

# EDITOR'S CRAFT

## Splitting Hairs

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Sometimes I wonder if it is only we editors who identify—and delete—the split infinitive. I am struck by the number of times I find this error in manuscripts. Probably I should not be surprised, however, as elementary and junior high school English departments generally do not address the issue. Therefore, most people who receive a typical education in the United States simply do not recognize this solecism.

Several years ago I tutored a good many seventh- and eighth-graders in writing. Most of them could tell me what they had learned in science class about splitting atoms, but not a one had the foggiest notion of what a split infinitive was. Somewhat pugnaciously, I admit, I questioned a junior high school English teacher about this. Her smile became rather fixed, and she tersely acknowledged that the matter was not covered. For the sake of friendship, I dropped the subject; for the sake of a complete education, however, the subject should be taught. If one reads enough books by British authors one quickly realizes that infinitives are left intact—those writers were properly drilled in the King's English. We might have shed the monarchy, but that does not give us license to rid ourselves of the rules of language.

Actually, the concept is very simple. The infinitive is the "to" form of the verb: to know, to travel, to believe, et cetera. The grammatical rule is that no word can come between "to" and the rest of the verb; that is, the infinitive must not be split. To the best of my knowledge of other languages,

English is the only one in which this error can be committed. Spanish, Italian, French, and German infinitives consist of one word and thus are not susceptible to being riven.

The frequency with which I encounter phrases such as "to carefully observe," "to definitively establish," and "to finally conclude" is high. (In fact, the last is a tautology, but that is a subject for another column.) In all cases, I move the modifier to one side or another, which corrects the grammar but does not alter the meaning of the sentence.

An argument can be made that rules are meant to be broken. In fact, I rather love to break rules. I dearly love working with language, too, whether it is reading dictionaries, editing **Pharmacotherapy**, or writing things like this column. Part of the joy is in deciding the very best way to say something, and in formal, professional writing the best way usually is the correct way.

Another argument, some maintain, is that unsplitting infinitives does not sound natural, that everybody does it, even respected greybeard television news commentators. Certainly, newspapers are littered with the error. Unfortunately, habit does not make it right, and it is my belief that articles discussing issues in which scientific precision is of paramount importance must be written in language that is just as exact, if their conclusions are to be accepted as valid.

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