

Knowhow

Slaying zombie language 'rules'

Zombie rules are 'laws' of language that are no longer, or never were, valid. Yet they refuse to die, and so continue to haunt people who work with words (and do a disservice to good writing).

Where did they come from?

Some zombie rules were taught at school (for example, to never start a sentence with 'and'), so are particularly tenacious; others have emerged from unknown or centuries-old sources. Zombie rules will always exist, because language is constantly evolving. As one is silenced forever, another will pop up in its place.

OK, so why are they a problem?

Zombie rules stalk the language landscape, disorientating editors and proofreaders, restricting writers' ability to express themselves as they would like, encouraging an elitist approach to language use and causing fights between wordsmiths.

Oh, no! How can we overpower them?

Our best weapon in identifying and defeating zombie rules is **awareness**: keeping up to date with current language use and understanding how it is changing.

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Some well-known zombies masquerading as 'rules'

- Don't split an infinitive
- Don't begin a sentence with a conjunction
- Don't end a sentence with a preposition
- 'Decimate' only ever means reduce by one tenth
- Use 'between' only with two people or parties
- Don't start a sentence with 'hopefully'
- It's 'such as', not 'like'
- Singular 'they' – never!

Dictionaries (particularly those online, because they're regularly updated) are key. Cambridge Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster produce regular updates, blogs and commentaries on how their entries for words and terms are evolving. Books about language are also invaluable in the fight, as they give background and context. See the **Resources** section for suggestions.

This fact sheet lists some common zombie rules so that you can bury them – if your client allows. We also discuss the importance of style and author preference in deciding whether a zombie should be banished forever.



The zombie rule	Let's overrule the zombie rule
Don't begin a sentence with a conjunction (for example, 'and', 'but', 'or')	And, just like that, we've overcome a zombie rule. But we can't hang around to celebrate – what's next?
Don't end a sentence with a preposition (words that describe location, time or place, such as 'at', 'by', 'in', 'of', 'with')	What resources can I fight zombie rules with?
Don't split an infinitive ('to be', 'to do', 'to see', and so on)	I'd like to properly understand your objection to splitting infinitives.
Don't split a compound verb (such as 'have done', 'have seen')	I have never done this: split a compound verb. (Oh, I just did.)
Don't use 'since' when you mean 'because' (because 'since' also has a time-related meaning)	<p>Since your text is now ten times the length of mine, I will concede that you're the faster writer.</p> <p>However, don't use 'since' in a statement such as: 'Since your text grew to ten times the size of mine, I must confess to feeling inadequate as a writer', since it's unclear whether you're using the 'since' as 'because' or as 'from then until now'.</p>
Don't use 'over' or 'less' when discussing countable quantities (use 'more than' or 'fewer')	<p>There are over 30 children in the class, and less than 10 of them can identify a zombie.</p> <p>However, make sure that your meaning is clear. 'I'm seeing less of my aunties' (because I'm not spending so much time with them) means something different from 'I'm seeing fewer of my aunties' (because I'm seeing two, not four, of them).</p>
Always use a singular verb with 'none'	<p>I hoped to speak to the zombie-hunting editors; however, none were available as they were attending the CIEP conference.</p> <p>Of course, you can use a singular verb if you want, particularly if 'none' means 'not one'. But you can <i>also</i> use a plural, particularly when 'none' means 'not any'.</p>
Use 'who', not 'that', when referring to people	The person that enjoys writing about points of grammar is a strange person indeed.
'They' can't be singular	When they hear from their client that the singular 'they' can't be used in writing, an editor will reply that the singular 'they' has been used for centuries, is endorsed in all the major style guides and is a perfectly acceptable non-gendered term.
'Decimate' should only be used to mean reduce by one tenth	Zombie rules have been decimated now that all the editors in the world have joined the CIEP.
'Hopefully' should not be used to convey that the speaker is hopeful; it should be used to mean 'in a hopeful manner', as in 'the bird sang hopefully in an azure sky'	Hopefully this zombie rule is almost dead.

The zombie rule	Let's overrule the zombie rule
Don't use sentence fragments (text that starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop but doesn't contain both a verb and a noun)	Unhelpful and untrue.
Don't use 'like' when giving an example; it's 'such as'	Zombie rules like this don't reflect how our language has moved on.
Use 'between' only with two people or parties; if there are more, use 'among'	<p>The peace treaty between the editors, proofreaders and zombies was almost agreed, until the editors amended half of the zombies and the proofreaders attacked the rest with delete signs. Thankfully, they resolved matters among themselves.</p> <p>Use 'between' for the relation of individual or separate things or people to each other, and 'among' for their collective relationship.</p>
'Data' and 'media' are plural	The UK government's plural data are sometimes provided in press conferences; the data is often taken to task by the UK media, which prefers it to be singular. They're both right.
You need two spaces between sentences (because that's what my typing teacher taught me)	This zombie rule, thanks to our almost universal use of computers to produce text, is pretty much dead. · · Ah, perhaps not quite. · There, that's killed it. (For now.)

Holding fire: Client style and preference

Despite now being armed with anti-zombie tactics, you can't just go slaying zombie rules without ensuring that your client will be happy with your decisions. Style guides vary. Some publishers will still prefer not to split infinitives and some authors will continue to avoid using a plural verb with 'none'. All you can do is inform your client that certain rules don't need to apply any more (if they ever did), and, if it's relevant, point to instances where the zombie rule has been overruled in the past to good effect. Dictionaries, or publications like *Fowler's*, will help you do this.

When it comes to zombie rules like avoiding the singular 'they', you may want to make a stronger point about ensuring that language is in keeping with current usage, such as being non-gendered. The CIEP has fact sheets that will help you with this (see [Resources](#)).

The evolution of language

As editors and proofreaders it's part of our job to monitor how language is changing so we can advise our clients on current usage, and this is a constant process. 'Really', these days used largely for emphasis, did mean what 'literally' now does, and it looks like 'literally' is moving away from its meaning of 'in an exact sense' towards overwhelmingly being used for emphasis too (as in 'I could literally eat a horse'). Hyphens are gradually disappearing from words; the language and punctuation (and even graphics, like emojis) we might use in text messaging are becoming more mainstream. Keep up to date with thinkers on language such as those we list in the [Resources](#) section.

Knowledge is power. Not least when tackling zombies.

Resources for slaying zombies

Online resources

Cambridge Dictionaries blog: dictionaryblog.cambridge.org

CIEP blog: A Finer Point: Zombies Rule Grammar. OK? Alright? blog.ciep.uk/a-finer-point-zombies

CIEP fact sheet: Being aware of gendered language: ciep.uk/resources/factsheets/#AGL

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage: merriam-webster.com

Also keep an eye on Merriam-Webster's 'Words at play' page, which has a 'Words we're watching' section: merriam-webster.com/words-at-play

Oxford English Dictionary blog: public.oed.com/blog

Stan Carey blog: stancarey.wordpress.com

Books

David Crystal (2019). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. 3rd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Benjamin Dreyer (2019). *Dreyer's English: An utterly correct guide to clarity and style*. London: Century. See chapter 9, 'Peeves and Crochets'.

Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage (2015). Edited by Jeremy Butterfield. 4th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

David Marsh (2013). *For Who the Bell Tolls: One man's quest for grammatical perfection*. London: Guardian Books.

Gretchen McCulloch (2019). *Because Internet: Understanding the new rules of language*. New York: Riverhead.

John E McIntyre (2020). *Bad Advice: The most unreliable counsel available on grammar, usage and writing*. Baltimore: Apprentice House Press.

David Shariatmadari (2019). *Don't Believe a Word: The surprising truth about language*. London: W&N.

Written by the CIEP information team

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