A Letter to Mrs. Finklebean

By Mark Cooney

Dear Mrs. Finklebean,

I was a student in your fourth-grade class way back, jeez, almost 30 years ago—long before my silk-stocking days as a partner at a prestigious law firm. If I stand out in your memory, it’s probably because of my regrettable decision to put a wriggling gob of earthworms into your coat pocket after recess one day. I swear it wasn’t my idea; Butch Dugan threatened to give me an atomic wedgie unless I did it. Once again, I’m truly sorry for that little stunt.

But I haven’t written you after all these years to renew my childhood apologies, Mrs. Finklebean. In fact, if I may be so bold, I’ve written because you owe me an apology—one that’s long overdue. Let me explain.

The other night, I opened one of our old classroom favorites, The Cricket in Times Square. As I read it aloud to my daughters, something curious struck me. I hadn’t gotten through a single page before I noticed a sentence beginning with the word And. Then, on the second page, I saw two sentences beginning with the word But—and another sentence starting with And. This got me scratching my head because I can still remember your exact words (and your wagging index finger): “Don’t ever begin a sentence with But or And! It’s improper!”

I put the book down and started paging through some of the other books you read to us, like Fantastic Mr. Fox and The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. I’d barely read a few pages of each when I started seeing sentences beginning with But and And. I was dumbstruck. Back in school, you were adamant that this was “wrong,” and you warned us against it in no uncertain terms. In fact, I think you mentioned something about blindness and eternal damnation.

These discoveries caused me great anxiety because, based on your school lessons, I’ve spent years telling my law-firm underlings that they should never, ever begin sentences with But or And. No transgressor has survived my red pen’s wrath. So I racked my brain for some explanation. At first, I told myself that this technique must be acceptable only in children’s literature. Yet when I checked more of the classics on my bookshelf—books enjoyed by grown-ups and children alike—I saw that the literary giants of yesteryear routinely began sentences with But and And: Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edgar Allan Poe, Pearl S. Buck, J.R.R. Tolkien, to name just a few.

With a growing sense of unease, I told myself that this surely had to be some relic of antiquated writing. Yet I saw the same thing in modern best sellers like The Da Vinci Code, Tuesdays with Morrie, Angela’s Ashes, and the Harry Potter books. Then I found sentence-starting Buts and Ands in the latest issues of National Geographic, Forbes, Discover, Smithsonian, Newsweek, Money, and The New Yorker—magazines written and edited by real pros. I saw the same thing from leading historical writers like Stephen Ambrose and Pulitzer Prize-winner David McCullough. Leading essayists like Charles Osgood, George Will, and Anna Quindlen also bite, without hesitation, at this supposedly forbidden literary fruit.

The plain truth, Mrs. Finklebean, is that I couldn’t find a single professional writer who did not start sentences with But and And. I found this technique, with ease, in every genre and generation that my curiosity chased. The rule you had sewn so indelibly into my mind unraveled with such force that my head spun.

Here’s another of our greatest hits during this 30th anniversary of the column. This one appeared in August 2010. It is also among the essays collected in Professor Cooney’s book, Sketches on Legal Style, published by Carolina Academic Press. —JK

Plain Language

“Plain Language” is a regular feature of the Michigan Bar Journal, edited by Joseph Kimble for the Plain English Subcommittee of the Publications and Website Advisory Committee. To contribute an article, contact Prof. Kimble at Thomas Cooley Law School, P.O. Box 13058, Lansing, MI 48901, or at kimblej@cooley.edu. For an index of past columns, visit http://www.michbar.org/generalinfo/plainenglish/.

Every accomplished writer of the English language, whether a legal writer or not, begins sentences with the words But and And.
But then a thought struck me—an iron-clad justification for every red line I’d ever marked through a sentence-starting *But* or *And*. The legal briefs that my firm produces don’t contain just any old kind of writing. They aren’t essays, novels, or news items read for leisure. No, my firm’s briefs contain legal writing. This is solemn, formal writing—writing that must bear the weight of the consequences that hang in the balance. Rights and liberties are at stake. Legal writing, I thought to myself, is no place for the casual *Buts* and *Ands* so common to other types of writing.

I put my theory to the test the next morning at work, going straight to the top: case *Prosser & Keeton on Torts* and *Practice Thurgood Marshall*, too. There was no types of writing. Casual marked through a sentence-starting clad justification for every red line I’d ever read for leisure. No, my firm’s briefs contain They aren’t essays, novels, or news items don’t contain just any old kind of writing. Scalia does it. So do Justices Kennedy, Kennedy, Thomas, Ginsburg, Breyer, Alito, Sotomayor, and Kagan.

And just as I was readying my poison pen for a scathing letter to the Justices, accusing them of abandoning the respectable formality that has for years been the high court’s hallmark, I saw that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. began sentences with *But* and *And*. Chief Justice Roberts does it. So do Justices Kennedy, Thomas, Ginsburg, Breyer, Alito, Sotomayor, and Kagan. And what did my eyes behold? Almost every sentence in *The Gospel of Mark* begins with *And* or *But*. Then I flipped back to *Genesis* and found the same thing. Ditto for *Exodus*, and on and on and on.

Mrs. Finklebean, it has become perfectly clear to me that every accomplished writer of the English language, whether a legal writer or not, begins sentences with the words *But* and *And*. The supposed rule against it is no rule at all. It never was a rule. It’s pure myth. Always has been. And there’s nothing worse than perpetual dogma with no basis in reality.

We’ve all spent a lifetime reading sentences starting with *But* and *And*. We’ve just never given it a second thought because we’ve been paying attention to the content—to the ideas being communicated—rather than the writer’s word choices. It’s a credit to this ever-present technique that we never notice it. It’s so clean and effective that we read along in our usual state of obliviousness.

I see now how starting a sentence with the word *But*, for example, is a strong, quick, and clean way to signal contrast or disagreement with the idea expressed in the preceding sentence. Just one glance at that little word sends our brain an immediate and unmistakable message, making the transition to the next idea natural and seamless. It aids clarity, and it packs a punch. That’s why fine writers so often begin sentences with *But*.

I don’t mean to sound harsh, Mrs. Finklebean, and I’m not bitter. Really, I’m sure you had noble intentions when you taught us this fake rule. You were probably worried that because we fourth graders were just babes in the writing woods, we might lapse into sentence fragments if we began sentences with *But* or *And*. It’s true that we were innocents. Heck, we hadn’t even had sex-ed yet. But rather than misleading us, might you have simply told us to beware of fragments?

Thank you for considering my comments, Mrs. Finklebean. If you’re ever in my neck of the woods, please drop by for some blueberry pie—and perhaps a good book.

With warmest regards,

Clark J. Mooney, Esq.

---

ENDNOTES

1. See, e.g., Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Modern Library Classics, 2001), at 7, 10 (“But now I was frightened again…. “And it was made more difficult….”);

2. See, e.g., Tswin, *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, & Essays 1852–1890* (Library of America, 1992), at 14, 17 (“And now for the facts: “But when the feat was at last accomplished, he sank down exhausted…”);

3. See, e.g., Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* ( Scribner, 1995), at 26, 27 (“And, after boasting this way of my tolerance, I came to the admission that it has a limit.” “But above the grey land…you perceive….; the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg.”)


5. See, e.g., Buck, *The Good Earth* ( Washington Square Press, 1999), at 1, 3 (“But this morning he did not wait.” “And if the woman weared, there would be her children to light the fire….”)

6. See, e.g., Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Houghton Mifflin Co, 2001), at 21 (“And if that was not enough for fame, there was also his prolonged vigour to marvel at.” “But he had no close friends….”).

7. See, e.g., Brown, *The DaVinci Code* ( Doubleday, 2003), at 17, 31 (“But it was straight ahead…. “And with it, of course, had come his skills.”)

8. See, e.g., Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* ( Doubleday, 1997), at 6, 9 (“But then the dancing stopped.” “And that was the end of his secret.”)

9. See, e.g., McCourt, *Angela’s Ashes* ( Scribner, 1996), at 14 (“But the child won’t come.” “And the child was named Angela for the Angelus which rang the midnight hour….”).
Plain Language

Rowling, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone (Scholastic Press, 1997), at 3, 5 (“But on the edge of town, drills were driven out of his mind by something else.” “And the old man hugged Mr. Dursley . . .”).

11. See, e.g., Jacobson, The Singapore Solution, Nat’l Geographic, January 2010, at 148 (“But this is beyond even him.” “And so bloggers . . . are free to broadcast opinions . . .”).

12. See, e.g., Shlaes, Current Events, Forbes, January 18, 2010, at 19 (“And worst of all is that . . . the Treasury and the Federal Reserve have failed to clarify rules.” “But many people couldn’t get a job at all.”)

13. See, e.g., Guter, NASA Braces for Course Correction, Discover, January/February 2010, at 20, 21 (“And scrapping NASA’s new Ares I Booster program could save billions . . . “But from necessity, it is poised to reinvent itself.”)


15. See, e.g., Pfefler, Lay Off the Layoffs, Newsweek, February 15, 2010, at 34, 37 (“And some research has looked directly at the health consequences . . . “But some drawbacks are surprising!”)

16. See, e.g., Gaskof, Six Ways to Ensure a Project Pays Off, Money, January/February 2010, at 58 (“But these six new rules will help . . . “And trying to keep problems a secret can cost you bigtime.”)

17. See, e.g., Gladwell, The Sure Thing, The New Yorker, January 18, 2010, at 24, 29 (“And people who like what they do are profoundly conservative.” “But he was bored . . . .”).

18. See, e.g., Ambrose, To America (Simon & Schuster 2002), at 5, 6 (“But Jefferson’s attitude toward women was at one with that of the white men of his age.” “And even Abigail Adams wrote of him, ‘He is one of the choice ones of earth.’”).

19. See, e.g., McCullough, 1776 (Simon & Schuster 2005), at 5 (“And in notable contrast to much of fashionable society and the court . . . the King remained steadfastly faithful to his very plain Queen . . . “But this was hardly fair.”)

20. See, e.g., Orgood, See You on the Radio (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1999), at 3, 3–4 (“But try as he might, he couldn’t . . . “And as he threshed around, company”).

21. See, e.g., Will, One Man’s America (Crown Publishing Group, 2008), at 132, 132–133 (“And in the 1990s, welfare dependency—and crime—were cut in half.” “But the second half of the 1960s brought the Great Softening . . . .”).

22. See, e.g., Quindlen, Loud and Clear (Random House, 2004), at 9 (“And eventually science said that that was right, and that they would be best fed on demand . . . “But it certainly seemed as though those babies had distinct personalities . . .”).


24. See, e.g., US v Gonzalez-Lopez, 548 US 140, 147, 150, 126 S Ct 2557, 165 L Ed 409 (2006) (“And even our recognition of the right to effective counsel . . . was a consequence of our perception that . . .”).