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Not sure what is good English and what is not? Write to The Sunday Times and we will get language experts to answer your queries. This is the start of a new series in support of the Speak Good English Movement.



COFFEESHOP at Block 824, Tampines St 81.

Familiar with this notice?

Have you seen this sign? You can find many like it in coffeeshops. We understand what it is trying to say even though it is written in non-standard English.

One way to convey the same message in standard English is: "Food and drinks from other outlets should not be consumed on these premises." Or, more informally: "Please do not consume food and drinks bought elsewhere in our coffeeshop."

Let's go back to the sentence on the sign. There are several common mistakes here that we can learn from.

- ▶ "Outside foods" — We can say "outside help", "outside interests" and "outside wall", but not "outside foods". The usage of "outside" here is wrong. Refer to a good dictionary for the correct usage of the word.
- ▶ "Foods" — The plural form of the word refers to different types of food, say, vegetables and meat. Here, the sign refers to food in general, so the singular "food" is the correct form to use.
- ▶ "To consumed" — This is wrong. The correct form is "to be consumed".
- ▶ "In this premises" — This is wrong. The correct form is "on these premises".

If you spot a sign with bad English, send an MMS to 75557 or e-mail 75557@stomp.com.sg

What's wrong?

"Please off your mobile phone"

We hear it so often: "Please off your mobile phone/lights/radio/etc."

And we know exactly what to do, even though there is no verb, or "action word", in the sentence! We know that the missing verb is "switch": "Please switch off your mobile phone." In the case of the tap, the correct form would be: "Please turn off the tap."

None of us would think that the request might mean we are being asked to "get off" a mobile phone that we were presumably sitting on!

This tendency to drop words for the sake of brevity seems to be a universal trend, thanks to SMS and e-mail, and has found its way into general usage.

It is possible to be brief and still be correct. "Lights off, please" is brief, correct and easily understood. So, if we must be short and sharp, why not try: "Mobile phones off, please"?

HOW TO SEND IN YOUR QUERIES

Please use the keyword
<english> SMS/MMS: 75557
Email: 75557@stomp.com.sg



OUR LANGUAGE EXPERTS are (left to right): Mrs Joy Lee, Mrs Regina Davamoni, Ms Connie Seng and Mrs Jeyalaxmy Ayaduray. All four are master teachers in English language — experts who help teachers develop good teaching practices and programmes.