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Say It Right

with Denyse Tessensohn

First or firstly?

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When you mean 'to begin with', either of these words may be chosen. But it is presumed that there will be at least one more item that will follow.

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Example:

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1) First make sure you have all the ingredients, then you can begin to prepare the meal.

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2) We didn't make it to the top, firstly because it rained, and secondly we were already exhausted.

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Poor English: I try first. If I like I buy two!

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Standard English: I'll try it first. If I like it I'll buy two [of them].

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We will answer some of your spoken English language questions in this column, and a book prize will be awarded weekly for the question, anecdote or suggestion most useful to our readers. Email us at sayitright@newstoday.com.sg