

## THE SPLIT INFINITIVE — A PROBLEM OF ATTITUDE?

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In 1986, *Style* magazine gave Archbishop Desmond Tutu the STYLE Award for Getting Priorities Right in the Face of Adversity for the following comment:

'I reckon that what I'm doing is, to follow a biblical paradigm, to constantly be speaking ... oh, I've split an infinitive (bursts into uncontrollable laughter) ... I'll have to change that. I can't stand split infinitives.' - Archbishop Desmond Tutu to a television crew interviewing him at a mass funeral for unrest victims.

(*Style Magazine*)

Fowler states that the English-speaking world can be divided into five groups: '(1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is; (2) those who do not know, but care very much; (3) those who know and condemn; (4) those who know and approve; and (5) those who know and distinguish.'<sup>1</sup> Quite obviously, Archbishop Tutu belongs in the third category or level of conscientization. What of the rest of us?

A snap survey in the Department of English in which I work asked 26 respondents to indicate which of the sentences below they found acceptable, which unacceptable, and which were uncertain cases. They were asked not to agonise unduly about any one sentence, but to operate on native speaker intuition, or 'gut-feeling'.

As you read the sentences, use a tick, or a cross, or a question mark to indicate your own preferences.

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### SENTENCES

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1. The pupils were told to quickly put their books away.            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I want you to thoroughly wash these instruments.                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. They didn't want me to hurriedly leave.                          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. We needed a plumber to immediately fix the geyser.               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I tried to carefully complete the task.                          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I plan to eagerly grasp the opportunity.                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. I like to vigorously exercise.                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. For Germany to repeatedly invade Western Europe was inexcusable. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. He seemed determined to really enjoy himself.                    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. The guards could be trusted to stoutly defend the castle.       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. The detective said it is difficult to always catch your man.    | <input type="checkbox"/> |

12. I'd like to really understand Nietzsche.
13. He began to slowly get up off the floor.
14. Your job is to really make the club a success.
15. He used to continually refer to the subject.
16. Our object is to further cement trade relations.
17. In not combining to flatly forbid hostilities, we are implicitly encouraging them.
18. The sentence ought to be differently constructed.
19. I want to definitely terminate this relationship.
20. To deliberately avoid a split infinitive is to sometimes write unnatural English.

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The survey provided some interesting insights. Firstly, not one sentence had unanimous support, and not one sentence was unanimously rejected. There thus seems to be no absolute consensus of native speaker intuition. Secondly, the emotional reaction on the part of some of the respondents was unexpectedly vehement. Sentences were not just 'incorrect', or 'unacceptable', they were 'inexcusable', 'horrible', 'terrible', 'awful', 'disgusting', and 'ugh!'

The table below gives the sentences as chosen in descending order of acceptability, indicating the number of votes for and against each sentence.

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Sentence number	VOTES For/Against
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ACCEPTABLE

9.	He seemed determined to really enjoy himself.	23/3
12.	I'd like to really understand Nietzsche.	21/5
20.	To deliberately avoid a split infinitive is to sometimes write unnatural English.	19/7
11.	The detective said it is difficult to always catch your man.	18/8
16.	The object is to further cement trade relations.	18/8
18.	The sentence ought to be differently constructed.	17/9
8.	For Germany to repeatedly invade Western Europe was inexcusable.	15/11

CONTROVERSIAL

14.	Your job is to really make the club a success.	13/13
10.	The guards could be trusted to stoutly defend the castle.	13/13

UNACCEPTABLE

5.	I tried to carefully complete the task.	10/16
17.	In not combining to flatly forbid hostilities, we are implicitly encouraging them.	10/16

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Sentence  
number

VOTES  
For/Against

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UNACCEPTABLE (cont.)

15.	He used to continually refer to the subject.	10/16
2.	I want you to thoroughly wash these instruments.	9/17
4.	We need a plumber to immediately fix the geyser.	9/17
19.	I want to definitely terminate the relationship.	9/17
13.	He began to slowly get up off the floor.	8/18
1.	The pupils were told to quickly put their books away.	7/19
6.	I plan to eagerly grasp the opportunity.	7/19
7.	I like to vigorously exercise.	2/24
3.	They didn't want me to hurriedly leave	2/24

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That nine English lecturers were so haunted by the bogey and the deplorable breach of etiquette constituted by a split infinitive that they rejected sentence number 18 (which is *not* a split infinitive) is an indication of the reign of terror that formal prescriptive grammar exerts. Apart from a small contingent of 'non-split die-hards',<sup>2</sup> as Fowler calls them, most respondents agreed that there are cases where a split infinitive is acceptable. An identifiable trend seems to be that adverbs acting as intensifiers (such as 'really') are less intrusive, and sound less jarring than adverbs of manner (such as 'vigorously') which carry a heavier semantic load, and thus rupture rather than merely split the infinitive.

Both Fowler and Partridge<sup>3</sup> (*Usage and Abusage*) maintain that a

split infinitive is always preferable to ambiguity and/or artificiality in style. Those who maintain that the offending adverb could (and should) in every case be moved to a less offensive position would be forced into constructions such as: 'In not combining flatly to forbid ...', or 'In not combining to forbid flatly ...', and 'The greatest difficulty about assessing the economic achievements of the Soviet Union is that its spokesmen try absurdly to exaggerate them; in consequence, the visitor may tend badly to underrate them.' Sentences such as these commit the double sin of a distortion of style which pulls your reader up short to notice (with respect?) your stout defence of the maidenhood of the infinitive, and a distortion of meaning. (Is it the 'combination' that is flat? Is the 'trying' of the spokesmen absurd? Is it the visitor's tendency that is bad?)

Perhaps the most realistic attitude to adopt, therefore, is that of Fowler's fifth category - those who know and distinguish. Their approach is that a split infinitive should not be gratuitously used (either through ignorance, or in a spirit of revisionist defiance), but is preferable to contorted and blind adherence to a dogmatic prescription. To deliberately avoid a split infinitive is, after all, to sometimes write unnatural English.

## NOTES

1. Fowler, H. W. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Oxford University Press. 1968. p 579.
2. Fowler. p 580.
3. Partridge, Eric. *Usage and Abusage*. Penguin Books. 1973. p 296.