

## 45 – Can you break a grammar rule if you think it's dumb?

Hello English learners! Lori here, your teacher from BetterAtEnglish.com. As always, you can find the full transcript of this entire episode, every juicy, delicious word, at [Betteratenglish.com/transcripts](https://www.betteratenglish.com/transcripts).

In my last episode I talked about making embarrassing mistakes in English, and I want to continue that theme today but with a totally different twist.

So let me start by asking you a question: is it ever OK to make a grammar mistake on purpose? Is it ever OK to know a grammar rule and break it anyway, even when you know that some people will totally disapprove?

I have my own opinion about this, but I will save that for later. For now, I want to play you a short extract from another podcast that I listen to.

You're going to hear [Scott Adams](#), a well known cartoonist and professional writer, talking about breaking a grammar rule on purpose.

To give you some background context, in his podcast he was talking about a scientific journal. This journal had recently *retracted* one of the studies that it had published several years before.

So, *to retract something* means that you say that something was a mistake, or that it was not true. So the journal basically said,

“Err...sorry...you know that study we published a few years ago? Well, it turns out it was a bad study with bad data, so please pretend that we never published it. Thank you. That is all.”

[How did you like that voice for you? Should I start doing voices? Let me know!]

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Scott is using this example to make a larger point: that the data in scientific studies isn't always correct, that scientific knowledge changes and evolves over time, and that it means we have to be very careful about the conclusions we draw from new studies, especially— and this is the key point— especially the way they are presented in the media.

So, that should be enough background for you. Let's listen to the extract...it's about a minute long, I'll be back at the end and we'll talk about the language.

[Begin Scott Adams quote]

“This is a subset of my theory that all data are wrong. Now, I like to say all data *is* wrong because as a professional writer I'm one of the people who is responsible for putting things into common usage.

[In] proper English data is plural, so you'd say the data are wrong. Just sounds like a *douchebag*. I'm sorry. You just sound like a *douchebag* when you say the data are wrong. If you say the data is wrong, you don't sound like a *douchebag* but you're technically incorrect.

Now it's my responsibility, as I said, as a professional writer, to give cover to the rest of you. So this professional writer is going to start saying the data is wrong because it just sounds better.

I'm sorry. It just sounds better. And I get to make that choice. You get to tell me I'm wrong, but just understand I'm doing it intentionally. That rule has to change. So I'll go first. The data is wrong.”

[End Scott Adams quote]

Wow. He didn't hold back, did he? He told us exactly how he felt. Here we have a professional writer, intentionally, willfully and knowingly breaking a grammar rule because he thinks that if you follow the rule, you sound like a *douchebag*.

“Hey Lori, what's a *douchebag*?” Yeah, I hear you asking.

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Well, if you describe someone as a *douchebag* you mean that the person is annoying, obnoxious, maybe a bit self-important or pretentious. And usually it means that the person isn't aware that they are coming across that way. Sometimes people shorten the word and just call someone a *douche*, or even a *d-bag*.

Douchebag is a good word for you to know and understand. But be aware that it's also vulgar and pretty offensive, so I wouldn't advise you to use it unless you really know what you're doing and want to take that risk. That's the way it is with all vulgar, offensive language. It's important to understand it, but definitely use at your own risk. **If in doubt, leave it out.**

But let's get back to the bigger point...breaking grammar rules on purpose. What do you think about the data is vs. the data are?

Technically, data is a plural noun, so people who are very particular about grammar think that you should use a plural verb.

But the problem there is that for a lot of regular everyday folks, as opposed to academics and grammarians, the word data feels like an uncountable mass noun, like information, or advice or knowledge. I know that's the way it feels for me.

And when I had to write academic papers (way back in the Stone Age) I hated having to write the data are. It felt like I was having to go against my own good sense and follow somebody else's stupid rule, just because they said so. But I had to do it, because I wanted my papers to get good grades.

And that's the difference between my old "student me" and Scott Adams. When it comes to our position and power in the world, we're far from equal. He's a wealthy, famous, successful writer. He has the power to say "Nope, not doing that" if he thinks a grammar rule is stupid. He's not afraid of the consequences.

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In the extract we just heard, it's clear that Scott is aware of this power differential. He knows that he's in a better position to influence the rules, compared to us regular folks. Let's listen again:

“Now it's my responsibility, as I said, as a professional writer, to give cover to the rest of you. So this professional writer is going to start saying the data is wrong because it just sounds better.” — Scott Adams

So he is knowingly putting himself out there, using his power and influence to try to set a precedent, to try to set a new standard for the rest of us. He's going to take the bullets of criticism for us, so we don't have to.

He's not the only one who doesn't like old-fashioned grammar rules. There are plenty of people who agree . If you google something like [stupid English grammar rules](#), you'll find a lot of examples of so-called rules that other native speakers of English don't think they should have to follow.

So here we have a professional writer going on a crusade to change a grammar rule that he thinks is dumb. Personally, I think it's awesome!

What do you think? Why don't you head on over to [Betteratenglish.com](#) and let me know. On my website you can find all the ways to contact me, plus the transcript for this episode and all the other episodes. They're all up there, handy in one place.

Before I sign off, do you mind if I ask you a big favor? If you enjoy the show it would totally make my day if you could leave a review or at least some stars on Apple Podcasts or Spotify or, basically, anywhere you can leave a review. I'm not picky! It's a small thing you can do that would mean a lot to me.

So that's all for this time. This is Lori, signing off from Better at English headquarters, and wishing you a super inspired and productive day. Bye for now!