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## English as it is broken

**Not sure what is good English and what is not? Write to The Sunday Times and we will get master teachers to answer your queries. This is a weekly series in support of the Speak Good English Movement.**

IF YOU had a funny feeling this sign is incomplete, you're quite right. While we are probably able to guess at the intended meaning, there are a few things wrong with it.

The 'To' at the beginning of the sentence is redundant. It leads us to expect that some other action needs to be performed beforehand. For example, we could say: 'To operate the hose, you need to turn on the inlet valve first.' But this is not the case here.

The sentence could also be saved if we add a word like 'remember' so that it reads: 'Remember to turn on the...'.  
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The other mistake is the use of 'running out', presumably to refer to the act of unrolling the hose. However, while water can run out from a tap, running out the hose sounds rather awkward.

'Run out' usually refers to something being used up so that no more is left. For example, you may run out of luck, money, patience or ideas. We also often hear people say, 'Time is running out', to hurry someone to action.

So, coming back to this sign, we would go with: 'Please turn on the inlet valve before unwinding the hose.'

### Biannual or biennial?

A reader sent us this query: What is the difference between 'biannual' and 'biennial'?

Well, this is another word which the British and Americans seem to disagree on. The most accepted difference is that 'biannual' (pronounced 'buy-ann-new-earl') means twice a year, while 'biennial' (pronounced 'buy-ann-nail') means once in two years. However, some American dictionaries like Merriam-Webster indicate that 'biannual' can also be used interchangeably with 'biennial' to mean once every two years.

If you're wondering about the connection with the Singapore Biennale 2006, Biennale is the Italian word for 'biennial'. However, thanks to the prestigious Venice Biennale which has been held every two years since 1895, 'Biennale' is now used to refer to any biennial art exhibition.

Interestingly, the word 'bimonthly' is used to indicate twice a month and once in two months as well. To avoid confusion, it is better to be more precise, as in 'This magazine is published twice a month' or 'once every two months'.

### Speaking terms

Another reader wanted to know if it mattered whether we said to 'speak to someone' or 'speak with someone'.

Either one will do if what you mean is that you're having a conversation with that person, for example, 'I was speaking to/with John when Mary arrived'. However, in certain contexts, 'speaking to someone' suggests that you're admonishing the person. For example, 'I will speak to him about his chronic latecoming.'

Another point on usage: 'Spoke', while generally interchangeable with 'talked', is usually used in more formal contexts. When you say you spoke at the meeting, it seems to suggest that you addressed the group, while saying that you talked at the meeting could suggest you were having your own private conversation!

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