

## Revisiting “The Elements of Style”:

### A review of our most common assumptions about common academic word usage

As we researchers are wont to do every so often, it’s a good idea to occasionally revisit our notes. This essential practice allows us to organize and reorganize our notes, even refine our thoughts and review old questions and cast them in a different light to assess them in new and unfamiliar ways.

It was in this process I found myself when I came across my notes from a few years back on an old edition of the grammar classic “The Elements of Style” by Strunk and White. Considering I had purchased a few writing guides from the Xinyi Eslite bookstore just a few weeks back, including an updated (and illustrated!) edition of this text, I decided to flip through it and cross-check it against my old notes to see what I would find, if anything.

Moreover, I chose to compare my findings against what a few other editors were telling their clients. (We were able to achieve this last part because of our collective past experiences working at various editing companies, and comparing what we had been instructed at the time to tell our clients.)

#### “Data”

Let’s start off with an easy one. Many so-called academic editors will tell you that “data” can be used only as a plural. This “lesson” should send your alarm bells ringing because it will conflict with what any modern dictionary indicates.

However, “data” has increasingly fallen into common usage as both a plural and a singular term. Therefore, you may use either “our data was” or “our data were”. Both are correct; the main point regarding correct usage is consistency in verb application.

#### “On the One Hand, On the Other Hand”

If you’ve worked with editors in major editing companies before, let me know if the following sounds familiar: “Don’t use ‘on the one hand’ because it is too colloquial for use in formal writing” or something of the sort. I must confess, I’ve been guilty of this

myself, but not because I didn't know better; I knew it was wrong, yet I was still instructed to inform customers because the boss thought he knew better (even though he has zero professional editing experience, and he still runs a major editing company in Taipei!).

Back to the point: Sure, it does *appear* to have an air of colloquialism attached to it. However, the fact that it is commonly applied in academia, specifically in studies to show contrast, implies that it has fallen into what is deemed to be acceptable usage. In fact, when I searched for it as a colloquialism, I could not find any official sources indicating it as such. However, it is officially classified as an idiom.

Therefore, I suggest that you don't shy away from its usage if it suits your purposes and you know how to apply it. In other words, use "on the one hand" first, and then use "on the other hand" to introduce the contrast, and always in this sequence. Do not introduce the second sequence without using the first, or use one sequence without the other.

If you would rather be cautious about it and avoid it altogether though, you can always use "by contrast" or "conversely" if you prefer a more formal tone. Note that "by contrast" is used to indicate differences (degrees), whereas "conversely" is applied to indicate an opposite (absolute) view.

## "Due to"

This term is the trickiest out of the bunch. We know that when used correctly, it is synonymous with "attributable to". Yet, many editors will tell you never to begin a sentence with "due to". This mistaken belief seems to have arisen from British English, which frowns upon starting a sentence with a conjunction. However, this also appears to be an antiquated "rule". To make matters worse, it doesn't appear to be a "rule" at all, but merely a stylistic preference. Yes, of course style is an essential consideration in effective academic writing, but my point is that, based on my own research of various texts and dictionary blog articles, none have been able to definitively inform me that this is in fact a rule to be followed to the dot. Therefore, please feel free to at least question or challenge your thinking regarding beginning a sentence with "due to", which has apparently increasingly fallen into common usage to the extent that this supposed "rule" (irrespective of whether it was once a rule, what is important at present is that it generally appears no longer to be followed) is only rarely applied.

## “In fact”

This one is straightforward. If an editor tells you never to use “in fact”, ignore your alarm bells and just start running. However, if you succumb to the urge to resist your flight-or-fight response and ask your editor his or her reasoning, if they tell you that it is unnecessary, and that you can be even more succinct, well, you could’ve saved some time by getting a head start on that run. “In fact” is extremely useful. Certainly, its omission would render your text more succinct, but then again, so would eliminating essential words such as “the”; it doesn’t make your work any better, and in fact (there it is), it may harm your flow and transitions. “In fact” can in fact be used to elaborate upon or stress a point, so don’t shy away from its usage. I’ve used it in this article a few times simply to drive the point home. I hope you will too.