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My Little Bag of Writing Tricks

How I translate grammar directives into moves I can use to make my sentences better

By Rachel Toor

In the progressive campus lab school I attended until sixth grade, my friends and I wrote poetry, celebrated the passage of Title IX, and did "new" math. The boys sewed and cooked in home economics, and the girls sawed and drilled their way through shop class.

When I got to junior high, I realized that the kids who had gone to Catholic school knew things I didn't. They could drink without getting caught, and were able to name the parts of speech. Eventually I learned to sneak gulps from dusty bottles in my parents' liquor cabinet. But diagramming sentences and identifying the parts of speech never made it into my repertoire.

And so grammarians intimidate me. Once someone starts talking about verb moods, dangling whosits, and misplaced whatsits, I squirm. When I try to struggle through their prose explanations, my brain hurts. I've learned enough to be able to explain basic things to my students about common writing mistakes, but I can't get technical. I refer to words ending with "ing" as "ing words." (I know that they can be gerunds or participles, and that there's a difference.) When I tell students that adverbs are not their friends, I explain I mean words with "-ly" on their tail. (I know different kinds of adverbs and adverbial phrases are essential, and they don't all end in "-ly." Whatever.)

I'm not convinced that studying grammatical labels would help my prose, though it might make me a more intimidating teacher. Neither am I convinced that I'd have more fun outdoors if I knew the Latin names of different plants, though I have learned—the hard way—not to pitch my tent in a patch of poison oak or stinging nettles.

I didn't know what comma splices were until the copy editor of my second book pointed out how often I used them. She wrote, in polite notes in the margins, "comma splice." I realized she just wanted me to look again at the sentence. Did I mean to do that? Was it a quirk of my style? I appreciated the call to examine each case. Some of the sentences sounded exactly as I had intended; others needed a friendly "and" or a sturdy semi-colon. I had been asking commas to do heavy lifting, they collapsed under the burden. (See how that poor little guy is straining? Comma splice!)

I love style books and have learned plenty from grammarians, even if they might not be my first choice for dinner dates or camping companions. I try to translate their directives and explanations into moves I can use to make my sentences better.

On the simplest level, we're told not to be vague, to write with strong nouns and verbs. But it can be hard to remember what vivid looks like. When you begin reading academic prose, it's like

going into the monkey house at the zoo. At first you're overwhelmed by the noise and stink. Then you get so used to it you no longer notice.

We need to notice. We need to scrub dirty, flaccid bits from our sentences if we want to be read. But telling me that "nominalizations" weaken prose doesn't help. The word alone can send me scurrying for cover.

Nominalization, in case you weren't aware, turns verbs into fuzzy nouns. "Investigate" morphs into "investigation"; "applicable" dresses up as "applicability." In order to weed them out I've learned a trick. I scan my manuscripts for words that end in -tion, -ism, -ty, -ment, -ness, -ance, and -ence. Then I grab a more muscular verb and slip in a concrete noun (when it makes the sentence better).

I have other tricks.

How many unnecessary uses of "this," "that," and "there" can I lose? I won't say removing them forces you into less passive constructions—because I would be taken to task for not knowing what a passive construction is. But they often drag down prose. So in my merry way, I go on search-and-destroy missions for the forms of "to be." Write with strong nouns and verbs, say Strunk and White. I say, CNTL+F the incarnations of "to be" and kick the suckers to the curb (when it makes the sentence better).

How many silly redundancies do we use without a second thought? "Completely finish"? As opposed to "partly finish"? "Consensus of opinion"? Because we fear the reader might think we mean a consensus of hamsters?

I love cutting my manuscripts. Life is too short to ask people to read bloated sentences loaded with junk phrases like "in the event that," "on the grounds of," or "under circumstances which." When Strunk and White urge me to "omit needless words," I appreciate the reminder and use the tools in my little bag of tricks to identify and delete those words, when appropriate.

During a workshop with our graduate students, a visiting writer said, "Don't write like a suburb." He talked about how he always flipped through the pages of a manuscript to see what the look of the thing could tell him. I did the same thing when, as an editorial assistant, I had to choose which manuscript I wanted to read and report on next. I avoided the drafts that looked like they would be no fun because the text presented itself as boring blocks, with long uninterrupted paragraphs made up of endless sentences—the manuscript equivalents of army bases or grid cities. Instead, I went for those that presented themselves as appealing and interesting, more like maps of Paris or lower Manhattan.

When it comes to my own work, I've adopted the habit of shrinking the type size of a manuscript by 50 percent, and then scrolling through. Is it too blocky? Too fragmented? When I look at tiny unreadable versions of my prose, I'm able to think differently about the formal structure of the project.

Then I'll blow it back up to normal size and change the font to something ugly and sans serif, like Ariel or Calibri, and make it single-spaced rather than double. Sometimes I'll inflate the font to the size of a children's book. When the formatting makes the manuscript unrecognizable, I'll start reading. Ungainly prose in a hideous typeface demands fixing.

With my latest book project, a novel, when I needed to read the whole thing from start to finish, I loaded the Word document onto my Kindle. That way, it looked like a "real" book, and I read it as if it were already published. Holy crap! I blushed to see sticky sentences and godawful mistakes. I picked away at it until I felt (for that moment) satisfied.

I also read my drafts out loud in such a way that my dog, Helen, pays attention. While sometimes I have to add "cat" or "walk" in places they don't belong, clunky sentences sound a whole lot clunkier when you're forced to listen to them.

In one of his recent *New Yorker* pieces, John McPhee discussed revision. Often, he said, he goes to the dictionary to look up definitions of the words he knows but thinks might not be the best choice. He relies on the dictionary, not the thesaurus, which he calls a "mere rest stop in the search for the mot juste." On his recommendation, I've started going to the dictionary when I have a word that is correct but perhaps not sterling.

Recently I led a workshop for scientists about how to get more writing done, and one woman shared her strategy. She creates her first draft as a PowerPoint presentation and uses that as an outline. Anyone who is comfortable with PowerPoint will see how her strategy is a great way to trick yourself into writing. You think about your article—or book—as a series of slides, come up with the right titles for each, list the main points you want to make, and then shuffle them to get the right order and flow. Your slides become cue cards to guide you in writing the full document.

It's taken me a long time to feel secure enough to admit to such simple and obvious practices. And it's taken me an equally long time to write sentences that don't use puffed-up syntax and thesaurus-unearthed words to attempt to cover up my many flaws. Grammarians can chastise me for my faulty education, lax attitude, and insufficient attention to the complexities of language, and they will probably do so in sentences that give me a headache.

And while they're at it, here's something else to hit me with: If readers haven't already figured it out, I love Strunk and White. Mostly I love impish Mr. White. I love the way he pops up, especially at the beginning and the end of *The Elements of Style*, to soften and enliven—with his cute pointers and his funny examples—the rules of his teacher, Commandant Will Strunk. I reread the little book frequently, because it always delights me and it never hurts to be reminded. I often decide to break their rules, and I'm OK with that. I bet White would be as well. (And, while I'm at it, I also love George Orwell's essay, "Politics and the English Language." So there.)

In the meantime, I'll keep looking for tricks to steal and then pass along to my fellow linguistically untutored writers so we can all try make our sentences better.

Rachel Toor is an associate professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University's writing program in Spokane. Her Web site is <http://www.racheltoor.com>. She welcomes comments and questions directed to careers@chronicle.com.