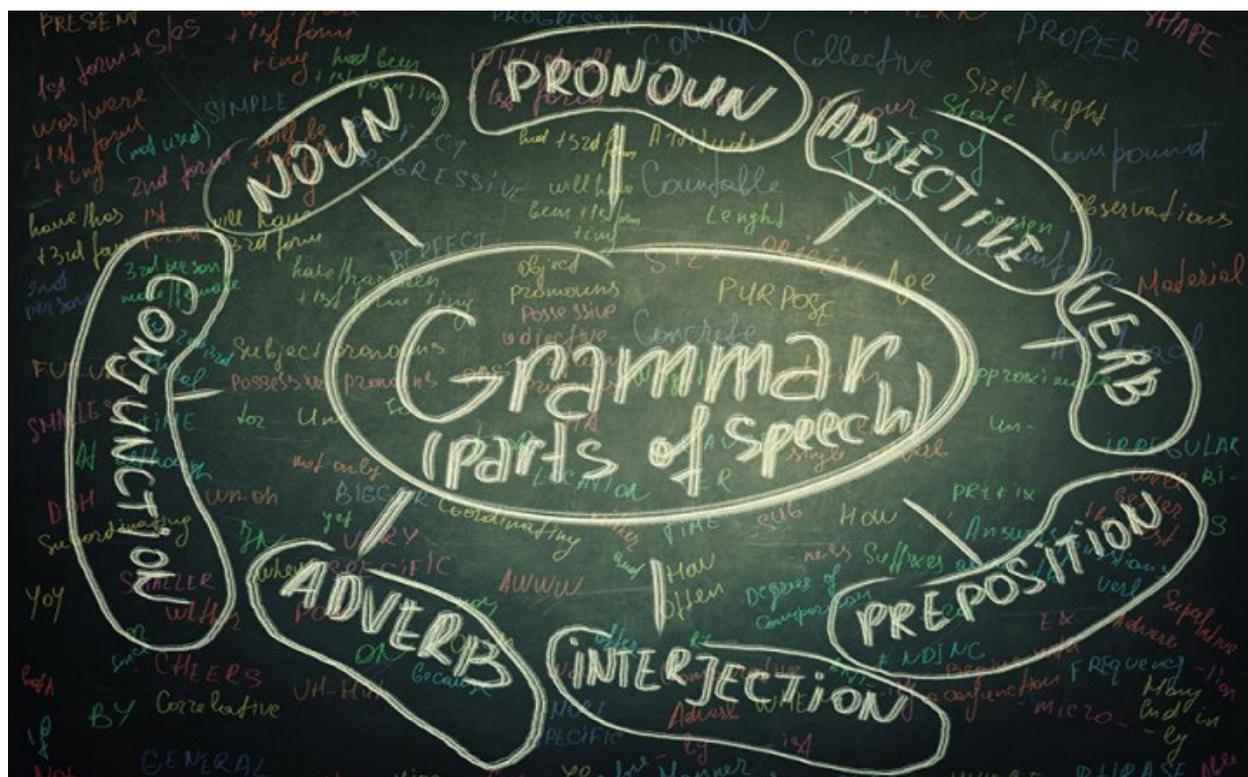


Where Did the “No Prepositions at the End of a Sentence” Rule Come From?

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Have You Ever Wondered...

- Where did the "no prepositions at the end of a sentence" rule come from?
- Is it OK to end a sentence with a preposition?
- Who was John Dryden?

What did you do that for?" If you have brothers and sisters, then you've probably heard that question on a regular basis, as siblings are known for bugging one another every chance they get.

If you wrote that sentence as part of a writing assignment at school, though, you might find your paper returned to you with the word "for" circled in red. Why? Many English teachers insist upon enforcing a longstanding grammar rule against ending sentences with a preposition.

Ending a sentence with a preposition, also known as preposition stranding, has been frowned upon by many teachers and grammarians for hundreds of years. But where did this strange rule come from? And why does it matter anyway?

First, let's review what we know about prepositions. Prepositions express the relationship between a noun, verb, or adjective and another noun or pronoun. Some common prepositions include the following: with, at, from, into, during, until, among, to, of, in, for, on, by, about, over, after, and under.

In our example ("What did you do that for?"), the preposition is "for" and it's found at the end of the sentence. Those who follow the rule against preposition stranding would insist that the sentence be rewritten so that the preposition comes before the noun or pronoun: "For what (reason) did you do that?"

As you can see, the "corrected" version of the sentence sounds odd because it's now too formal. Most people don't talk that way. This is why many people today no longer follow the rule against preposition stranding.

Grammar rules are supposed to minimize confusion and maximize understanding when using language. However, the rule against preposition stranding too often has the opposite effect. It forces people to rephrase sentences in ways that end up being too formal or even nonsensical.

For example, which of the following would you be more likely to say to your friend after getting off a roller coaster: "I told you there was nothing to be afraid of!" or "I told you there was nothing of which to be afraid!"? Obviously, the latter sounds awkwardly formal.

So where did this controversial rule come from? Historians have traced the rule against preposition stranding back to a 17th century English writer named John Dryden. Dryden criticized other writers for stranding prepositions, claiming that doing so was "not elegant."

Linguists believe Dryden's view, which was shared by others over the years, stemmed from his fascination with Latin and classical literature. In Latin grammar, prepositions must always come before their object. This is evidenced by the word itself beginning with the letters "pre," which as a prefix mean "before."

However, the rules of English grammar do not have to follow those of Latin. No one knows for sure why Dryden's views on preposition stranding led to such a hard and fast rule that has stuck around to the present day. He was certainly an influential writer in his day, so perhaps his critiques carried more weight than he would've ever imagined.

Fortunately, today's writers don't adhere strictly to the rule against preposition stranding. Ending sentences with prepositions is part of standard English and sounds natural. Prepositions at the ends of sentences aren't confusing, linguistically wrong, or grammatically incorrect, so feel free to keep stranding those prepositions whenever it seems natural. After all, what else are they good for?

Wonder Sources

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