

Bad rules

Consider and critique the following frequently taught* grammar rules.

**In the sense that teachers frequently teach what's in the books.*

Ever

“We use *ever* to talk about an experience that happened at some time in your life.”

(Business Focus Pre-Int, OUP 2004, page 30)

How does the rule fit these sentences?

*I've ever been to Poland.**

*We went ever to Tossa on holiday.**

Come and see us if you're ever in Tehran.

As ever, not a word to Jonathan about this.

I'm going to leave you if you ever do that again.

You're looking great, as ever.

I don't ever want to hear another word about this.

We've had these problems ever since we installed the new system.

Some and Any

“We use *some* in positive sentences. We use *any* in negative sentences and some questions.”

(Essential Business Grammar and Practice, OUP 2006, page 124)

How does the rule fit these sentences?

Would you like some wine?

Some of them didn't even bring a pen.

I knew some of your friends were a bit strange.

Is this some kind of joke?

Can't some of you wait outside? There's not enough space for everyone.

Have you got any kids?

Any time will do.

If you have any queries, please contact me.

English is like any other language is this respect.

The Japanese send Christmas cards because they like any kind of festive occasion.

The first conditional

“We use the 1st conditional to talk about something that will probably happen.”

(Business Focus Pre-Int, OUP 2004, page 63)

How does the rule fit these sentences?

I'll be very surprised if she passes the test.

If the baby's a girl, they'll call her Clara.

If we go to your parents' this Christmas I'll have to put up with their inane comments.

If your skin is red after waxing, the wax might have been too hot.

Might

“We use *might* to say “will possibly”: *By 2050 robots might win the World Cup.”*”

(Face2face pre-intermediate, CUP 2005, page 128)

How does the rule fit these sentences?

“Whose laptop is that?” “It might be Juliet's.”

Let's start without him. He might have left work late”.

The second conditional

I would buy it if you gave me 70% discount.
“This is not a real possibility, so we use the second conditional.”
(Essential Business Grammar and Practice, OUP 2006, page 80)

How does the rule fit these sentences?

If you could come over right away, I'd be very grateful.
I'd be bored to the back teeth if we spent Christmas again with your parents.
If I were to say that we could deliver in four days, would you be surprised?
I wouldn't be surprised if Simon and Gina came late.
If we left right now we'd still be able to catch the 8.30 session.

Usually and Often

“Inter Post **usually / often** delivers on time (=86%)”.
(Essential Business Grammar and Practice, OUP 2006, page 94)

How does the rule fit these sentences?

I often fell in love when I was younger.
I often get headaches.
Usually I get up quite early.
We usually go to Scotland in August.
Bruce Springsteen often plays in Barcelona.
We met often in his office.
She's often bad-tempered
She's often late for work.
In Spain, matches are usually played late on Sunday afternoon.
This usually occurs in males with a body mass index of over.
This often occurs in males with a body mass index of over..

The present perfect

“The present perfect tense describes actions that started in the past and continue into the present.”
(Framework 2, Richmond 2003, page 23)

How does the rule fit these sentences?

Elaine and Xavi have had a baby.
I've been to Fiji.
I've been to Fiji before.
I'm afraid Mr Flory has left.
Have you seen this film?
It's hard to believe that I've lived here.
They've been here for a week; didn't you know?
Oh no, Beckham has missed the penalty!
How long have you had this car?
We've had three power cuts this week.
You've obviously put a lot of work into this.
We've been based here since 1999.
I've been meaning to talk to you for ages.
Have you spoken to the union about it?

Other ways to describe actions that started in the past and continue into the present include:

Present continuous: *House prices are going through the roof at the moment. And Alonso is now leading the race comfortably with three laps to go. Oh no- Are you enjoying your beef, honey?*

Present simple: *She has got three kids.*

They live on the outskirts now.

He wears his hair quite long these days.

Now he's divorced, he has the kids every second weekend.

Past continuous: *I was wondering if I could ask you a favour.*

We were thinking of asking Natalia over for the weekend.

Mixed conditional: *I wouldn't be here if you hadn't invited me!*

Will: *They'll be on their way by now.*

Comparatives

“The comparative form of adjectives like *high* is *higher* and the superlative form is *the highest*. The comparative form of longer adjectives like *important* is more important and the superlative form is *the most important*.”

(Business Focus Pre-Int, OUP 2004, page 39)

New words

Incorporating material by Simon Haines printed in MET October 2003, Bruce Milne of Bell International, and Melvyn Bragg in *The Adventure of English* (Sceptre books, 2004).

*There will be no red carpet for Adam Curtis when his film *The Power of Nightmares* receives its gala screening at the Cannes Film Festival on Saturday. There would be no point: his film has no leading ladies who could disport themselves in backless numbers or lantern-jawed himbos to vogue fatuously before the snappers.*

The Guardian

The aid paradox was highlighted by former UK Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, who said yesterday: 'The US will claim that they are teaching the Uzbeks less repressive interrogation techniques, but that is basically not true. They help fund the budget of the Uzbek security services and give tens of millions of dollars in military support. It is a sweetener in the agreement over which they get their air base.'

The Observer 15/05/05

One of those arrested in the raids in the US was Francesco Paolo Augusto Cali, of the New York Gambino family, known as "Franky Boy". He is allegedly the "ambassador" in the US of the Sicilian Mafia, the Cosa Nostra, tasked with improving relations between the various families.

BBC News 07/02/08

New words in the language tend to originate in:

- Words and phrases coined to convey new concepts
- Words and phrases invented for fun or amusement.
- New meanings for existing words, or adaptations of existing words

Others include:

- **Teenspeak:** *wicked, a boff, stuff, Whatever!, spect, sorted...*
- **Low-tech inventions:** *a jiffy bag, a skip, tippex,*
- **Higher-tech inventions:** *a hit, to google, to email, to top up (a mobile), podcasting, phishing, MP3, log on, to text, breaking up (mobile conversation), facebook,*
- **Marketing, Media and Business:** *a feelgood movie, a must-have toy, a chickflick, a tiger, low-hanging fruit, on point, futures & options, benchmarking, a sea change, blamstorming, the knowledge society, user-friendly, to touch base.*
- **Journalism and society:** *spin, a pre-nup, binge drinking, an asbo (=person), a mouse potato, ecowarrior, gastro-pub, retail therapy, empowerment, a mindset.*
- **Politics:** *spin doctor, carbon footprint, carbon neutral, road map, top-up fees, nanny state, a failed state, to partner, a suicide bomber, 9/11.*
- **The military:** *collateral damage, waterboarding, extraordinary rendition, a surge (=military campaign), to take out (an enemy/position), air assets.*
- **Political correctness:** (adverb+) *challenged, to task, an issue, faith leaders, a sex worker, a partner, same-sex marriage, substance abuse, Afro-American,*

- Ethnic minority speech: *rap, rock and roll, bling, chav, balti-house.*

1. Words and phrases coined to convey new concepts

By their nature, these often do not have alternatives, and where they do, these do not convey the same meaning. These words are widely used because they serve a specific purpose.

Word / phrase	meaning	alternative
	<i>Fruity, fizzy alcoholic drinks which are attractive to young people because they look and taste like soft drinks.</i>	<i>none</i>
<i>Bad hair day</i>	<i>A day when everything seems to go wrong</i>	
<i>Blog</i>		<i>none</i>
<i>Boomerang kids</i>	<i>Offspring who leave the nest when they get married, only to return when they get divorced.</i>	<i>none</i>
	<i>Pressure by a group of people, often workmates, criticising one person and making his/her life difficult. .</i>	
	<i>Someone who spends too much time lounging around at home, often in front of the TV.</i>	<i>lounge lizard?</i>
<i>Ladette</i>	<i>A young woman who behaves like an uncouth young man.</i>	
	<i>Anger and aggression linked to the stress of driving.</i>	<i>none</i>
<i>Pound stretcher</i>	<i>Type of bargain shop where everything is cheap.</i>	<i>Op shop</i>
<i>24/7 society</i>	<i>Society / culture where shops and other services stay open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.</i>	
	<i>An extreme religious sect in Afghanistan known for their strict Puritanism, intolerance and violent fanaticism.</i>	<i>none</i>
<i>A wanabee</i>		<i>A would-be star</i>
	<i>A product designed to help men with erectile dysfunctions.</i>	<i>none</i>
<i>A hoodie</i>		<i>Lout?</i>
	<i>Usually a male whose life evolves around computer technology and whose social skills may be underdeveloped.</i>	<i>none</i>

Words and phrases invented by individuals or organisations for fun or amusement.

Similarly, these often do not have alternatives, but most of them are unlikely to enter the common hoard of the language. In a sense, this is recreational vocabulary, designed to amuse or impress in some way. I call them *Jabberwocky words*

Word	meaning	alternative
<i>A luton</i>	<i>A horseshoe shaped rug designed to fit around a toilet seat.</i>	<i>none</i>
<i>A himbo</i>	<i>A male bimbo – a sexy young male of limited cognitive depth.</i>	<i>none</i>

<i>simpology</i>	<i>A combination of the words simple and technology.</i>	<i>Low-tech, zero-learning.</i>
<i>twillock</i>	<i>A silly person- usually applied to males cf. pillock.</i>	<i>Berk / dork / prat / plonker</i>

New meanings for existing words, or adaptations of existing words

In this category, the new meaning to some extent sweeps away the old meaning. You can't talk about a gay party any more, meaning it to be merely *happy*, or *fun*. *Merry* has gone the same way.

Word / phrase	New meaning	Original meaning
	<i>Insincere / smug / predictable / clichéd</i>	<i>Tasting or smelling of cheese or bad-smelling feet / socks etc.</i>
<i>To do</i>	<i>Eg: Americans don't do holidays, I don't do lovey-dovey.</i>	
	<i>Utterly disappointed</i>	<i>Destroyed by fire / disembowelled.</i>
<i>to graze</i>	<i>To change TV channels slowly, less quickly than zapping. Maybe also eating with slow movements.</i>	<i>Limited to grass eating by cows, sheep and goats. And camels, llamas and yaks.</i>
	<i>People (especially young) of either gender.</i>	<i>People / Youths / Everybody</i>
<i>A hate affair with sth / sb</i>	<i>Opposite of "a love affair, eg: "Alonso's hate affair with Lewis"</i>	<i>No meaning</i>
<i>To make love</i>	<i>Need I?</i>	
	<i>It's not difficult, it's easy to grasp.</i>	<i>Simple technical description.</i>
	<i>Pathetic, despicable</i>	<i>Unhappy, depressed maybe due to bad news, etc.</i>
<i>to sex up</i>		<i>No meaning</i>
<i>Spam</i>	<i>Junk emails</i>	
<i>spin</i>		<i>To turn on a spindle (textile industry)</i>
	<i>Financial incentive</i>	<i>Sugar substitute</i>
<i>Wicked</i>		<i>Evil, especially in children's stories.</i>

To teach or not to teach?

When we consider whether a new word or phrase is worth teaching, we should ask ourselves three questions:

1. Is the word / phrase likely to be useful to my students?

Lexis can be taught for recognition or for production, though there is no black-and-white line between these. Whether a piece of lexis is useful or not will depend on your students' current situation, present needs and future needs. Some lexis may only be useful for high-level learners.

2. Is the word / phrase likely to remain in the language for some time, or to go out of fashion?

This is not an easy question to answer, but some words, especially those used coined by youth culture, are likely to be fashionable for a few years before disappearing from use or even reverting to a previous meaning.

3. Has the word / phrase been coined by a sub-group as a kind of secret code?

This related to point 2 above, and there are words that have entered the mainstream (*cool, hip, jazz, hassle, rip off, rock and roll*) but if it has an aura of code about it, it is consciously impenetrable for outsiders, and is not likely to enter the common hoard of the language.

If the answers to numbers 1 and 2 is *yes*, and to 3 *no*, then I suggest you teach it.

And there is another issue to consider, especially if you are teaching high-level students who are interested in the language *per se*, and how words are formed. The fact is that many new lexical items are constructed from or related to existing words. A few common construction patterns are:

- New compound words – *road rage, trolley-rage, sex up, pound stretcher*.
- Combinations of existing words – *wannabe, alcopops, cornflakes*.
- By analogy with existing words – *mouse potato, trolley rage, pink collar, guppies*.
- By standard addition of prefixes and suffixes – *ladette, cheesy*.

Lining up for the OED

Half of these lexical items have appeared in the latest *Oxford English Dictionary*. Can you pick them?

*Clienteism emotional intelligence the Anglosphere sizeist to Google an earworm
to whitelist sussed unplugged rumpy-pumpy new economy a gayby*

Some useful concordance websites

www.lexatur.ca
www.ota.ox.ac.uk
www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/micase/index.htm
<http://torvald.aksis.uib.no/colt/>

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