



Video 5 – Real Grammar: should I avoid split infinitives?

Let's talk about split infinitives.

Have you ever been told that you should *never* split an infinitive?

A split infinitive is when you place an adverb between the word "to" and the verb, for example in a sentence like "Congress voted *to immediately approve* the new medicine".

This rule about not splitting infinitives has been around for well over a hundred years, but there is not a single piece of evidence to support it.

In fact, writers who make great efforts to *avoid* splitting infinitives can sometimes end up making their meaning *less* clear.

Consider, for example, these two sentences:

"Patients are encouraged gradually to increase their activity level."

"Patients are encouraged to gradually increase their activity level."

The first sentence avoids splitting the infinitive, but its message is ambiguous: are the patients being gradually encouraged to do something, or are they being encouraged to do something in a gradual way? We just don't know. The second sentence - which *does* split the infinitive- is much clearer, so in this case "to gradually increase" is the better choice.

Successful communication depends on the writer or speaker conveying their message as clearly as possible... and sometimes, the old rule about not splitting infinitives just gets in the way - and if it does, you should feel free to ignore it. To effectively communicate, you sometimes have to break the 'rules'.

If you'd like to know more about this topic or other real grammar questions, have a look at the Macmillan Dictionary Blog.