



But Can I Start a Sentence with "But"?: Advice from the Chicago Style Q&A (Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing)

The University of Chicago Press Editorial Staff

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Q. Is it “happy medium” or “happy median”? My author writes: “We would all be much better served as stewards of finite public funds if we could find that happy median where trust reigns supreme.” Thanks!

A. The idiom is “happy medium,” but I like the image of commuters taking refuge from road rage on the happy median.

Q. How do I write a title of a song in the body of the work (caps, bold, underline, italics, etc.)? Example: The Zombies’ “She’s Not There” looped in his head.

A. Noooo! Now that song is looping in my head (“but it’s too late to say you’re sorry . . .”). Use quotation marks. Thanks a lot.

Every month, tens of thousands of self-declared word nerds converge upon a single site: *The Chicago Manual of Style Online’s* Q&A. There the *Manual’s* editors open the mailbag and tackle readers’ questions on topics ranging from abbreviation to word division to how to reform that coworker who still insists on two spaces between sentences. Champions of common sense, the editors offer smart, direct, and occasionally tongue-in-cheek responses that have guided writers and settled arguments for more than fifteen years.

But Can I Start a Sentence with “But”? brings together the best of the Chicago Style Q&A. Curated from years of entries, it features some of the most popular—and hotly debated—rulings and also recovers old favorites long buried in the archives.

Questions touch on myriad matters of editorial style—capitalization, punctuation, alphabetizing, special characters—as well as grammar, usage, and beyond (“How do I spell out the sound of a scream?”). A foreword by Carol Fisher Saller, the Q&A’s longtime editor, takes readers through the history of the Q&A and addresses its reputation for mischief. (“It’s not that we set out to be cheeky,” she writes.)

Taken together, the questions and answers offer insights into some of the most common issues that face anyone who works with words. They’re also a comforting reminder that even the best writer or editor needs a little help—and humor—sometimes.

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