

And there are rules. But I don't know what they're for

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■ Children at school are taught made-up 'rules' about English, says Peter Trudgill

When children go to school, they're taught arithmetic because they don't know arithmetic. They have French lessons because they don't know French. And teachers teach them geography because they don't know geography.

English is different. Children aren't taught English because they don't know English. If they didn't know English, they couldn't be taught arithmetic or geography – or anything. Teachers teach children to read; they teach them to write – well, we hope; and they teach them English vocabulary. They also, I expect, teach them about the grammar of English and other languages: everyone needs to know something of grammatical categories like nouns, verbs, and conjunctions.

But what else is there left for them to teach? Not much. When I went to school, they could have taught us about English dialects, or the history of our language. But they didn't. Instead they invented things to teach. They took some made-up 'rules', and taught them to us. They could do that because the rules were fantasy rules. Since they weren't real, we didn't know them, and so the teachers could

spend time telling us about them! What a foolish waste of time and energy.

One of these imaginary rules was "you mustn't start a sentence with a conjunction". My response is: why not? Who says? But an EDP correspondent has kindly written to query the fact that I start sentences with 'and' and 'but' myself, and says she believes it's important that one shouldn't do this. I'm always genuinely grateful to people who care about language, but in this case I would like to refer the her to the respected Chicago Manual of Style which says that this 'rule' has "no historical or grammatical foundation". Conjunctions do conjoin, but they

can conjoin sentences just as well as they can conjoin phrases into sentences. English conjunctions have always been used to start sentences – though we have to note that the idea of the 'sentence' itself is a new one. After all, no one speaks in sentences. The notion that a written sentence should begin with a capital letter, contain at least one verb, and end with a full stop dates only from the 1600s.

Another imaginary rule we were taught at school was "you mustn't end a sentence with a preposition". We didn't know that rule either – because there's no such rule! In English a preposition has always been a good thing to end a sentence with.