

split infinitive. 1 A split infinitive occurs when a word (usually an adverb) or phrase comes between the particle *to* and the verb of a so-called *to*-infinitive (*to really love* / *to really and truly love*). No other grammatical issue has so divided English speakers since the split infinitive was declared to be a solecism in the 19c: raise the subject of English usage in any

conversation today and it is sure to be mentioned. The term itself is first recorded as recently as the 1890s, although the controversy is somewhat older and the practice very much so. Examples occur in Middle English (though only twice in Chaucer) but it went out of fashion from the 16c to the end of the 18c, and no examples have been found in Shakespeare (unless we count Sonnet 142: *Root pity in thy heart, that when it grows, Thy pity may deserve to pitied be*). During the 19c it came back into favour, with examples to be found in Fanny Burney, Mark Twain, Thomas Hardy, and most famously in a poem of Byron: *To sit on rocks to muse o'er flood and fell, To slowly trace the forest's shady scene—Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 1812.

2 Now, at the start of a new century the split infinitive is widely held to be an error on the grounds that the particle *to* and its verb belong together. The basis for this belief is highly questionable, because other separations occur, for example between a verb and its auxiliary verb (*I have never said so | We would always ask you first*). An altogether more compelling argument for avoiding split infinitives is that they can jar and sound ugly. This argument makes the issue one of style rather than grammar, and is especially valid when the adverb can be placed naturally in another position or when the split is a lengthy one: *We talked about how everything was going to suddenly change—Nigel Williams, 1985* (defensible on grounds of emphasis, perhaps, but the normal order is *We talked about how everything was suddenly going to change*) | *You two shared a curious dry ability to without actually saying anything make me feel dirty—Philip Roth, 1987* (split here

for effect) | *Lectures . . . were introduced in the Middle Ages only because it was not possible to affordably type lecture notes for students—Independent, 2006* (better to put the adverb at the end of the phrase: *not possible to type lecture notes affordably for students*).

3 On the other hand, the split infinitive avoided, usually by putting the adverb before or after the entire *to*-infinitive, can lead to results that are just as unnatural, often stylistically poor, and in some cases ambiguous or misleading: *Rhys considers it unwise to attempt radically to alter taxes on large cars, as proposed by Labour—Autocar and Motor, 1990 | It should be the Government's task quietly to advocate such a comprehensive strategy with our American allies—Times, 1998 | I know too that repeatedly to drink and drive is a profound and serious matter—Independent, 2007*. In these examples the natural position of the adverbs *radically*, *quietly*, and *repeatedly* is after the word *to*, and in the first case the important connection between *radically* and the verb it qualifies (*alter*) is compromised; in the second, there is a similar effect with *quietly* and *advocate*; and in the third, the sensible alternative is to recast the sentence and avoid the problem altogether (*I know too that repeated drink-driving is a profound and serious matter*). In some cases, the adverb becomes attached to the wrong verb: *It was in Paris that the wartime alliance began finally to break up—television broadcast, 1998*. It is arguable in these cases that the adverb, or adverb phrase, has a stronger claim to association with the verb than does the purely functional particle *to*. In writing it is often possible to rephrase so as to avoid the hazard altogether (as above), but in speech

a sentence once begun has to be finished, and sometimes an infinitive is better split either because the rhythm of the sentence demands it or because ambiguity might otherwise result.

4 When an adverb, especially an intensifying adverb such as *actually, even, ever, further, just, quite, really*, belongs with a verb that happens to be an infinitive, it is usually better (and sometimes necessary) to place it between *to* and the verb: *I want to really study, I want to be a scholar*—Iris Murdoch, 1987 | *In face of all this Patrick managed to quite like him*—Kingsley Amis, 1988. In some cases, an adverbial phrase is also inseparable from its verb: *It allowed Fernanda Herford to slightly more than double her money*—Julian Barnes, 1993 (where *slightly more than double* is in effect a verb phrase).

5 RECOMMENDATION. The split infinitive, though recent as an object of disapproval in the broader context of the history of English, has sufficient weight of opinion against it to recommend avoidance when possible, and especially when it is stylistically awkward. But it is neither a major error nor a grammatical blunder, and it is acceptable and at times necessary when considerations of rhythm and clarity call for it.

spoiled, spoilt. In BrE the normal form for the past tense and past participle is *spoilt*, although *spoiled* is also used and is the dominant form in AmE. As an adjective in attributive position (i.e. before a noun, as in *a spoilt child*) *spoilt* is always used in BrE and sometimes in AmE.