

English Corner 2: the split infinitive

It has been said of **split infinitives** that there are those who do not know what they are, those who do know but don't care if they are split, those who don't know but care a lot, and those who know and take care not to split them. Scientist aiming for clarity should belong to the last group. An **infinitive** is **split** when a **word** (usually an **adverb**) or **phrase** is inserted between the **verb** and the infinitive marker **to**. The position of adverbs in sentences is important in denoting subtle differences in meaning: adverbs **before** the verb generally relate to the subject's **approach** to the verb whereas adverbs **after** the verb relate to his **performance** of it: adverbs **splitting** the verb provide **neither** indication. Some word combinations bring double meanings hold the reader up and force him to go back to understand just what is meant.

Split infinitive constructions should be avoided to prevent confusion shown below.

Infinitives split by adverbs

- In many cases adverbs are used to add **emphasis** to verbs when placed before them: [I advise you **immediately to start** the incubation] brings an urgency to it (perhaps the water in the incubator is rapidly evaporating) that the alternative form [I advise you **to start** the incubation **immediately**] lacks, which implies only that if you don't start now, you may need to stay late to finish the experiment. With the infinitive split [I advise you to **immediately** start the incubation] these meanings are lost.
- Other adverbs, including the oft-quoted **to boldly go**, similarly provide little useful information. Was it bold (brave) **to go** at all into the unknown, or was **the going** bold rather than hesitant? In sentences with two verbs [He **proceeded to boldly answer** the question] it is unclear to which verb **bold** refers. If the adverb is placed **after proceeded** (**boldly to answer**) it was brave of him to answer the questions at all (he may have decided not to attend), if **after answer** (**to answer boldly**) he delivered the answers in a confident manner.

Infinitives split by a negative

- [I think it better **to not admit** that I deleted the file] is incorrect for the reason that the negating word **not** should be placed immediately **before** the verb it negates and the verb here is an infinitive. In the correct form [I think it better **not to admit** that you deleted the file] the position of **not** clearly indicates that it negates **to admit**.
- A similar construction [He wanted **to no more than go** through the motions of helping out] is incorrect because **no more than** is an adverb that only governs an infinitive **without** the infinitive marker **to** (here **go**). The correct form for emphasis is to employ the verb **to do** [He wanted **to do no more than go** through the motions of helping out].

Infinitives split by words that may be verbs

- In [This work was done **to better understand** the causes of male infertility] the reader initially expects **better** to be the **verb** (meaning **to improve**) whereas it is used here as an **adverb**. Understanding is clearly

improved when the adverb comes after the verb [This work was done **to understand better** the causes of male infertility] or its object [This work was done **to understand** male infertility **better**].

- Similarly in [The current work was designed **to further investigate** the action of A23187 on the acrosome reaction] the reader first expects **further** to be the **verb** (meaning **to develop**) and then rethinks when he realises it is used as an **adverb**. With the adverb close to the verb [The current work was designed **to investigate further** the action of A23187 on the acrosome reaction] it is made clear that more investigations are being studied. Having **further** close to the verb is important, for placing it at the end of the sentence [The current work was designed **to investigate** the action of A23187 on the acrosome reaction **further**] demands a lot of the reader's memory and may also make him read the sentence twice.

Infinitives split by adverbs that *may govern more than one verb*

- In [I did not dare **to actually speak** to him] it is unclear which verb the adverb **actually** governs, **to dare** or **to speak**. Which one is so governed is made clear by moving the adverb **before the auxiliary verb**, if the daring was a problem [I did not **actually dare** to speak to him] or **before the infinitive** [I did not dare **actually to speak** to him], if the speaking was a problem (if you'd prefer to send an email).
- Similar confusion is built into [He resolved **to quietly creep** along the corridor], where it is unclear if the resolution made in the quiet or the creeping was done silently. Again, in [She endeavoured **to very exactly copy** the experimental methods] it is unclear whether the **endeavouring** or the **copying** was exact. In these two examples it is fairly obvious to a native English speaker what is meant, but to a non-native English speaker it may not be so clear.

When *either probably or first* split infinitives

- A slightly different loss of meaning occurs in [I expected her **to probably write** to the Editor] because it is unclear whether **probably** governs **what** she wrote or **to whom**. By moving the adverb **before** the infinitive [I expected her **probably to write** to the Editor] the emphasis is on the importance of what she did (perhaps she wrote rather than telephoned); in moving the adverb **after** the infinitive [I expected her **to write probably** to the Editor] the emphasis is on whom she wrote to (perhaps the editor rather than her colleagues).
- Likewise, in [I expected her **to first write** to the Editor] it is unclear whether the verb or the recipient is governed by **first**. By moving the ordinal number **before** the infinitive [I expected her **first to write** to the Editor] she would perhaps do something other than writing to him thereafter; by moving it **after** the infinitive [I expected her **to write first** to the Editor], she would perhaps continue writing after finishing her letter to the Editor, but to someone else.

When *both probably and first* split infinitives

- In [He expected her **to probably first write** to the Editor] it is unclear which adverb governs the **verb** and which the **indirect object**. Care should be taken when avoiding the split infinitive by placing the adverbs either side of the infinitive, since the meaning depends on which one comes before the verb. When **probably** comes first [He expected her **probably to write first** to the Editor] the emphasis is on which of

several people she most likely (**probably**) will write to, and the Editor is **first** on the list. The alternative [He expected her **first to write probably** to the Editor] is nonsense: if it is expected to whom she will first write, **probably** is not needed at all.

- When **probably** defines a whole sentence (meaning **it is probable that**), the meaning is completely different; in [**Probably** he expected her **to write first** to the Editor] you are wondering what he expected, not what she was doing.

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