

**Personal taste and editorial style: *however* vs. *but***

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Writing handbooks since Strunk (1918) advise against sentence-initial linking *however* –

The roads were almost impassable. However, we at last succeeded in reaching camp.

saying it's ponderous, weak, unemphatic. Bryan Garner, a current energetic opponent of initial *however*, recommends the conjunction *but* instead (thus reversing an earlier prejudice against beginning sentences with conjunctions). Call this Garner's Rule (GR).

Nowhere in this literature is GR justified on the usual prescriptive grounds. Instead, Garner calls *however* "merely a stylistic lapse"; the offense is one of taste, a personal taste Garner shares with some other advisers.

But not all. Several contributors to the Language Log do not share Garner's animus towards *however*, regarding it as an acceptable alternative to *but*.

The numbers from web searches are heavily in favor of *but*, but that would not justify GR, which is blanket advice against *however*. The advantage of *but* over *however* is maintained in news corpora, which show high *but/however* ratios:

New York Times: 22.05

Reuters News Services: 17.01

Wall Street Journal: 15.86

These differences are statistically significant, highly significant for the *Times* over the others, an effect that probably results from editorial practices at the *Times*, rather than writers' individual practices. (Leech & Smith (2006) found "dramatic" U.S./U.K. differences in preferences for *that* over *which* as a restrictive relativizer, an effect they attribute to differences in editorial practices in the two countries.)

To get at the actual writing practices of serious writers, unmediated by copyediting, we examined the most prolific Language Loggers and a number of political bloggers, finding huge differences between individual writers. For instance, of the three Language Loggers on record against GR, one used no *however* at all (vs. 40 *buts*), one had a ratio of 57 (hugely above the *Times*), and one had the tiny ratio 3.03. Tastes clearly differ.

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