

# Zombie Rules and Shibboleths: Exploring a Few Contested Rules of English Grammar

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## BACKGROUND

- Is preposition stranding something up with which we do not put? The prohibition against ending a sentence with a preposition is one of a few contested rules of good writing.
- Many style guides are relaxing their views on some of these rules. Indeed, many scholars suggest that these rules are pedantic inventions rather than accurate reflections of how the English language works.<sup>1,2</sup> Linguist Arnold Zwicky coined the term “zombie rules” because they trudge on despite the linguistic and literary evidence against them.<sup>3</sup>
- But what is the view among writers and editors? Are we relaxing these rules or perpetuating them? Do novice and experienced writers view them differently?

## METHODS

- We conducted an online survey targeted to editors and writers to ascertain their acceptance of certain contested usages.
- The survey consisted of 20 questions divided into four categories:
  - Example questions** presented a sample sentence with a potential usage error underlined. Questions in this category were randomized. (See Figure 1.)
  - Rule questions** described a particular usage, each corresponding to one of the example questions. Questions in this category were randomized. (See Figure 2.)
  - Respondent characteristic questions** collected data on respondents’ education, years of experience, and primary job role (editing, writing, both, or neither).
  - A **free-response question** was included for respondent comments.
- Examples and rules were presented separately to evaluate whether responses to a particular usage differed in application and in theory.
- During survey development, we consulted published works on good standard practices.<sup>4,5</sup>

Figure 1. Example Question

The following questions present specific examples. In your opinion, are the underlined usages acceptable in formal writing?

One principal investigator failed to maintain their files appropriately.

Yes, this example is acceptable

No, this example is not acceptable

Figure 2. Rule Question

The following questions ask about certain usages in general. In formal writing or editing, would you allow the following?

Singular *they*? (the use of *they* as a singular pronoun when the referent’s gender is unknown or the referent is nonspecific)

I always allow singular *they*       I never allow singular *they*

I rarely allow singular *they*       I am neutral about singular *they*

I usually allow singular *they*       I am unfamiliar with this usage

## Topics

- We selected the following topics because they are well-known prescriptions or are used frequently in the medical writing field.
- Singular *they***, defined in the survey as “the use of *they* as a singular pronoun when the referent’s gender is unknown or the referent is nonspecific”
    - Singular *they* is proposed as a clear and established solution to the lack of a gender-neutral singular third-person pronoun in English.<sup>1,2,6-8</sup> However, many style guides find it unacceptable or remain reluctant to recommend it.<sup>2,9-13</sup>
    - The survey included two examples of singular *they*: one with “one principal investigator” as the referent and one with “everyone” as the referent, based on evidence that readers would respond to these differently.<sup>7</sup>
  - Preposition stranding**, defined in the survey as “a preposition separated from its object”
    - Many style guides consider the rule against preposition stranding to be a myth,<sup>1,2,8,10,12</sup> but some note its rhetorical or stylistic advantages in formal writing.<sup>2,6</sup>

- Split infinitives**, defined in the survey as “a word between *to* and its verb”
    - The traditional rule against splitting infinitives has been relaxed or discredited in many style guides.<sup>1,2,6,8,10,12</sup> However, some note continued resistance to breaking it.<sup>1,9,13</sup>
  - Impact as a verb**
    - Style guides note that this use of *impact* is widespread, but many still consider it jargon and recommend against its use.<sup>1,2,9,12</sup>
  - Passive voice**
    - The passive voice is often maligned as weak or evasive writing,<sup>14</sup> although it has effective uses, especially in scientific writing.<sup>16,8,9</sup> Style guides recommend generally avoiding passive voice,<sup>2,8,10-13</sup> but some suggest that the passive voice is often misidentified.<sup>2,5</sup>
  - Split verb phrases**, defined in the survey as “adverbs that split verb phrases”
    - The rule against splitting verb phrases is unmentioned or unsupported in many guides.<sup>2,8-10,13,16</sup> It appears to be a recent invention promulgated by legal style guides.<sup>17-19</sup>
- Two examples of uncontested usages were also included; all respondents were expected to agree on their acceptability.

## Pretesting and Revisions

- We sent a draft survey to a convenience sample of 9 editors, writers, and survey experts.
- Following their feedback, we revised the introduction to use a more formal tone and to better explain the purpose of the study. We also changed one of the two “incorrect” validation questions to a “correct” validation question.

## Data Collection

- Participants were recruited via a post in the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) member forums, via a post on the AMWA and the AMWA Carolinas Chapter LinkedIn pages, and via e-mail to the members of the AMWA Carolinas Chapter.
- The online survey was conducted using Survey Monkey from July 30 to August 16, 2015. Only one response per browser per computer was allowed.

## RESULTS

- The survey had 66 respondents. The majority had completed graduate school (56.1%) or college (24.2%). Most respondents’ highest level of education was in the life sciences (48.5%) or in English, communications, or journalism (24.2%). Primary job roles were writing (30.3%), editing (28.8%), or both (25.8%). The mean years of experience was 14.4 (standard deviation, 10.1).
- For the validation questions, 90.9% of respondents accepted the “correct” example and 98.5% rejected the “incorrect” example.
- Respondents generally rejected the examples of singular *they* referring to “one” (81.1% vs. 16.7%) and *impact* as a verb (68.2% vs. 28.8%) and accepted the examples of a split verb phrase (75.8% vs. 24.2%), a split infinitive (74.2% vs. 24.2%), and passive voice (68.2% vs. 28.8%). Respondents were more evenly divided on the acceptability of the examples of singular *they* referring to “everyone” (40.9% accepted vs. 57.6% rejected) and preposition stranding (54.5% accepted vs. 43.9% rejected).
- Most respondents rarely or never allow singular *they* (65.2% vs. 24.2% who do) or *impact* as a verb (60.6% vs. 28.8%), and half rarely or never allow preposition stranding (50.0% vs. 36.4%). Half or more of respondents always or usually allow (or are neutral regarding) split infinitives (50.0% vs. 39.4% who do not), split verb phrases (65.2% vs. 24.2%), and passive voice (56.1% vs. 34.8%).
- Rule questions had higher nonresponse rates (9.1% to 13.6%) than example questions (0% to 3.0%).

Table 1. Majority Opinion Summary and Comparison With Usage Guide Opinions

| Usage                   | Rule Questions | Example Questions | Usage Guides   |
|-------------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Singular <i>they</i>    | ✗              | ✗ <sup>a</sup>    | ✗              |
| Preposition stranding   | ✗              | ✓                 | ✓              |
| Split infinitives       | ✓              | ✓                 | ✓              |
| <i>Impact</i> as a verb | ✗              | ✗                 | ✗              |
| Passive voice           | ✓              | ✓                 | — <sup>b</sup> |
| Split verb phrases      | ✓              | ✓                 | ✓              |

✓ Indicates the majority of respondents either (1) always or usually allow the usage or are neutral about it or (2) found the presented example acceptable. ✗ Indicates the majority of respondents either (1) rarely or never allow the usage or (2) found the presented example unacceptable.

<sup>a</sup> Both examples of singular *they* were rejected by a majority of respondents.

<sup>b</sup> Although most guides accept the passive voice, they recommend preference for the active voice.

## Examples Versus Rules

For each usage, we compared the proportion of respondents who found an example unacceptable with the proportion who rarely or never allow the usage (Figure 3).

- Singular *they*** referring to “one” showed the greatest gap (16.7 percentage points) between the examples and the rule, though the majorities in both still rejected the usage.
  - Most respondents rarely or never allow singular *they* in general, and an even greater majority rejected the example of singular *they* referring to “one.” Of those who rarely or never allow singular *they*, 2 (4.8%) accepted the example with “one” and 11 (25.6%) accepted the example with “everyone.”
- Split infinitives** showed the second greatest gap (15.2 percentage points) between the example and the rule, though the majorities in both still accepted the usage.
  - The proportion of respondents who rarely or never allow split infinitives was greater than the proportion who rejected the example. Of those who rarely or never allow split infinitives, 14 (53.9%) accepted the example.
- Preposition stranding** was the only usage in which the majorities in each question type did not agree, although the gap was moderate (6.1 percentage points) compared with the gaps regarding singular *they* and split infinitives.
  - Half of respondents rarely or never allow preposition stranding, but less than half rejected the example. Of those who rarely or never allow preposition stranding, 11 (33.3%) accepted the example.
- For the other usages, the proportions of respondents who rejected the examples were similar to those who rarely or never allowed the usages in general.

## Editors Versus Writers

For each usage, we compared the responses from writers with the responses from editors (Figure 4).

- The **singular *they*** rule question prompted the greatest difference between writers and editors. Editors were more likely than writers to rarely or never allow it. However, nearly equal proportions of writers and editors rejected both examples.
- Impact as a verb** prompted the second greatest difference. Editors were more likely than writers to reject the example or to rarely or never allow it in general.
- Split verb phrases** prompted the third greatest difference. Writers were more likely than editors to reject the example, but editors were more likely than writers to rarely or never allow it in general.
- Regarding **preposition stranding**, writers showed more example–rule inconsistency than editors, with both being more likely to reject the usage than the example.
- Regarding **passive voice**, editors showed example–rule inconsistency, being more likely to reject the usage than the example, whereas writers showed no inconsistency.

## Educational Background

Respondents selected the field of their highest level of education from a list, including the option to write in a field not listed. We categorized the selections as (1) English, communications, and journalism (“writing fields”); (2) life sciences; and (3) other fields (Figure 5).

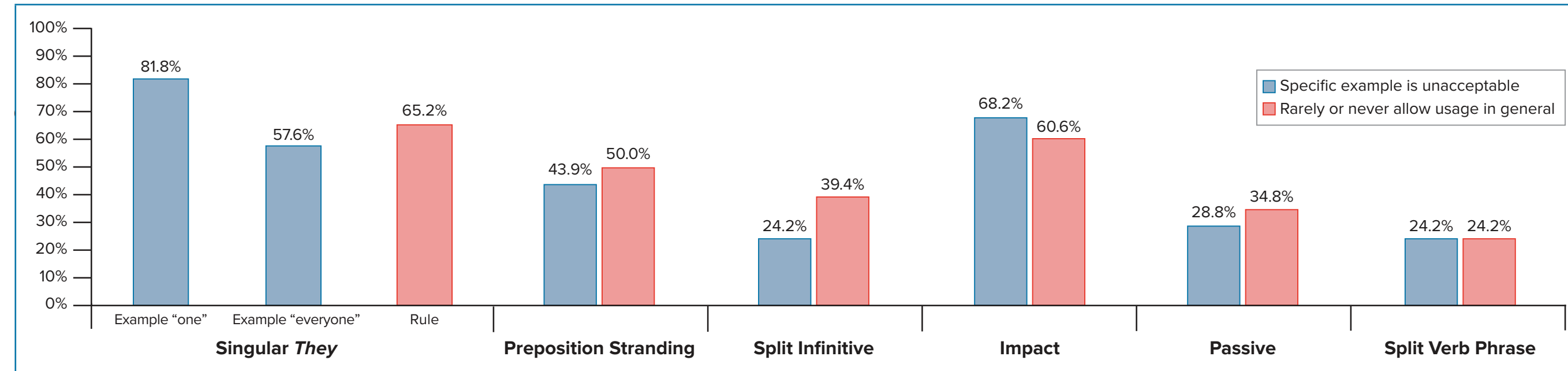
- Preposition stranding** prompted the greatest difference among respondents of different educational backgrounds. Those from other fields were much more likely than those in writing fields or the life sciences to reject both the example and the general usage.
- Singular *they*** prompted varying results. Those in other fields were more likely than those in writing fields or the life sciences to reject the “everyone” example. Those in the life sciences were more likely than those in writing or other fields to reject the “one” example and less likely to reject the usage in general.
- Regarding **split infinitives** (rule question only), **passive voice**, and **split verb phrases**, those in the life sciences were generally less likely to reject examples and usages than those in writing or other fields.
- Regarding **split infinitives**, those in other fields showed high example–rule inconsistency. Of those in other fields who rarely or never allow split infinitives, 4 (66.7%) said the example was acceptable.

## Experience Level

Respondents entered their number of years of experience as professional writers and/or editors. We categorized their responses as 0 to 9 years, 10 to 19 years, and 20+ years (Figure 6).

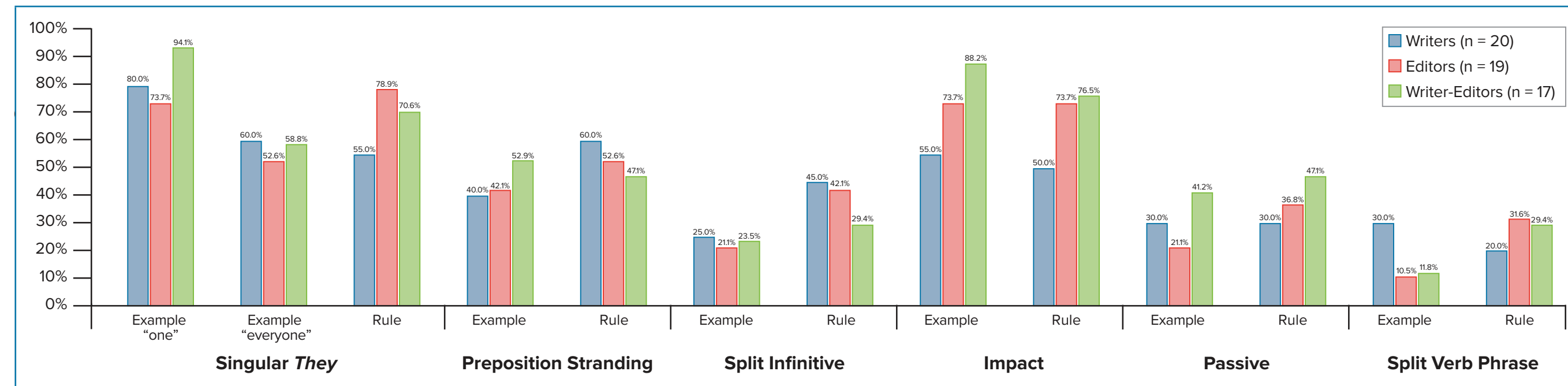
- Passive voice** prompted the greatest difference among respondents of different experience levels. Those with 20+ years of experience were more likely than those of other experience levels to rarely or never allow it. Those with 20+ years constituted 57.1% of those who rarely or never allow passive voice but only 30.3% of the total sample.
  - There was much example–rule inconsistency among all experience levels. Those with 20+ years were more likely to reject the usage than the example; those with 10 to 19 years were more likely to reject the example than the usage.
- Impact as a verb** prompted the second greatest difference. Those with 20+ years were more likely than those of other experience levels to reject the example. There was little difference among the groups in response to the rule question.
- Singular *they*** prompted the third greatest difference. Those with 0 to 9 years and those with 20+ years were more likely to reject both the examples and the general usage than those with 10 to 19 years.

Figure 3. Negative Responses, Examples Versus Rules (N = 66)



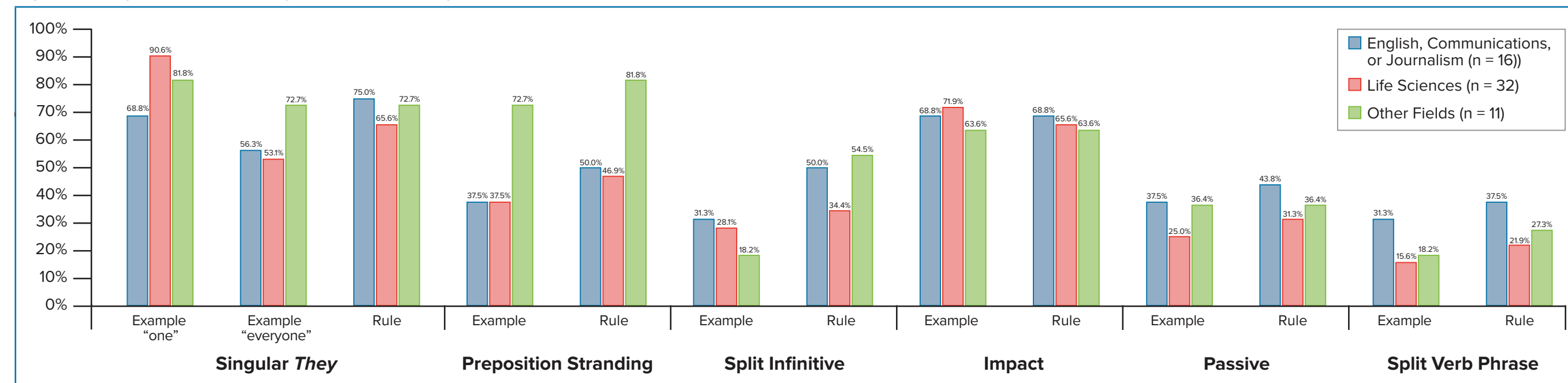
Negative responses are defined as (1) “not acceptable” for example questions and (2) “rarely allow” and “never allow” combined for rule questions.

Figure 4. Negative Responses, Writers Versus Editors



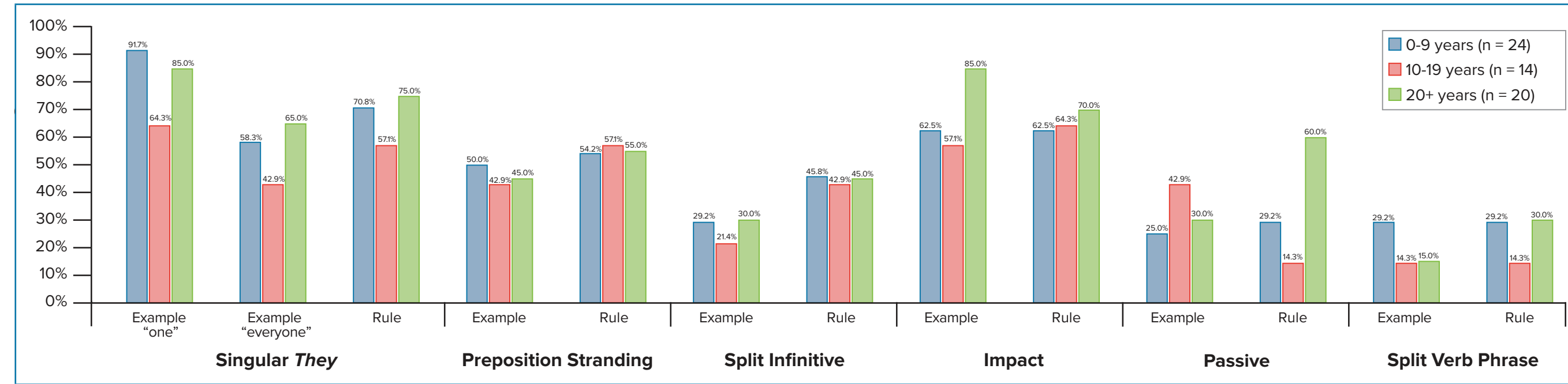
Negative responses are defined as (1) “not acceptable” for example questions and (2) “rarely allow” and “never allow” combined for rule questions.

Figure 5. Negative Responses by Educational Background



Negative responses are defined as (1) “not acceptable” for example questions and (2) “rarely allow” and “never allow” combined for rule questions.

Figure 6. Negative Responses by Years of Experience



Negative responses are defined as (1) “not acceptable” for example questions and (2) “rarely allow” and “never allow” combined for rule questions.

## LIMITATIONS

- Our analyses were exploratory because the total sample size was too small to support statistical analysis. The data-collection application enables significance testing only if each subgroup has at least 30 responses.
- Participation in the survey was voluntary and may be subject to selection bias. Recruitment methods primarily targeted AMWA members to help limit respondents to professional writers and editors. Therefore, responses may be specific to medical writing and not technical writing in general.
- Rule questions had a high nonresponse rate.
  - Some respondents were not familiar with the terminology used in the rule questions. For example, preposition stranding was defined as “a preposition separated from its object,” though it is more commonly known as placing a preposition at the end of a sentence. The definition of split verb phrase may also have been unclear; one of the pretesters did not understand the difference between this usage and split infinitives.
  - Some pretesters and respondents noted difficulty understanding or answering the rule questions without examples.
  - Eight respondents skipped one or more rule questions, and five skipped the respondent characteristics questions as well, limiting our ability to draw conclusions about nonresponders.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Overall, responses were generally consistent with the guidance found in the usage and style guides on all usages except one: most respondents indicated that they rarely or never allow preposition stranding even though most style guides find it acceptable.
- Discrepancies between acceptability of an example and acceptability of a described usage were greatest for singular *they* (which most respondents found unacceptable) and for split infinitives (which most respondents found acceptable).
- We did not find a clear trend between editors and writers in the acceptability of the analyzed usages overall, nor did we find a clear trend among those of different educational backgrounds or experience levels.

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## REFERENCES

Please see handout for complete reference list.

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