

Background

(From the Preface of *What's the Rule? Book, Second Edition*)

I wrote *What's the Rule?* six years ago for my students and business clients. They told me they were continually frustrated when they tried to find answers to English punctuation and grammar questions. The complaint I heard most often was, “The explanations were so complicated that I gave up.”

Most grammar books are written by grammarians who believe it is crucial that writers understand proper grammatical nomenclature and master a complex set of writing rules. One book I consulted had 32 pages of comma rules! Here’s one of them:

“Use a comma to set off nonrestrictive appositives and nonrestrictive dependent adverbial clauses.”

It’s no wonder many people give up! Even after they’ve consulted their dictionaries to determine the meanings of all the words in this rule, they may still not know if they need to use a comma.

My business clients and students told me they wanted information they could understand and use—and they didn’t have time to wade through several different books to find the answer to a specific question. What they wanted, they said, was a comprehensive rule book that would give them information quickly and in language they could understand.

In my eighteen years of experience as a business writer and editor, college writing instructor, and corporate trainer, I had developed or compiled some simple explanations for many punctuation, grammar, and usage rules. I supplemented these explanations with research in writing and editing texts, style guides, writing reference guides, periodicals, and online sources to determine where experts agreed and disagreed. I also had many lengthy discussions with business colleagues and fellow writing instructors about what they consider appropriate in today’s college classroom and workplace. Finally, I attempted to translate the rules into language for non-English majors. The result was the first edition of the *What's the Rule?* reference guide.

Since the guide was published in 1999, I have been pleased by its sales success. But, even more gratifying have been the comments I have received from its users. The most rewarding feedback has come from individuals who have written to tell me that this book enabled them to succeed in their college courses or helped them grasp a concept they had never before understood.

During the past six years, many people have written to me with questions, ideas, or suggestions for improvement. In this second edition, I’ve tried to address those needs and to expand the coverage of several topics—most notably, the list of commonly confused words, the explanations of active and passive voice, and the descriptions of sentence problems.

One important addition to this second edition is the newly created section on usage. This section (combined with grammar) provides guidance on appropriate language usage in business and academic writing and strategies for avoiding language bias. The section also includes discussions of 21st century writing issues such as computer writing tools, hyphenation of terms such as *email* and *online*, and those age-old cautions against ending a sentence with a preposition and splitting an infinitive.

Our complex information economy requires that we communicate effectively and efficiently. I hope *What's the Rule?* is a useful tool to aid you in achieving these goals. I sincerely welcome your feedback about how I can make this guide more useful for you. Please write me at mail@whatstherule.com with your thoughts.

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