

Split Infinitives through Time

Read and compare the following rules about split infinitives from different time periods. Note the dates of each rule statement. Notice that there are not only differences in the recommended practices but also in the approaches and writing styles of the grammarians.

1. "Do not place any word or words between the parts of an infinitive."
From Glen Arnold Grove, *One Hundred Lessons in English: A Text-book Embracing the Essentials of Practical English for Use in Commercial Schools, High Schools and Others Desiring a Short Course*. S. S. Packard Publishers, 1904.
2. "Split Infinitive: The English-speaking world may be divided into (1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is; (2) those who do not know, but care very much; (3) those who know and condemn; (4) those who know and approve; & (5) those who know & distinguish To the second class, those who do not know but do care, who would as soon be caught putting their knives in their mouths as splitting an infinitive but have hazy notions of what constitutes that deplorable breach of etiquette, this article is chiefly addressed. These people betray by their practice that their aversion to the split infinitive springs from instinctive good taste, but from tame acceptance of the misinterpreted opinion of others; for they will subject their sentences to the queerest distortions, all the escape imaginary split infinitives. "To really understand" is a split infinitive; "to be really understood" is not a split infinitive."
From H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Oxford University Press, 1946.
3. "Avoid awkward separation of parts of verb phrases and awkward splitting of infinitives. . . . Although all split infinitives were once considered undesirable, those needed for smoothness or clarity are now acceptable."
From John C. Hodges and Mary E. Whitten, *Harbrace College Handbook*. Seventh Edition. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972.
4. I don't split infinitives. I don't know why, but I do not feel comfortable splitting. Split infinitives seem to disturb some delicate sentence balance I

am aware of when I write. Perhaps the feeling is an illusion. Perhaps it is a lingering memory from my seventh-grade English teacher. Perhaps it is only the consciousness of how much split infinitives annoy some people whom I respect. Whatever it is, my own feeling against the split infinitive is so strong and so habitual that I do not fight it. I revise sentences to eliminate split infinitives, and something old-fashioned in me makes me notice when other people split them. You are much more likely to find split infinitives in journalism-the newspaper and magazine writing-than in trade books. The more time editors have with a manuscript, the more likely they are to eliminate split infinitives. But the split infinitive is so common nowadays in so many things we read that writing teachers become a little foolish in trying to combat split infinitives in the name of some grand principle. (109-110)

From Richard Marius, *A Writer's Companion*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1985.

Rules about correctness are a matter of social agreement and convention. Like clothing styles, they are, in part, fluid customs related to historical and cultural eras. Indeed, the rules governing correct usage are not always logical.

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