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## Feb 2010 - Zombie Rules and the MWDEU

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You know all those rules we learned in school about how to use English properly? Guess what? Not all of them were rules.

Yes, a few of them were. But some of them were only guidelines. Some were suggestions. Some were conventions. Some were stylistic choices. Some were personal preferences and shibboleths. And some were outright superstitions.

It's probably safe to assume that as students we didn't understand those distinctions (if the distinctions were even made), and we've grown up thinking of all of those teachings as Rules. We're careful to abide by them ourselves, and quick to castigate those who don't.

Some of these so-called rules—located for the most part at the superstition end of the scale—have been repeatedly debunked over the years. But they refuse to die, leading one language professional to label them “zombie rules.”

Two zombie rules come immediately to mind: Never split an infinitive, and never end a sentence with a preposition. These restrictions are hogwash, and have been for centuries, except perhaps for brief periods when some self-proclaimed grammar expert tried to chisel them in stone.

One linguist had this to say recently about the split-infinitive thing: “There's no question that splitting infinitives is a variant within standard English, and has been for a long time. If you believe it's nasty, that's your personal taste, but you're going to have to live with the fact that other (educated and articulate) people do not share your taste, and you should stop beating them with a stick about how their English differs from yours.”

So just how do we go about determining which of the rules we learned in school were not rules, but were instead merely guidelines, or conventions, or fashions, or a teacher's personal preferences, or zombie rules?

Here's the first place to look for insight: Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage (MWDEU), subtitled “The complete guide to problems of confused or disputed usage.” New or used, this book should be in the library of every language-maven-in-training. It's not your typical dictionary, the kind that tells you what a word means. It's a special kind of dictionary that tells you how a word is used—and (this is the cool part) how the word has been used in the past.

You'll find the MWDEU fascinating reading, full of thousands of quoted examples. But prepare to be humbled; you may have to rethink some of your longstanding language fetishes.

For example, it's always been a rule with me that in phrases like “the senator that sponsored the bill,” you should say “the senator who” instead of “the senator that.” “That” is reserved for non-humans only. Whenever I was within red-pen reach of a “that” used with a human, I always changed it to “who.” But the MWDEU's several pages on the usage history of the word “that,” all the way back to the 14th century (!), make it embarrassingly clear that the rule I've followed with such single-minded devotion all these years is not a rule. It might be a convention, a guideline, or a personal preference; but it is not a rule, and the sky will not fall if I leave “that” alone. The list of respected—even venerated—authors who have ignored this non-rule over the centuries is enormously impressive.

But I'm sorry, I still change “that” to “who.” So sue me.

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