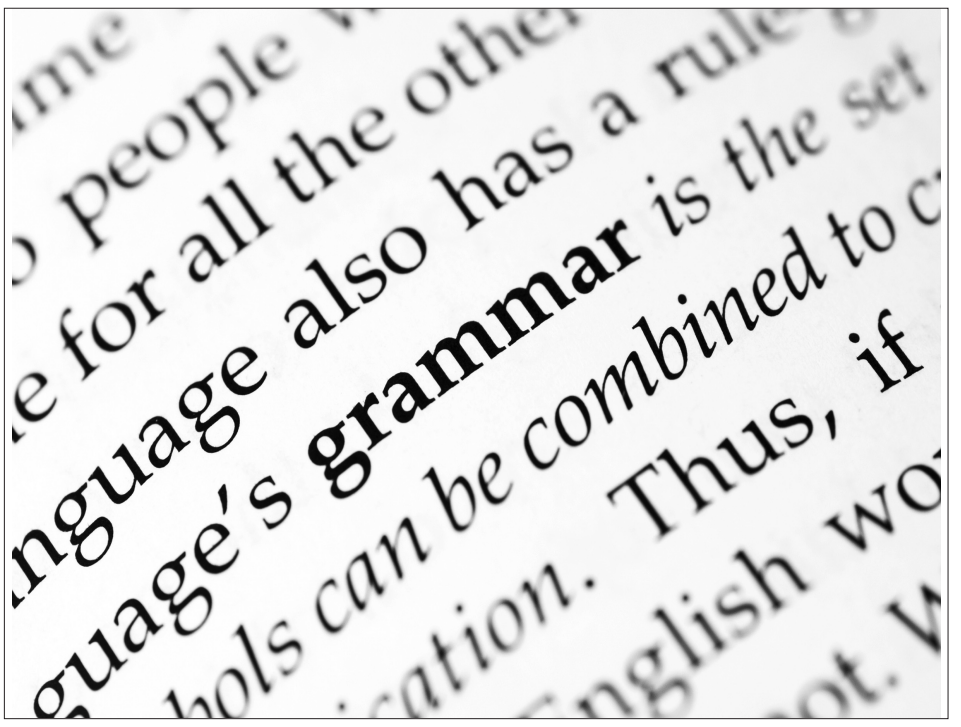
Your elementary-school teachers got it wrong

If “Garner’s Modern American Usage” is correct that the rule against beginning sentences with *And* or *But* “is rank superstition,” how did it become so widespread? Writing authorities aren’t quite sure. According to Garner, some writing authorities believe that grade-school grammar teachers grew tired of pupils beginning all of their sentences with *And* or *But* so the teachers invented the rule to discourage it. In “Writing with Style,” John Trimble suggests that teachers perpetuated the rule because they (a) learned the rule as students and never questioned its correctness; (b) wanted to stamp out informality in their pupils’ writing; and (c) were focused on teaching compound sentences where conjunctions join two independent clauses.

Regardless of the rule’s origin, however, modern grammar and usage authorities universally condemn it. Besides Garner and Trimble above, Eric Partridge (“Usage and Abusage”), Sir Ernest Gowers (“The Complete Plain Words”), H.W Fowler (“A Dictionary of Modern English Usage” (Ernest Gowers ed. 1965)), Theodore M. Bernstein (“The Careful Writer”), William Zinsser (“On Writing Well”), and “The Chicago Manual of Style” all have rejected the rule as illegitimate. In “We Who Speak English: And Our Ignorance of Our Mother Tongue,” Charles Allen Lloyd called it a monstrosity: “[A]pparently about half of our teachers of English go out of their way to handicap their pupils by inculcating [the rule]. One cannot help wondering whether those who teach such a monstrous doctrine ever read any English themselves.”

***However* and its ilk are flawed replacements**

Many writers prefer to use *However*, to begin adversative sentences. Beginning a sentence with *But*, they say, is too jarring. True, there’s nothing grammatically wrong with beginning a sentence with *However* followed by a comma. But *However*, as a sentence-starter is a cumbersome way to begin a contrasting sentence. Trimble says to avoid using *However*, because *But* “has two fewer syllables and takes no comma, so it’s a cleaner, punchier transition word — especially at the head of a paragraph, where it’s peerless.” Writers who prefer the softer *however*, however, commonly set it off with commas mid-sentence at the point of emphasis.



Careful readers notice that polished writers rarely begin their sentences with *However* followed by a comma. Consider the United States Supreme Court’s decision in *Missouri v. McNeely* (Apr. 17, 2013). The Court’s majority opinion, Chief Justice Roberts’s partial concurrence/dissent, and Justice Thomas’s dissent used *But* to begin 20 sentences; whereas, only two sentences began with *However* followed by a comma. That’s a 10–1 ratio in favor of *But*.

There are, of course, other words that can introduce a contrast, including *On the other hand*, *Notwithstanding*, *Nonetheless*, or *Nevertheless*. And *In addition to*, *Furthermore*, and *Moreover* are grammatically sound substitutes for *And*. But these clunky substitutes force readers to parse more than one syllable, and the subsequent comma stops the sentence at the first word. So while the grammar police won’t rap your knuckles if you use these words, they’re not good style because they interrupt the euphony and rhythm of the sentence.

Knowing is admitting that you don’t know

In Plato’s “Apology,” Socrates says that “I am better off than he is — for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know.” Lawyers — as professional writers — should apply the same self-criticism to what they think they already know about writing.

If you can’t remember when or how you learned a grammar rule, take a few minutes to verify whether it is, in fact, a legitimate rule. Besides the authorities above, there are many other excellent writing guides that answer thorny grammar questions. If you claim to be too busy to do this homework, remember this — the only thing that’s worse than not knowing how to do something is to do something wrong while believing that it’s right.

J&J chalks up win in Chicago DePuy ASR hip trial

By Pat Murphy
Dolan Media Newswires

A Chicago jury has decided that Johnson & Johnson’s DePuy Orthopaedics unit is not liable for the failure of a metal-on-metal hip implant that failed three years after an Illinois woman’s hip-replacement surgery.

Carol Strum had asked for at least $5 million in damages, but a 12-member Cook County jury, in a unanimous verdict rendered April 16, rejected the 54-year-old nurse’s claim that her ASR XL hip implant was defective.

The case was the second to go to trial of the thousands of DePuy ASR XL hip lawsuits filed in courts throughout the country. In March, a Los Angeles jury awarded $8.3 million in the first case to go to trial over the metal-on-metal hip replacement implants.

According to Strum’s complaint, she had a DePuy ASR XL implanted in January 2008. The product allegedly failed and needed to be replaced in January 2011. Strum sued DePuy later that year in Cook County Circuit Court in Illinois, asserting strict liability and negligent design claims.


BLOOMBERG PHOTO: PATRICK T. FALLON

A plaintiff attorney holds up an ASR XL hip implant made by Johnson & Johnson during his Jan. 25 opening statement to a California jury. That trial resulted in a $8.3 million verdict against Johnson & Johnson. The outcome was different last month in Chicago, where a jury decided the medical giant is not liable for the failure of an ASR XL hip implant. A 54-year old nurse was seeking $5 million in damages.

The trial that yielded the $8.3 million verdict against DePuy took place in California state court, where about 2,000 cases are consolidated. Another 10,000 cases await trial in federal multidistrict litigation in Ohio.

The lawsuits allege that the DePuy ASR XL, which uses a metal ball-and-socket joint, has a high failure rate and increases cobalt and chromium toxicity in the bloodstream, often requiring surgery to remove the device. DePuy recalled the product from the market in August 2009. European studies showed a failure rate of 44 percent over a period of seven years.

The Food and Drug Administration has proposed to reclassify several metal-on-metal hips, requiring manufacturers to complete a premarket approval application (PMA) in order to receive the agency’s approval.

In responding to the FDA’s request for comments on the agency’s proposal, Mary Alice McLarty, president of the American Association for Justice, submitted a letter warning that the reclassification could put patients’ legal rights in question.

“We can envision a manufacturer seeking to gain retroactive immunity if a device is ultimately approved through a PMA, even though that would be chronologically absurd and terribly wrong,” McLarty wrote. “Therefore we request language that makes it explicit that such an argument would have no footing.”