

## Little Burnt Corkscrew Hairs

You've heard the story. About the freshman from Boise? Lost on the Harvard campus? No? Well, he's standing in the quad, confused. Can't find the library. So he sees this upperclassman, walks over, says, "Excuse me. Where's the library at?" Upperclassman pats him on the head, says, "At Hahvahd we never end a sentence with a preposition." Freshman from Boise tries again. "So, where's the library at, Genius?" (You know what he really said, but if I put that naughty A-word in here, the etiquette police won't let me hear the end of it!)

That's one way to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. Another would be to drop the *at*:

So, where's the library?

And still another would be to tuck a preposition back inside the sentence:

Which part of campus would I find the library *in*?

*In* which part of campus would I find the library?

The grammar rule about not ending a sentence with a preposition is not only the oldest, but also the most frequently cited by grammarians as an example of how they really are a care-free, fun-loving bunch. "Sure, it's okay to end a sentence with a preposition," they say. "Let's loosen up a little, let our hair down, have a little fun. *La cucaracha!*"

Oh my, those grammarians know how to party. But forget grammar. In their quest to show us their fun side, the yay-saying grammarians overlook one thing: When we end a sentence with a preposition, the sentence feels unfinished. That's more important than worrying or not worrying about violating or not violating some existing or non-existent grammar rule. Here's why: Prepositions begin prepositional phrases, so we expect to see an article, a noun, maybe an adjective following. But when that preposition is the last word in the sentence, we feel like we've fallen off a cliff. Something's missing. I would always try to delete that preposition or move it into the sentence.

There are exceptions, but they are rare. The real problem arises when we encounter what grammarians call "prepositional verbs," verbs that require a preposition to complete their meaning: move *over*, take *in*, fly *up*, work *on*, find *out*. To end a sentence with one of these is not so bad, because the preposition merely refines the verb. I wish I had done that recently.

I was talking to a friend about an old entertainer in Las Vegas. I couldn't remember the entertainer's name. The next day I saw the friend again, and I said:

"Wayne Newton is the name *up with* which I could not come."

I wasn't doing my best imitation of Churchill; I actually said that before I could stop myself. No one should ever speak or write that sentence. Leave the preposition, or prepositions, alone:

"Wayne Newton is the name I could not come *up with*."

An even better solution, especially when we're writing and have more time to think, is to replace the "prepositional verb" with another verb that doesn't carry all that prepositional baggage. *Move over* becomes *shift*, *take in* could be *gather*, *going on* might be *happening*. A little rearranging of the sentence is not a bad idea, either:

By far the best:

I love to grill, but I hate to get those little burnt, corkscrew hairs on my wrists.

Not so bad:

I love to grill, but I hate those little burnt, corkscrew wrist hairs I end *up with*.

Absolutely, the worst:

I love to grill, but I hate those little burnt, corkscrew wrist hairs *up with* which I end.

The freshman from Boise? His lawyer claims he was grievously harmed by the condescending nature of the upperclassman's pat on his head and suffered great mental anguish, requiring expensive pharmaceuticals. I read the deposition of the upperclassman, who denies having ever spoken to a freshman.

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### About the Author

*New York Times* bestselling author Gary Kinder has taught over 1,000 writing programs to law firms, corporations, universities, and government agencies. In 2012, Gary and his team of engineers created WordRake, the only software in the world that edits for clarity and brevity, giving professionals more confidence when writing to clients and colleagues. Backed by nine U.S. patents, WordRake was recently hailed as "Disruptive Innovation" by Harvard Law School. And LexisNexis® Pacific has chosen the WordRake editing software to include in its new Lexis® Draft Pro.