“Don’t Begin Sentences with *But*” Is a Writing Myth

In this brief essay, George Dorrill takes on the age-old struggle in a fascinating and informative way.

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The phlogiston theory—the belief that fire is a material substance—was once the prevalent explanation for such phenomena as combustion and, indeed, life in general, but it was discredited and replaced by more current theories. The phlogiston theory is no longer taught in our schools, except as a historical curiosity. However, equally hoary, equally discredited beliefs still are taught in schools, particularly in the field of usage. For instance, when students or former students are asked what rules of grammar they remember being taught, one of the most common responses is “Don’t begin sentences with *but*.” But is this a rule at all?

The short answer is no. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage* (MDEU), the best guide to English usage in the United States, provides the definitive treatment of the issue, quoting William Zinsser:

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.

When the MDEU says “everybody,” it means all the usage sources consulted in the making of the dictionary. And they seem to be right.

Here, for example, is what William and Mary Morris, among the most conservative of the usage gurus, have to say on the subject in the *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* (1975):

*But* may . . . be used . . . to establish the relationship between independent sentences (“Churchill painted a gloomy picture. But the British people rallied to the challenge”). But may, as the previous example indicates, be used to start a sentence, a practice deplored by Victorian grammarians.

Bryan Garner, another conservative usage maven, is even stronger in *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (1998):

*It* is a gross canard that beginning a sentence with *but* is stylistically slipshod. In fact, doing so is highly desirable in any number of contexts . . .

Garner goes on to quote six stylebooks all commend beginning sentences with *but*, and continues by citing examples from thirteen twentieth-century authors, among them Mencken, Nabokov, Agee, and Jarrell. He concludes by saying, “These are not good writers on bad days. No: they were having good days. And the list could be expanded a thousandfold.”

So the verdict is in, and it is unanimous: there is absolutely nothing wrong with beginning sentences with *but*. Perhaps the more interesting question is why, in the face of such overwhelming evidence, should this myth be perpetuated in our schools? But that is a topic for another paper.

References


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