
The Only Thing That These Signs Have in Common

The only poor decisions are the ones you don't follow through on.

—YOGI BERRA, COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AT SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

I'm up to something here, only I'm not saying what. I'll give you only one hint: you don't want to get caught putting a certain word in the wrong place.

Okay, I'll give you more than one hint, only you have to find the others on your own.

To confirm the answer, skip ahead—but only after you've studied these examples, all taken from signs I've seen.



Word Up!

I only have
a kitchen
because it
came with
the house



I CAN ONLY PLEASE
ONE PERSON A DAY.
TODAY IS NOT YOUR
DAY. TOMORROW
DOES NOT LOOK
GOOD EITHER.



These signs have only one thing in common: the *onlies* come too early. *Only*, which has been called “perhaps the most frequently misplaced of all English words,”³⁵ belongs next to the word or phrase it limits. Compare the originals with these rewrites:

- I drink only to make you more interesting. (The original — “I only drink...” — implies, “Drinking is the only thing I do to make you more interesting.”)

35. Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage*, 592.

- Quality happens only when you care enough to do your best. (The original—“Quality only happens ...”—implies, “The only thing that quality does when you do your best is *happen*; it doesn’t do a dang thing more.”)
- I have a kitchen only because it came with the house. (The original—“I only have a kitchen ...”—implies, “I don’t do anything else with that kitchen but *have* it. *Have have have*, all day long.”)
- I can please only one person a day. (The original—“I can only please one person a day ...”—implies, “All I can do is please that person every day. It must be dull, getting nothing but pleased. ‘Pleased today, pleased tomorrow ... can’t a person get anything but pleased around here?’”)
- Change available only with postal transaction. (The original—“Change only available ...”—implies, “Sorry, folks, all of our postal-transaction change is the available kind. If you want unavailable change, go find another post office.”)
- Casket for sale. Used only once. (The original—“Only used ...”—implies, “Nothing else was done to this casket. It was used, okay? Just used. Only used. That’s all you need to know.”)

It surprised me to learn that English speakers have been slopping their *onlies* around for hundreds of years. Scottish rhetorician Hugh Blair noted in the eighteenth century that “with respect to such adverbs as *only*, *wholly*, *at least*, and the rest of that tribe ... we acquire a habit of throwing them in loosely.” Blair made allowances for this looseness in conversation, but he held writers to a higher standard: “In writing, where a man speaks to the eye ... he ought to be more accurate.”³⁶

Speak to the eye. Useful advice. And not for *only* only.

36. Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, vol. 1 (1783; 11th ed. 1809), 245, quoted in Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage*, 593.