

**Avoid vagueness? The case of sentence-initial linking *however*
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When two items are very similar in meaning, but one (the Spec alternative) is in some way more specific than the other (the Gen alternative), the general maxim Avoid Vagueness (AV) comes into play:

AV: Be specific; avoid vagueness.

The straightforward way to obey AV in the case of Spec/Gen pairings would be to adhere to Just as Specific as Necessary (JASAN): Use Spec when it is appropriate; otherwise, use Gen. If you follow JASAN, Spec maintains its meaning, and Gen picks up some content by implicature. An example: for the choice between the intensifier *very* and a more specific alternative like *extremely*, following JASAN keeps *extremely* towards the high end of the scale, while *very* continues to denote something up the scale, but now conveys that it's not at the high end.

Prescriptions about usage rarely suggest JASAN; instead, they routinely advise that AV be satisfied by avoiding Gen: Avoid the Less Specific (ALS). In particular, advice manuals routinely suggest avoiding *very*. The consequence of following ALS is to move Spec into the space Gen used to occupy, eventually bleaching it (and Gen as well).

In at least one case, some manuals actually advise AGAINST Spec: from Strunk (1918) to recent works by Garner, we're told not to use sentence-initial linking *however* ("The roads were impossible. However, we at last succeeded in reaching camp."). Garner recommends using *but* instead. (Call this Garner's Rule, GR. GR, of course, contradicts a widely touted but quite spurious "rule" No Initial Coordinators (NIC), barring sentence-initial coordinating conjunctions; see Zwicky 2006a,b.) These advisers think of this *however* (H) and *but* (B) as equivalent in "meaning", and sense that H somehow weakens the effect of the clause that follows. But H and B aren't equivalent: B is Gen, and H Spec, as observed by Fraser (1998). There are many circumstances (some of which we survey) where B is fine but H is at best odd, as in protests:

A: It's bedtime.

B: But I haven't had a story yet. / *However, I haven't had a story yet.

In Schiffrin's (1987) terms, B marks a main unit in discourse organization, while H marks a subordinate unit (and so conveys more about information structure than B, which merely expresses contrast).

JASAN would tell us to use H wherever appropriate, B otherwise, and ALS would tell us to avoid B. Either way, B would be disfavored. In actual usage, B dwarfs H, but the frequency of H is not negligible, and is even considerable for some practiced writers (we exhibit some statistics). We suggest that GR might reflect an appreciation of the discourse subordination of the material that H introduces, but we're dubious about GR on two grounds: other sentence-initial discourse connectives (*consequently, therefore, nonetheless, nevertheless*) that no one seems to complain about, although they are also discourse subordinators; and sentence-internal uses of H ("We at last succeeded, however, in reaching camp."), which are also discourse subordinators, but are often suggested as substitutes for initial H. The other initial adverbials and the internal uses of H also share with initial H its prosodic weight and formality of style, so there seems to be no external justification for the bias against initial H, which remains a matter of individual taste – perhaps a reaction to the over-use of initial H by student writers who have been taught NIC. In any case, GR runs against both the Gricean JASAN and the prescriptivists' usual advice, ALS; there is no good reason not to use initial H on occasion.

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