

TELL IT WELL 0.13

# Don't Think Twice— It's All Right

## A GUIDE TO LANGUAGE RULES THAT HAVE EXCEEDED THEIR SHELF LIFE

If you've read our past Tell It Well posts, you may have found them overweighted toward rules and injunctions: Write concisely. Watch your grammar. Don't use the wrong word.

We don't mean to sound hectoring—only to be helpful. So, to even things out, we'd like to lift the bans on some common English conventions that the usage cops have imposed in the past—words, phrases and practices once considered improper that may now be used freely in speech and writing without risking a verbal wrist-slap. You're welcome.

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○ **Hopefully.** Some hard-liners still disallow “hopefully” as a stand-in for “it is hoped,” as in “Hopefully, we'll make it to the picnic before all the bean salad is gone.” That's wrong, they insist—hopefully's only acceptable meaning is “full of hope”—“The dog looked hopefully up at the roast beef just out of the oven.” We're fine with either use. Hopefully, you are too.

○ **“Everyone is welcome to bring their cat to work tomorrow.”** Since “everyone” is a singular noun, “their” may seem wrong—except that this is a case where good grammar makes for bad writing. Replacing

“their” with “his” would be technically correct but blatantly sexist and “his or her” is just plain clunky. For these reasons, editors are becoming more accepting of noun-pronoun disconnects when they enhance clarity and simplicity.

○ **Sentence fragments.** Never mind what we may have learned in elementary school—every sentence does not require a subject and verb. Because mixing in bits and pieces of sentences can aid readability and add variety to our writing. Even one-word sentences. Really.

○ **Impactful.** There was a time when using “impact” as anything other than a noun would have landed you in the lexical penalty box. “Impact, the verb...is merely a pseudo-technical dress-up,” Canadian commentator Rex Murphy inveighed in *The Globe and Mail*. “It is weaselry.” Writing in the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, Paul Woody was more blunt. “Impact is not a verb and it never will be.” Well, it is—and has been at least since 1588, when English surgeon William Clowes instructed “young chirurgians” in the treatment of gunshot and sword wounds: “Cold things must bee applped...but the vse of them after the beginning, impacteth the matter and encreaseth the payne.” He also threw around variations like “impaction” and, we’re confident, would have gladly used “impactful”—another word unfairly maligned by the word grinchers—had the need arisen.

○ **FANBOYS.** No one seems to know exactly where this brilliant acronym originated, but it’s a useful guide to the conjunctions that many of us were taught never to begin a sentence with: for, and, nor, but, or, yet and so. But we disagree that these words can’t be sentence-starters. And the reason is simply that it’s one of those silly prohibitions with no basis in linguistic history. As merriam-webster.com. notes, “Using ‘and’ at the beginning of a sentence has been a practice for over a thousand years.”

Language evolves—slowly but continuously, pulled along by the tide of common usage. If being constantly reminded about the rules can sometimes feel like being nagged to eat our vegetables, relaxing the rules can be as freeing as starting dinner with dessert.

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