

## A reconsideration of *why to*-infinitives

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The present paper describes and discusses the distribution of ‘*why to*-infinitive’, one of the constructions that have hitherto received little attention in the current literature, and the aim is to give some insights into the specific constraints governing its acceptability. The data for this study is collected from large present-day corpora such as the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

It is a well-known fact that a *to*-infinitive can be used after a *wh*-word or phrase, as in (1).

- (1) a. I wonder who to invite.  
b. Tell me what to do.  
c. I don’t know where to put the car.  
e. Tell me when to pay.

(Swan 2016: Section 111.1)

As for a *why to*-infinitive, it is considered ungrammatical (e.g. Wierzbicka 1988; Dixon 1991; Eastwood 1994) or rare (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985; Swan 2016). It seems that this phrase occurs sporadically with other *wh*-word(s), other infinitive *wh*-clause(s), or the noun *reason*, as in (2) – examples here from COCA:

- (2) a. She would favor a “federal grant to teach Houstonians how and why to vote.”  
b. Knowing what to do, how to do it, and perhaps most important, why to do it has become an integral part of teaching.  
c. But now, after what happened to him, it was another great reason why to stop.

Furthermore, *why to*-infinitives may be acceptable when used as headings and titles, as in (3),

- (3) a. Thank you for your editorial “Why to supper Labeling GM Foods” in the August/September 2013 issue. (2013 COCA)  
b. *The Single Person’s Guide to Buying a Home: Why to Do It and How to Do It.*

(Book title)

This study attempts to provide a plausible explanation for the reason ‘*why to*-infinitive’ constructions are restricted in syntactic and semantic terms. It will be shown that (1) *why* functions as a disjunct and thus is less closely related to an *infinitive* than the other *wh*-words, and (2) the meaning of *why* (which implies that the speaker can’t think of any reason or cause for something) is incompatible with the meaning of the *to*-complement (which implies that the speaker volitionally becomes involved in the activity) (cf. Wierzbicka 1988; Dixon 1991; Duffley and Enns 1996).

## References

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