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FOR
BETTER
WRITING

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Chapter 3

LET'S GET IT STARTED: STARTING A SENTENCE

NOW THAT YOU'VE MASTERED usage and basic grammar, it's time to start writing. But argg! Writer's block is bad enough without having to worry about the nitpicky little "rules" governing how you should start a sentence. *And, but, however, because*—it's enough to make you click that Solitaire/Bejeweled/Second Life/YouTube button (you know the one) and procrastinate for one more day.

I have good news: you can forget almost every rule you think you know about how not to start a sentence (unless you're writing a cover letter—then you should see the "Idiot Manager" box at the end of this chapter). Sometimes how you start a sentence matters in formal settings, but many dictums are only delusions.

STARTING A SENTENCE WITH *HOWEVER*

When people ask me about the sentence-starting rules, *however* is the word they mention most often. Rest assured: it's fine to use *however* at the beginning of a sentence; you just need to know when to use a comma.

The comma is important because *however* is a conjunctive adverb that can be used in two different ways: it can be a conjunction that joins main clauses, or it can be an adverb that modifies a clause.

"What is an adverb?" you ask. Most commonly, it is a word that modifies a verb. That's easy to remember because *adverb* has the word *verb* in it. Adverbs often end in *-ly*. *Quickly* is an adverb in this sentence: *Squiggly ran quickly*. *Quickly* describes how Squiggly ran. Adverbs can also modify adjectives, other adverbs, clauses, and whole sentences. A conjunctive adverb is a transitional word that joins two clauses that could be independent sentences, and it provides meaning about the relationship between the two sentences. Examples include *however*, *therefore*, and *nevertheless*. (See the appendix on page 196 for more examples.)

If you start a sentence with *however* and don't follow it with a comma, *however* means "in whatever manner" or "to whatever extent."

***However* Squiggly tried, he couldn't get his mind off chocolate.**

***However* loud the maracas, they couldn't drown out the sound of the gathering peeves.**

In both of those sentences, *however* isn't acting like a conjunction. It's not joining anything to anything else. I don't believe anyone has ever disputed starting a sentence with *however* when it's used this way.

On the other hand, the esteemed grammarians Strunk and White did say in their book, *The Elements of Style*, that you shouldn't start a sentence with *however* when you mean "nevertheless" or "on the other hand." Brace yourself. I'm going to dis Strunk and White, but only because other grammarians did it first. (I have the heart of a field mouse.)

Most of the time people stick with Strunk and White, but everyone who's anyone in modern grammatical society (don't you wish you could come to our parties?) has decided that the classic advice is unreasonable.

Here's why: when you put a comma after *however* at the beginning of a sentence, everyone knows it means "nevertheless." There's no reason to outlaw a perfectly reasonable use of the word when you can solve the problem with a comma!

Squiggly couldn't forget about chocolate. *However*, he wasn't trying very hard.

Squiggly was Aardvark's best friend. *However*, sometimes Aardvark found him exasperating.

Take that Strunk. Take that White. Please don't haunt me. More famous writers than I have defied your directive; go haunt them if you're feeling peeved.

If you have an unhealthy reverence for Mr. Strunk or Mr. White and want to avoid starting a sentence with *however*, it's not hard to do—the quick and dirty tip is to grab a semicolon and use it to connect your two main clauses instead of separating them with a period.

Squiggly was Aardvark's best friend. *However*, sometimes Aardvark found him exasperating.

Squiggly was Aardvark's best friend; *however*, sometimes Aardvark found him exasperating.

Treat the other conjunctive adverbs the same way. For example, if *indeed* is used in the middle of two independent clauses as a connector, treat it as you would *however*—put a semicolon before it and a comma after.

Squiggly was Aardvark's best friend; *indeed*, sometimes Aardvark thought Squiggly was his only friend.

You can also bury a *however* that means “nevertheless,” “on the other hand,” etc., in the middle of a sentence. You might do this to avoid using it at the beginning when you suspect your audience contains rabid Strunk and White fans, or you might do it because it makes sense with the rhythm of your sentence. When you put *however* in the middle of a sentence like this, it should be surrounded by commas.

Friendship, however, is a complicated dance.

A gift of chocolate, however, has the power to salve minor missteps.

Again, put a comma before and after *however* when you use it in the middle of a sentence that way. People often get confused about this point because in long sentences sometimes you need a comma and sometimes you need a semicolon with your *however*. Just remember that you only use the semicolon when you are joining two main clauses and the *however* just happens to be in the way, shouting “nevertheless.” Just think of a semicolon as a sentence splicer—it splices together two main clauses.

So don't let anyone tell you it's wrong to start a sentence with *however*. On the other hand, it may be a good idea to avoid the practice if you're applying for a job since a lot of people mistakenly believe it's wrong. Mind your commas and semicolons, and don't use any punctuation after *however* when you use it to mean “in whatever manner” or “to whatever extent.”

STARTING A SENTENCE WITH *HOPEFULLY*

If you believe *hopefully* is a sentence adverb, and you don't care what people think of you, you can start a sentence with *hopefully*.

Frankly, I can't do it. If you've ever heard me give a radio interview, you've probably heard me self-correct. I'll start a sentence, “Hopefully, the interrobang . . .,” panic [Screech. Internal panic. Holy cats, I just started a sentence with “hopefully.” Abort! Abort!], and start over. “I HOPE the interrobang gets its own key on the keyboard someday.”

If you read the definition of adverb in the “However” section, you might have noticed that adverbs can modify whole sentences. When they do this they are called (unimaginatively) sentence adverbs. (Adverbs are starting to bug me because they can’t decide what their job is. How would you feel if I suddenly threw in a chapter on gardening or genetic engineering? But I digress.)

Here are some examples of less controversial sentence adverbs in action:

***Fortunately*, the peeves were upwind.**

***Honestly*, I wish I were somewhere else.**

Hopefully, you can see that [Screech. Panic.] . . . I am hopeful you can see that the sentence adverbs *fortunately* and *honestly* modify the whole sentence. *Fortunately* relates to the entire point that the peeves were upwind, and *honestly* describes the subject’s state of mind and gives the whole sentence a confessional quality.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows the first use of *hopefully* as a sentence adverb meaning “I hope” in 1932, so it is relatively new, as far as words go. For the three hundred years before 1932, *hopefully* primarily meant “in a hopeful manner,” and this is still the more acceptable use today.

***Squiggly* looked *hopefully* in the direction of the chocolate tree.**

***Hopefully*, he broached the subject of an expedition.**

“Ah ha!,” the holdover* language sticklers will say as they read that second example. “We’ve got you now! ‘Hopefully, he broached the subject of an expedition’ could mean two different things. It could mean he broached the subject in a hopeful manner, or it could mean the storyteller

* Many language experts have come around on starting a sentence with *hopefully*. The response ranges from an enthusiastic “fully standard” by Dictionary.com to a resigned “lost cause” from Bryan Garner, author of *Garner’s Modern American Usage*.

is hopeful that he broached the subject of an expedition.” And the language sticklers are right.

The counterargument is that there are few instances where a reasonable person would be confused; context usually makes the meaning clear. And if there is an instance where intolerable confusion will ensue if you start a sentence with *hopefully*, don't do it. There's no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In most cases, the meaning is clear:

***Hopefully*, the book will do well.**

***Hopefully*, it won't rain.**

**We don't have chips to go with the salsa? *Hopefully*,
Aardvark is getting chips on his way home.**

Now, although I've made a strong argument for starting a sentence with *hopefully*, my advice is this: don't do it.

For some reason, to many language sticklers, starting a sentence with *hopefully* has become a mark of ignorance. It's not as bad as using *literally* for emphasis when you mean “figuratively” or saying someone “graduated college,” but it won't help you win friends or influence people.

I am hopeful that starting a sentence with *hopefully* will become more acceptable in the future. For a list of sentence adverbs that are always acceptable, see the appendix on page 195.

STARTING A SENTENCE WITH *BECAUSE* (AND OTHER SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS)

Because is a subordinating conjunction—when it begins a clause, that clause is dependent on the main clause in the sentence. As I said in the section on sentence fragments, dependent clauses need their main clauses just as kids need their parents.

For grade-school children, subordinating conjunctions are only slightly less dangerous than matches. It's easy to create a sentence fragment (that's a bad thing) when you start a sentence with one of these critters:

Because Aardvark wanted to go fishing. (wrong)

When we get back from vacation. (wrong)

But once you're an adult, you're usually trusted with matches, and I believe you can also be trusted with subordinating conjunctions. As long as you include the main clause later in the sentence, words like *because*, *when*, and *unless* are acceptable sentence starters.

Because Aardvark wanted to go fishing, we had to get up at four in the morning.

When we get home from vacation, I'm going to buckle down at work.

The main clause comes after the comma and explains the subordinated part. Suddenly, it's not a sentence fragment; it's a complete sentence with a main clause and a dependent clause headed by a subordinating conjunction.

Truthfully, you can usually reverse the clause order to avoid starting the sentence with *because* and its friends, but you shouldn't have to. No grammatical rule exists to stand in your way.

We had to get up at four in the morning because Aardvark wanted to go fishing.

I'm going to buckle down at work when we get home from vacation.

Note that you don't need a comma between the two clauses when the dependent clause comes after the main clause. An exception to this rule is when the two parts of the sentence are in stark contrast. (Commas are often used to mark contrast when they would otherwise be left out.)

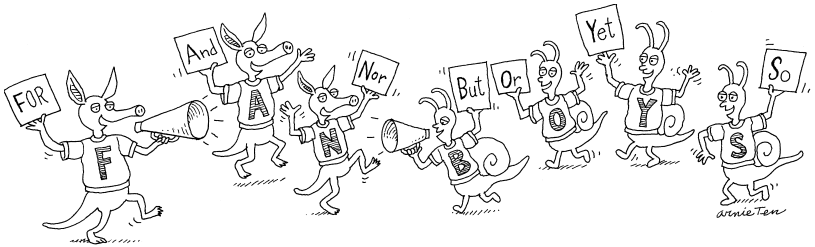
Squiggly was wide awake, despite getting up at four in the morning. (comma included because of contrast)

For more on subordinating conjunctions, see the appendix on page 197.

STARTING A SENTENCE WITH THE FANBOYS

Coordinating conjunctions are the FANBOYS of language.

- F—For
- A—And
- N—Nor
- B—But
- O—Or
- Y—Yet
- S—So (*So can also be a subordinating conjunction*)



Typically, a coordinating conjunction joins other words, phrases, or clauses that have the same construction.

Squiggly was often distracted by this or that.

(This and that are both single nouns.)

Squiggly went to the store and bought some chocolate.

(Went to the store and bought some chocolate are both verb phrases.)

Squiggly went to the store, and Aardvark wondered when he would return.

(Squiggly went to the store *and* Aardvark wondered when he would return *are both main clauses.*)

But by now, you've probably figured out that I tend to be on the relaxed side of the language divide, and relaxed people think it's OK to start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction like *and*, *but*, and *or*. Actually, most sticklers think it's OK too. It's just a matter of style and formality. Starting a sentence with a coordinating conjunction is an informal style; it makes your writing sound conversational. In addition, a conjunction at the beginning usually draws attention to the sentence and adds punch.

I couldn't find the answer in my library. And I have a lot of books.

The punch is one of the reasons you don't want to overdo starting sentences with the FANBOYS in business writing—you don't want to sound punchy.

So, you might be thinking to yourself, "Why do I *think* I learned that it's wrong to start a sentence with a conjunction?" The answer is that many teachers cautioned students against starting sentences with conjunctions (especially in the past) because if you don't do it right, you can create sentence fragments. The risk is greater with subordinating conjunctions (see "Starting a Sentence with *Because*"), but the FANBOYS are sometimes considered guilty by association:

And looking for the answer. (wrong)

But hanging out at the beach. (wrong)

Also, I suspect that teachers believe kids are informal enough and don't need extra help from initial coordinating conjunctions to achieve an informal tone. How many things that you write in school call for an informal tone anyway? You don't often hear teachers saying, "Write an

essay on the three branches of government by Monday, and make sure it has an informal tone.”

The next question that always comes up is whether to follow the conjunction with a comma when you use it to start a sentence. A comma is not required after the conjunction unless there's an aside that would require commas anyway immediately after the conjunction.

And I love the holidays.

And, despite the extra work, I love the holidays.

STARTING A SENTENCE WITH *THERE* *ARE* AND *THERE IS*

Starting a sentence with *there are* and *there is* isn't grammatically incorrect, but the words are often unnecessary fluff:

There are many people who hate rain. (OK)

Many people hate rain. (better)

Also, starting a sentence with *there are* or *there is* can seem weak and boring. Usually, your sentence will be better with a stronger subject and verb. Which of the following sounds more exciting and helps you get a better visual image? (Hint: It's the one marked "better.")

There is a fly in my soup. (OK)

A fly is swimming laps in my soup. (better)

STARTING A SENTENCE WITH A NUMBER

Avoid starting a sentence with a number if you can, but if you have to contort your writing, just write out the number and get on with your work. Unless you enjoy torturing your readers, it's usually worth the effort to rewrite the sentence when you're working with long or complex

numbers. Consider, in these examples, how much easier the second sentence is to read:

Twelve thousand eight hundred forty-two people attended the parade.

The parade was attended by 12,842 people.

The second sentence uses the passive voice (see chapter 8), but passive voice is better than writing out a humongous number and taking the risk that your readers' brains will be numb by the time they get to the verb.

When businesses report a lot of statistics and the natural place for the number is at the beginning of the sentence, they sometimes adopt a house style that puts the numeral in parentheses after the written-out number:

Seventy-two percent (72%) of respondents chose Hawaii as their preferred destination, 20% chose Alaska, and 8% chose Arizona.

Some style guides say it is OK to start a sentence with a numeral when it is a year or a proper name (for example, the company name 3M), but more stringent style guides say to rewrite the sentence to avoid starting with a numeral. I think it is acceptable to start a sentence with a numeral in such cases, but use your own judgment—you know your audience better than I do.

1985 was a fabulous year. (questionable)

3M hit their numbers this quarter. (questionable)

IDIOT MANAGER ALERT

So now you can distinguish between the real rules and the myths about how to start a sentence. But knowing that myths are myths won't protect you from powerful people who don't have your level of language prowess.

Here's a list of what I like to call cover-letter grammar rules. They aren't real grammar rules, but I'd usually rather be hired than be right.

Don't start a sentence with

- *However*
- *Hopefully*
- A conjunction (*and, but, or, etc.*)
- *Because*
- A number

Getting started is often the hardest part of writing. Now that you know the rules, at least grammar confusion won't add to the stress of staring at a blank screen or piece of paper.