

Writers Can Learn to Relax by Not Worrying About Some Supposed “Rules”

Do you know the origin of stuttering? Actually, no one knows for sure. Scientists believe that it may in part have a neurological basis. But not surprisingly, there's also evidence that environment plays a role. More about the environmental factors in a moment.

The known facts are that about 90 percent of stutterers are male, and that about one in 30 males stutter. It's not at all uncommon. But what causes it?

Well, all children stammer—naturally—as they're first learning to form sentences. And the one common environmental characteristic of stutterers is a nervous adult, usually a parent, who won't let the stammering child finish a thought without negative emotional pressure. “Out with it, Johnny! Come on!” And poor Johnny can't get it out—sometimes for the rest of his life.

So what does all this have to do with writing?

I'd suggest that, throughout the United States, we've bred several generations of writing stutterers. You see, writing instruction too often has been of the don't-do-this-and-don't-do-that school. Too many schoolchildren learn writing in an environment in which

they feel as if the teacher is standing over them with a ruler, ready to rap their knuckles. They pick up a pencil and freeze.

Too many of us learned to write at the hands of someone who, essentially, took all the fun out of it. Although many junior-high and high-school teachers in this country do good, there are those who do harm.

There's a balance to be struck, you see. On the one hand, it's important to learn to express yourself freely. That's why many experts in child development recommend not correcting children's language much at all until they're speaking in complete sentences—maybe not even until fourth or fifth grade. On the other hand, we do need to instill a sense of standards in our children—standards of good grammar and usage.

Among teachers in the early grades, this balance plays out in the debate between those who support the whole-language approach and those who support phonics.

Whole-language adherents have children write out stories however they like, without correcting much if anything; creative spellings are fine. Advocates of whole language want to cultivate the students' creativity, not stifle it with rules. Proponents of phonics have children learn spelling through sounding out syllables; the students can then read sentences aloud even if they don't yet understand the sentences. And soon enough, the theory goes, they'll be able to write out their own sentences—and spell correctly.

Among college teachers, the balance plays out somewhat differently. On the one hand, we want students to use their creativity and develop imaginative approaches to their subject matter. On the other hand, we want them to stay within the current of idiomatic English—with good punctuation, good grammar, and sound word choices.

Yet traditional teaching methods have emphasized the latter: correctness over creativity,

Contest Winner

Last month, I offered a free copy of *Lifting the Fog of Legalese: Essays on Plain Language* to the first person who e-mailed me an A version of this gem:

“Under the power of sale contained in said mortgage and the statute in such case made and provided, notice is hereby given that said mortgage will be foreclosed by a sale of the mortgaged premises, or some part of them, at public vendue, at the 1st floor of the Ingham County Circuit Courthouse in Mason at 10:00AM on August 10, 2006.”

The winner is Ricardo J. Lara, of Kerr, Russell & Webber, for this version:

“The mortgage will be foreclosed by public sale of the premises on August 10, 2006, at 10:00 a.m. at the 30th Circuit Court, Mason Courthouse, 1st floor.”

All the entries dispensed with the legalese—making you wonder why most foreclosure notices continue to read the way they do.

Watch for a new contest next month. And thanks to everyone who participated. —JK

“Plain Language” is a regular feature of the *Michigan Bar Journal*, edited by Joseph Kimble for the Plain English Subcommittee of the Publications and Website Advisory Committee. We seek to improve the clarity of legal writing and the public opinion of lawyers by eliminating legalese. Want to contribute a plain-English article? Contact Prof. Kimble at Thomas Cooley Law School, P.O. Box 13038, Lansing, MI 48901, or at kimblej@cooley.edu. For more information about plain English, see our website—www.michbar.org/generalinfo/plainenglish/.

idiomatic rigor over imagination. And from the teacher's perspective, it's easier to mark papers by focusing exclusively on the small points: misspelled words, misplaced commas, dangling participles, and split infinitives. To mark a paper for these, the teacher needn't think much about the whole. It's easy enough to spill ink on the paper by pouncing on the peccadilloes.

As Sir Walter Scott once put it, "Many a clever boy has been flogged into a dunce, and many an original composition corrected into mediocrity." Even back in his time (the early 1800s), we were creating writing stutterers.

One of the most interesting points about writing is that those who pounce on "errors," especially in the United States, don't know what they're talking about. Their negativity is misplaced. They never bother to check what the authorities say.

Probably the most common manifestation of this problem has to do with beginning sentences with *And* and *But*. (Have you noticed that I've now done it six times in this column? That's six out of 43 sentences so far.) Did you know that good writers do this in about 10 percent of their sentences? And did you know that grammarians have long said this is perfectly proper?

Let me cite chapter and verse, with just a few examples through the years:

- **1896:** "Objection is sometimes taken to employment of *but* or *and* at the beginning of a sentence; but for this there is much good usage." Adams Sherman Hill, *The Principles of Rhetoric* 88 (rev. ed. 1896).
- **1938:** "Next to the groundless notion that it is incorrect to end an English sentence with a preposition, perhaps the most widespread of the many false beliefs about the use of our language is the equally groundless notion that it is incorrect to begin one with 'but' or 'and.' As in the case of the superstition about the prepositional ending, no textbook supports it, but apparently about half of our teachers of English go out of their way to handicap their pupils by inculcating it. One cannot help wondering whether those who teach such a monstrous doctrine ever read any English themselves." Charles Allen Lloyd, *We Who Speak English: And Our Ignorance of Our Mother Tongue* 19 (1938).

- **1965:** "That it is a solecism [mistake] to begin a sentence with *and* is a faintly lingering superstition. The *OED* [*Oxford English Dictionary*] gives examples ranging from the 10th to the 19th century; the Bible is full of them." Sir Ernest Gowers, ed., *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* 29 (2d ed. 1965).

- **2000:** "*But* and *And* are absolutely valid ways to begin a sentence. Not only valid ways, but *excellent* ways. And all seasoned writers know it." John R. Trimble, *Writing with Style* 85 (2d ed. 2000).

I could multiply examples. If anybody ever told you it's a mistake to begin a sentence with *And* or *But*, that person was (uncontroversially) wrong when making the statement. It's not that grammatical standards have changed on this point. The standards have stayed constant. It's just that too many "correctors" have believed a myth—no, a superstition.

If you don't believe me, please look it up.

And then think of the times you've been "corrected" on this point. If you've been unfortunate enough to experience this, you may be among the writing stutterers. You're among the unfortunate many who have learned writing at the hands of someone who seemed to stand over you with a ruler, applying unintelligent dogmas in unintelligent ways.

If you want true proficiency in writing, you'll need to unlearn some of these dogmas.* Get a good book on writing and relish

it. A great place to start, for any writing stutterer, is John Trimble's *Writing With Style*, recently out in a second edition (Prentice-Hall, 2000). If you want to know what it's like to learn at the hands of an unflinching master—an encouraging mentor—try Trimble.

And if you want an enlightened guide to grammar, a slender and entertaining handbook by a legal editor, try *Miss Grammar's Guide*, by Karen Larsen (State Bar of Oregon, 1994). It's full of reliable information.

Meanwhile, work on your expressiveness. Learn to polish your writing at the end, but first try to relax and convey your thoughts forcefully. Avoid beginning with *dos* and *don'ts*. Carried to an extreme, those things would make writing stutterers of us all.

*Editor's note: For other dogmas, see the November 2002 "Plain Language" column.

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Bryan Garner (bglawprose@yahoo.com), president of Dallas-based LawProse Inc., teaches advanced-writing seminars for more than 5,000 lawyers and judges each year. His books include *The Winning Brief* (2d ed. 2004), *The Elements of Legal Style* (2d ed. 2002), and *Legal Writing in Plain English* (2001). He is editor in chief of all current editions of Black's Law Dictionary.