

By Bryan A. Garner

On Beginning Sentences with *But*

Many legal writers believe that *but*, if used to begin a sentence, is either incorrect or loosely informal. Is it?

No. *But* the superstition is hard to dispel. Usage critics have been trying to dispel it for some time. In the first quarter of the 20th century, the great H.W. Fowler dispatched an editor who wanted to change a *but* to *however* at the beginning of a sentence:

"It is wrong[¹, said the editor,] to start a sentence with 'But'. I know Macaulay does it, but it is bad English. The word should either be dropped entirely or the sentence altered to contain the word 'however'." That ungrammatical piece of nonsense was written by the editor of a scientific periodical to a contributor who had found his English polished up for him in proof, & protested; both parties being men of determination, the article got no further than proof. It is wrong to start a sentence with "but"! It is wrong to end a sentence with a preposition! It is wrong to split an infinitive! See the article FETISHES for these & other such rules of thumb & for references to articles in which it is shown how misleading their sweet simplicity is.¹

When Sir Ernest Gowers revised Fowler in 1965, he treated the question with *and*:

*That it is a solecism to begin a sentence with **and** is a faintly lingering superstition. The OED gives examples ranging from the 10th to the 19th c.; the Bible is full of them.²*

"Faintly lingering" is a good description of what the superstition is doing nowadays. It isn't supported in books on rhetoric, grammar, or usage—though several try to eradicate it. I do my part in *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage*³ and in *The Elements of Legal Style*⁴—in the latter book by quoting two sentences from Justice Holmes's judicial opinions.

Webster's Dictionary of English Usage—generally ultrapermissive, but thorough in

marshaling previous discussions on point—found unanimity among language critics:

*Part of the folklore of usage is the belief that there is something wrong in beginning a sentence with **but**:*

Many of us were taught that no sentence should begin with "but." If that's what you learned, unlearn it—there is no stronger word at the start. It announces total contrast with what has gone before, and the reader is primed for the change

—Zinsser 1976

*Everybody who mentions this question agrees with Zinsser. The only generally expressed warning is not to follow the **but** with a comma....⁵*

Perhaps we can all agree that beginning a sentence with *but* isn't wrong, slipshod, loose, or the like. *But* is it less formal? I don't think so. In fact, the question doesn't even reside on the plane of formality. The question I'd pose is, What is the best word to do the job? William Zinsser says, quite rightly, that *but* is the best word to introduce a contrast.⁶ I invariably change *however*, when positioned at the beginning of a sentence, to *but*. Professional editors such as John Trimble regularly do the same thing.⁷

Sheridan Baker, in his fine book *The Complete Stylist*, recommends that writers choose *but* over *however* in the initial position:

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however. *Bury it between commas, or replace it with **but** or *nevertheless*.*

Poor

However, the day had not been entirely lost.

Improved

But the day had not been entirely lost.

Poor

However, the script that Alcuin invented became the forerunner of modern handwriting.

Improved

*The script that Alcuin invented, **however**, became the forerunner of modern handwriting.⁸*

Elsewhere in the book, Baker says: "*But* (not followed by a comma) always heads its turning sentence. . . . I am sure, *however*, that *however* is always better buried in the sentence between commas; *But* for the quick turn; the inlaid *however* for the more elegant sweep."⁹

Professional editors understand the wisdom of Baker's and others' advice. Good writing—formal writing—often contains a great many sentences beginning with *but* and (a little less frequently) *and*. A recent front page of *The New York Times* contained a dozen sentences beginning with *but* or *and*:

- "Pentagon officials said today that they were prepared to deliver large amounts of emergency aid to victims of Hurricane Andrew on Monday, the day it devastated South Florida. *But* they did not do so because neither President Bush nor other civilian officials ordered a large-scale Federal response to the devastation until late Thursday."¹⁰
- "But interviews with officials at numerous Federal agencies suggest that there was a breakdown in communication and coordination at top levels of the Government."¹¹
- "After the storm smashed into South Florida early Monday, Mr. Bush declared a major disaster and flew to Miami to inspect the damage. *But* neither he nor the Federal Emergency Management Agency directed the armed forces to deliver all the aid they were ready to send to storm victims."¹²

- “But the truly radical part of the plan approved by the City Council this week has nothing to do with burning trash and everything to do with recycling it.”¹³
- “But at least one crucial question remains: Will it ever really happen?”¹⁴
- “It has been three years since the Council passed the city’s first recycling law, a program many rejoiced in. But most environmentalists and city officials now agree it floundered about as badly as such a plan ever has”¹⁵
- “‘Scale is everything in this kind of program,’ said John Schall, a visiting professor at Yale University and the lead consultant on the city’s new solid-waste management plan. ‘And this will have the biggest scale you ever saw.’”¹⁶
- “The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often cast in terms of sticks and stones and broken bones. But it is also a war of words.”¹⁷
- “And Israeli references to the piece of land commonly known as the West Bank now generally avoid the words ‘Judea and Samaria,’ terms of biblical origin . . . rejected by Palestinians.”¹⁸
- “This language barrier may not seem like a major matter. But labels count, and they often reveal differences in political points of view as surely as ballots and bullets do.”¹⁹
- “But ‘occupied’ sounds harsh and unfair to some.”²⁰
- “But ‘settlements’ can be a loaded word to some people, especially on the Israeli right, because to them it suggests an alien intrusion.”²¹

But (someone might say) we’re talking here about *formal legal writing*, not newspapers! I’ll answer by quoting from what most would agree is formal legal writing. In *The Federalist Papers*, only the least distinguished writer—Jay—abstained. Madison and Hamilton regularly began sentences with *but* and *and*:

- “But let it be admitted, for argument’s sake, that mere wantonness and lust of domination would be sufficient to beget that disposition”²²
- “The affairs of the Union will become more and more objects of curiosity and conversation among the citizens at large. And the increased intercourse among those of different States will contribute not a little to

diffuse a mutual knowledge of their affairs, as this again will contribute to a general assimilation of their manners and laws. But with all these abatements, the business of federal legislation must continue so far to exceed, both in novelty and difficulty, the legislative business of a single State, as to justify the longer period of service assigned to those who are to transact it.”²³

During the drafting of the Constitution, Gouverneur Morris’s Style Committee—advisedly, I’m sure—admitted several initial *buts*, *but ifs*, and *ands* into the Constitution itself. Such sentences appear even in the more recent amendments. For example:

- “If after such Reconsideration two thirds of that House shall agree to pass the Bill, it shall be sent, together with the Objections, to the other House, by which it shall likewise be reconsidered, and if approved by two thirds of that House, it shall become a Law. But in all such Cases the Votes of both Houses shall be determined by Yeas and Nays”²⁴
- “But in chusing the President, the Votes shall be taken by States, the Representation from each State having one Vote”²⁵
- “But if there should remain two or more who have equal Votes, the Senate shall chuse from them by Ballot the Vice-President.”²⁶
- “Full Faith and Credit shall be given in each State to the public Acts, Records and judicial Proceedings of every other State. And the Congress may by general Laws prescribe the Manner in which such Acts, Records, and Proceedings shall be proved, and the Effect thereof.”²⁷
- “And if the House of Representatives shall not choose”²⁸
- “But no person constitutionally ineligible to the office of President shall be eligible to that of Vice-President of the United States.”²⁹
- “But when the right to vote”³⁰
- “But Congress may by a vote”³¹
- “But neither the United States nor any State shall assume or pay any debt or obligation incurred in aid of insurrection”³²
- “But this Article shall not apply”³³

We have much sound authority for using *but* to begin sentences—even in the most formal contexts—and no sound authority for refraining. Writers who insist on recasting

sentences to avoid the initial *but* hobble themselves stylistically. ♦

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FOOTNOTES

1. H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* 586 (1926).
2. *Id.* at 29 (Ernest Gowers ed., 2d ed. 1965).
3. Bryan A. Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage* 123–24 (2d ed. 1995).
4. Bryan A. Garner, *The Elements of Legal Style* 49–50 (2d ed. 2002).
5. Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage 211–12 (1989).
6. William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* 74 (rev. 6th ed. 2001).
7. See John R. Trimble, *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing* 85 (2d ed. 2000). (“The fact remains . . . that *But* and *And* are absolutely valid ways of beginning a sentence. Not only valid ways, but *excellent* ways. And all seasoned writers know it.”)
8. Sheridan Baker, *The Complete Stylist* 305 (1966).
9. *Id.* at 31–32.
10. Robert Pear, *Pentagon Planned Fast Storm Relief*, N.Y. Times, 29 Aug. 1992, at 1.
11. *Id.* (beginning a ¶).
12. *Id.*
13. Michael Specter, *Hope, Off the Ash Heap*, N.Y. Times, 29 Aug. 1992, at 1 (beginning a ¶).
14. *Id.*
15. *Id.*
16. *Id.*
17. Clyde Haberman, *Words, War and Sensibility: Linguistic Fog in the Mideast*, N.Y. Times, 29 Aug. 1992, at 1.
18. *Id.* (beginning a ¶).
19. *Id.*
20. *Id.* (beginning a ¶).
21. *Id.*
22. The Federalist No. 17, at 119 (Alexander Hamilton) (Clinton Rossiter ed., 1961) (beginning a ¶).
23. *Id.* No. 53, at 334 (James Madison).
24. U.S. Const. art. I, § 7, cl. 2.
25. *Id.* art. II, § 1, cl. 3.
26. *Id.*
27. *Id.* art. IV, § 1.
28. *Id.* amend. XII.
29. *Id.*
30. *Id.* amend. XIV, § 2.
31. *Id.* § 3.
32. *Id.* § 4.
33. *Id.* an. XXII, § 1.