usage

Grammar, in my mind, is more than parsing sentences and understanding parts of speech. It is more than just obeying a list of conventions or seemingly arbitrary rules. It has been defined as the sum of all possible structures by which we understand the relations of words. I like to think of it as a map or a *code* or a kind of *magic* that makes even the most ordinary words not only meaningful, but sometimes beautiful, terrible, and surprising.

Sometimes the very word *grammar* may strike fear into the hearts of those who were traumatized by it in sixth grade language arts class. It incites debate between those who adhere strictly to the rules, and those who resist and rebel. Some call these two camps *prescriptivists* and *descriptionists*. Steven Pinker says: "*Prescriptivists* prescribe how language ought to be used. They uphold standards of excellence and a respect for the best of our civilisation, and are a bulwark against relativism, vulgar populism and the dumbing down of literate culture. *Descriptivists* describe how language actually is used. They believe that the rules of correct usage are nothing more than the secret handshake of the ruling class, designed to keep the masses in their place."

I tend to live in the space between these two camps, devoted to and inspired by the rules of the game we call language, but convinced that the things people do creatively to the language are every bit as interesting as the traditional forms. Perhaps the thing that baffles people about grammar and punctuation is the seeming contrariness of it.

Consider this sentence: **"I'm hurrying, aren't I?"**
This something we have said and read a hundred times. We would say this sentence is grammatical.

But how about this one: **"I'm hurrying, are not I?**

We would say this sentence is ungrammatical, though nothing has changed except the contraction. This sort of contradiction makes some dislike grammar, but it fascinates me. It may be the very contrariness of grammar that makes it both frustrating, and also so useful.

As Bill Bryson so eloquently stated, “One of the undoubted virtues of English is that it is a fluid and democratic language, in which meanings shift and change in response to the pressures of common usage rather than the dictates of committees. But at the same time, there is a case for resisting change. Even the most liberal descriptivist would accept that there must be some conventions of usage.”

Why does correct usage matter?

It may matter to the agent or editor you hope to acquire. Sending your manuscript to an agent or editor full of punctuation and grammar errors is somewhat like going to a job interview with a stain on your shirt. You may not get the job because of it, or you may get the job at less pay. But that’s not the most important thing.

We talk about good writing at the level of scene. We necessarily discuss creating believable characters, pitch-perfect dialogue, setting and structure and theme. But when we talk about good writing at the sentence level, it’s all about understanding the grammar. If words are the nucleotides ACT and G, grammar is the way they are strung together on a strand of DNA. And it’s all that DNA that makes up the genome of good writing. When you master this at times maddening system of relating one word to another, you can create an infinite number of meanings and moods. *You can use grammar to add precision and complexity to meaning. And that is the most important thing.*

Please consider this lecture an attempt to alert you to areas where you may wish to do further study. All the points I bring up in this lecture have been inspired by the basic rules that my colleagues and I at VCFA saw violated with some regularity in student work.

We will begin with punctuation.

punctuation

Punctuation exists for the same reason musical notation exists: to support rhythm, direction, pitch, tone and flow. Lynn Truss in her entertaining book about punctuation, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, says punctuation is a courtesy to help readers understand a passage of writing without stumbling. I like that – a courtesy, as if good punctuation may be akin to good manners. Certainly it is important to meaning. Consider the following:

A woman, without her man, is nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.

A few little dots or squiggles, and the same words in the same order can mean drastically different things. As Truss so eloquently put it, punctuation is the stitching of the language. If you don't use it properly, language falls apart and all the buttons fall off.

So let's do a whirlwind tour of some of the basics of punctuation.

the apostrophe
It's surprising how sensitive people can feel about misplaced apostrophes.
I learned that there exists a real and for true organization called the Apostrophe Protection Society.

Queen Elizabeth I created an office called the Apostropher Royal and it was his job to make sure she never neglected or inserted an apostrophe where one should not be inserted or neglected. Now we have grammar check, but as we all know, we can't always depend upon those squiggly underlines.

- The most famous apostrophe problem is the itses:
  its / it's

  The apostrophe can stand for a missing letter. In this case, the missing letter is i. If you write *it's,* you mean *it is*. If *it is* doesn't fit in the sentence you are writing, you want the possessive version, which has no apostrophe.

  The same goes for
  whose / who's

  This ad got it wrong.

- We all know that an apostrophe **S** indicates the singular possessive, as in ***the boy's hat*.**

- We also all know that if two boys are strangely and unhealthfully sharing the same hat, it is the ***boys' hat*.**

- If the name of the boy is James, it is ***James's hat*.**

- If both boys are named James and they persist in sharing the hat, it becomes trickier. The plural of James is Jameses, and the hat is the **Jameses' hat.**

- Some style guides make exceptions for Jesus and certain people of antiquity. The rules about possessives get complicated and vary widely between style authorities. I have decided to never to give my characters names that end in S or X.

the comma

Last time I looked I found forty pages of the Chicago Manual of Style devoted to the comma.

- commas are used for joining – A comma comes before a conjunction like *and, but*, or, *while*.

  James wanted the hat, but John wouldn't let him have it.

  Beware the comma splice, which is what happens when you join two complete sentences with a comma.

  comma splice: James wanted the hat, John wouldn't let him have it.

  This is incorrect. Done knowingly, however, the comma splice can be used as a poetic device, so be sure you know the rule so you can break it in beautiful ways. Remember, though, like the sentence fragment, if a comma splice isn't used sparingly and at the right time, it will be perceived as an error.

- commas are used to set off an interruption to the main thought
  James, who really wanted the hat, began to despise John with whom he had to share the hat.

- commas are used to set off interjections, such as oh
  Oh, if only John had showered.

- commas are used to punctuate dialogue, which we will discuss momentarily

semicolon and colon

Lynn Truss calls the semicolon "glamorous." The comma, she suggests, is utilitarian, and when you use it properly it only proves that you aren't thick. The colon and semicolon, according to her, are aristocracy. They are, quote, "the thermals that benignly waft our sentences to new

altitudes – that allow us to coast on air and loop-the-loop, suspending the laws of gravity." End quote.

Other people think colons and semicolons are mostly fussy, old-fashioned and pretentious. The writer David Barthelme said they were "ugly, ugly as a tick on a dog's belly." Gertrude Stein thought them servile. She said, referring to semicolons, **"They have within them deep within them fundamentally within them the comma nature."**

My opinion of the semicolon is this: odds are you don't know how to use them properly. In my years as a copyeditor at a tech company and my years teaching at VCFA I can count on two hands the number of instances when someone has used a semicolon correctly. If you love semicolons, study up on them carefully.

However, even if you do know how to use them correctly, unless you are writing *Octavian Nothing*, it is unlikely they belong in your story. I used semicolons in *Tom Finder*, about a homeless teenaged boy, written in close third. I know for a fact that Tom did not think in semicolons. I am still embarrassed to see those semicolons. That was the middle-aged writer with two degrees talking, not my teenaged character.

The m-dash is less formal than the semicolon, more conversational in tone, and can often be used in place of a semicolon. It is capable of some subtle effects. Unfortunately, of late I have become addicted to dashes, and no one except Emily Dickenson is allowed to use them that much. I have had to reign myself in. But in a pinch, one might find a dash handy.

If you are determined that your narrative needs a semicolon, understand that it goes between two related, complete sentences where there is no conjunction such as and or but.

James ran away with the hat. John looked for a weapon.

It is possible, taken out of context, that these two events, James running away with the hat and John looking for a weapon, could have nothing to do with one another. But put a semicolon in, and we see that the events are most certainly and tragically related.

So again, do study up on the uses of colons and semicolons before inflicting them on the innocent.

ellipses

Oh, how I love those three little dots. Periods are so final, so abrupt, so sure of themselves. But an ellipsis is a gentle slowing down. It says, my voice is getting softer, fading away. It suggests that I am not quite as sure as I may sound. It invites conversation. It trails off in an intriguing manner. My editors are always turning my ellipses into dashes or periods, which is sometimes distressing and may indicate that I am misusing or overusing them.

hyphens

The Chicago Manual of Style has 66 rules for hyphens. The basic rule is that one hyphenates a noun phrase to qualify another noun, which then becomes a compound modifier. It helps us distinguish between

twenty-odd people or twenty odd people. Twenty three or four normal people look for the hat? or exactly twenty strange people?

Never hyphenate nouns in compounds that end in –ly. Certain people will notice and love you for it.

About 16,000 words have succumbed to pressures of the Internet age and lost their hyphens in a new edition of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. As one writer put it, "There are rules, exceptions to the rules, and exceptions to the exceptions." In most cases, it is a matter of good sense combined with a good dictionary.

italics (not punctuation, but note…)

Use italics for book titles, films, etc. Underlining is considered passe, because it's now used to indicate a link.

Also use italics for foreign words and phrases and when drawing attention to a word as a word.

Be wary about using it for emphasis, although that is one of its legitimate uses. If you feel tempted to use italics, first ask yourself if you can rewrite the sentence so the emphasis is clear without changing the font.

exclamation marks

Also called in the journalism world, a screamer, a gasper, or a startler. The exclamation mark, as Truss says, is the big attention-deficit brother who gets over-excited and breaks things and laughs too loudly. On the other hand, it is desperately eager to please. We all know to be

sparing. I will often use more exclamation marks in an informal email than I will in an entire novel.

question mark
Just one thing to be aware of:

"I wonder if this hat is worth it?" James said.

This is incorrect. I wonder is not interrogative. Your grammar check will underline it, and now you will know why.

interrobang
?!
Save this punctuation for your own personal correspondence, if you like it. It has not yet moved into the realm of respectability.

punctuating dialogue
Many of my students struggle with the conventions of punctuating dialogue, so we'll review a few basic points.

- periods and commas always go inside the quotation marks all the time – if you remember this one rule, you will make your advisors happy – periods and commas always, always go inside the quote marks
  John said, "Give me the hat."

- with semicolons, question marks, dashes and exclamation marks – it depends – in this case, it would go inside
  John screamed, "I said give it to me!"

  But in this case…
  Did John just scream, "Give me the hat"?

  You can see that John did not ask a question. John screamed, but he did not ask a question. Someone else is asking the question, and so the punctuation goes outside the quotes.

- when a tag line interrupts a sentence, it is set off by commas
  “John,” James said, “the hat will never be yours.”

  Note that this is all one sentence. The t on “the” is not capitalized because the speech is all one sentence, and we know we only capitalize at the beginning of a sentence.

- **“James!” John said. “You are mistaken!”**

  Note that this is two sentences, so a period is required after said, and the y on you is capitalized.

- to signal a quotation within a quotation, use single quotes, unless you live in Britain

- Just as an aside, said is not dead, as your second grade teacher may have carefully taught you. *Said* is the preferred dialogue tag, and is miraculously invisible. You can get yourself in a bit of a mess trying to avoid the word said.

So. If any of this punctuation business went a bit too quickly for you, perhaps a review of punctuation is in order. For those of you who found it obvious, please don’t rub it in. My seventh child is a bit of a genius, but he has no idea where a sentence ends. If you struggle with this stuff, it does not reflect upon your intelligence, but as a writer, it behooves you to try.

word crimes

Word crimes or usage crimes are just easy things to point to – they aren’t the end of the world. In my opinion, snobbish, opaque, elitist, faux-academic gobbledygook is a true crime. Calvin agrees with me:

Calvin: I used to hate writing assignments, but now I enjoy them. I realized that the purpose of writing is to inflate weak ideas, obscure poor reasoning and inhibit clarity. With a little practice, writing can be an intimidating and impenetrable fog. Want to see my book report?
Hobbes: the dynamics of interbeing and monological imperatives in Dick and Jane: a study in psychic transrelational gender modes.
Calvin: Academia, here I come.

The worst thing about this kind of fake writing is that it’s a breeding ground for all manner of solecisms. Comparatively, usage errors, small grammar errors, only indicate a little hole in one’s

education. Nevertheless they reveal that you don't understand something basic about the English language, and this is like a burr under some people's saddles. For example, one cartoonist was so incensed by the way people write alot as one word, that he or she was inspired to art. He thinks of the alot as a kind of beast…

http://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.ca/2010/04/alot-is-better-than-you-at-everything.html

So yes, we have to be attentive. Let's review some usage niceties.

grammar conventions

- overuse of intensifiers such as *very, really, highly, and extremely* get under the skin of grammar snobs, and for this reason it is tempting to use them ***very*** often – however, it is true that unmodified adjectives tend to be interpreted categorically. **An honest man** is 100% honest. **A very honest man** could be only 90% honest because by adding the intensifier you have created a scale. Intensifiers can actually drain the power out of a word, so be careful.

- there is/there are – Jane Resh Thomas clipped my wings on this when I was a student here. I loved using the there is/there are construction, but she taught me that in many cases you can avoid it
    - There were a great number of dead leaves on the ground.
    - better: Dead leaves covered the ground.
    - (from the essay of a former student, with her permission) When magic exists in a story, there must be a purpose for it being there, and there should also be a price or a consequence associated with it.
    - (my edit) Magic must have a purpose and exact a price or consequence.

  Most of the time if you find a "there is" construction in your sentence, you can make the sentence stronger by eliminating it.

- When the implied subject of the clause at the beginning of the sentence never actually shows up, or shows up too late in the sentence, you have a misplaced modifier

  Wide-brimmed and stylish, James was crazy about the hat.

  In this case the referent (the hat) comes too late in the sentence, making us wonder if James himself is wide-brimmed and stylish

- gerunds – any time you begin a sentence with a gerund, take a good hard look. You could be headed for a dangling modifier, and a really bad sentence.

  Eyeing the hat, desperation overcame John.

  Does desperation have eyes? Be watchful if you begin a sentence with a gerund, especially in your critical writing.

- **to be/to have.** This next point is not so much about bad grammar necessarily, but about good style, which includes a mastery of good grammar and word choice: Anytime you have any conjugation of the verb *to be* or *to have* in a sentence, see if you can't trim it out and replace it with stronger verbs. I could devote many minutes to this one element of good style. I would say that this one bit of advice made a big difference in my writing style.

- **avoid redundancies** – these can be insidious because the more we hear them, the more they seem acceptable – and they may be accepted, but you will make your writing more elegant and forceful if you avoid them
  - close proximity - proximity
  - end result - result
  - exactly the same - the same
  - consensus of opinion - consensus
  - cooperate together - cooperate
  - he/she is a person who . . . - he/she
  - climb up – climb
  - past memories – memories

  You can find dozens of them on the Internet for your surfing entertainment.

- a word about the word *unique* – it means without like or equal – there are no degrees of uniqueness. So any modifier becomes redundant. I know it is not the most horrible word crime in the world, but whenever I hear someone on TV say "very unique" or "so unique," I judge them and think I am better than they are. This causes me to have to repent, which is annoying.

- ending a sentence with a preposition – Yes, you've all heard that it's okay, and that Mr. Churchill said that banning it was pedantry up with which he would not put. But if you

find a preposition at the end of your sentence, don't be smug. Check to be sure your sentence is well constructed.

  - **student sentence: Mr. Smith wants to marry the children's mother, something the children themselves all end up in full support of.**
  - **Mr. Smith wants to marry the children's mother, something the children all fully support.**

- and just in case I didn't make my point well enough earlier, be wary of fancy Nancy words – this is one of my favorite lines from *Elements of Style* by Strunk and White: **"'Every sky is beauteous.' What is wrong with beauteous? No one knows for sure."**

- be clear – Clarity is a virtue. Let the substance of your text be your concern, not how convoluted you can make your sentence. Another one of my favorite lines from *Elements of Style*: **"Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose, it is a destroyer of life."** Clarity comes when you revise a work many times, making each sentence as tight as a drum.

So now we're going to talk about creative grammar – breaking with convention
Thomas McCormack said that punctuation and grammar are "like anatomy to the artist." He learns the rules so he can knowledgably depart from them as his art requires. The best argument for understanding and following the rules of grammar is that if you know the rules, you can break them for art's sake. Here is a wonderful quote from *The Elements of Style:*

"Only the writer whose ear is reliable is in a position to use bad grammar deliberately." – Elements of Style

But before we go into that further, I want to establish one principle, and I'll use a James Thurber story to illustrate.

"After dinner, the men went into the living room."

This is a line from a short story by James Thurber. Thurber's editor at the New York Times, Harold Ross, was always putting commas in where Thurber didn't wish them to be. Apparently they frequently argued about it. One day someone queried Thurber about the above comma, which, while technically correct, seemed a bit formal and fussy for Thurber's style. This time

Thurber defended Ross by saying: “This particular comma was Ross’s way of giving the men time to push back their chairs and stand up.”

What Thurber was saying here is that form contributes to and is connected to function. Grammar is part of form, and it can powerfully *reflect and affect* content. Perhaps writers for the young have more reason than any writer to know how and when to break the rules of writing, because we are writing about characters who may not have been fully initiated into all the subtleties and complexities of English grammar. We may be writing about characters who are testing the rules.

Let’s consider a few passages from some texts and talk about how the writer has made slight adjustments to the rules to some effect.

Long Way from Verona, Jane Gardam
Well this man came, and we all filed into the biggest classroom and the little ones sat down cross-legged upon the floor and the big ones lounged on chairs behind and then we were told to shush and the door opened and this terribly tired-looking man came in behind the Headmistress.

Because the commas are missing, this passage more accurately reflects the noise and disorder that often accompanies the assembling of the student body. It is not tidy and orderly, as a number of commas would suggest. It causes the reader’s eye to rush through the passage, in the way the teachers would be rushing the children into the assembly hall to hear the visiting writer.

Compare that to a passage in the same book just a few lines previous:
There weren’t many of us who had really given a lot of thought to it – to writers at all, let alone to becoming them, and certainly not me, not in actual words and thoughts, that is.

In this case the proliferation of commas do something else. They break up the sentence in a way that helps us hear the choppy thought processes of an adolescent girl – she thinks one thought, she amends it, she adds another cavil and another as she tries to dig down through the layers to say what is true.

In *My Book of Life by Angel* I wanted the punctuation to be visibly and noticeably absent, and the line breaks to serve as a kind of big punctuation when I needed it. I wanted the lack of

quotation marks to indicate airlessness and voicelessness, the randomness of capitalization to reflect a questioning of what is proper in a proper noun. My Angel was not a grammar geek.

I thought oh no
when Serena didn't show up at her corner one night
and not the next night or the next,
and then she didn't show up to church Wednesday.
She always went to church Wednesday
and told her man Asia it was for free hot dogs
but it was really for church –
she told me that secret.

I was excited to get the audio book of Angel. I was sure we would sound young, innocent, though maybe a bit rough around the edges. But the person who read for Angel had a grown-up voice, a voice with a couple of degrees behind it. The reader had correct, clipped, precise pronunciation. When she read this passage, she read it like this… "then she didn't show up to church**,** Wednesday. She always went to church**,** Wednesday."

I wanted church Wednesday to be specifically identified as church Wednesday. Of course, it would be an easy error to make, because you don't show up *to* a weekday. You show up *to church on a weekday*. You don't modify a weekday with the word church. Except… Angel does. If it was meant to be read that way, wouldn't it have had commas around it, as an interjection? Notice, dear professional reader, that there are no commas around it. This was on page three or so, and I turned the audio book off and couldn't listen to any more.

Here is another small example from Angel:
"He left without his wallet ha ha
and his watch
and his tie pin,
which I hid all of them under the mattress."

Grammatically it should have read,
"He left without his wallet, his watch and his tie pin. I hid all of them under the mattress." But without that "which," this passage is bloodless and boring and doesn't get across how formal and smart Angel feels now that she has come up with her plan.

How many of you have read ***How Green Was My Valley* by Richard Llewellyn?** Some of my favorite books are marketed to the adult audience, but have child protagonists, such as *To Kill a Mockinbird*, and *Life of Pi*. *How Green Was My Valley* is one of these books. I encourage you to read it if you haven't. The characters use the "there is" construction, which I have assiduously taught you to try and avoid. The author uses it to indicate the Welsh dialect.

"There is beautiful you are."

"There is a fool you feel when somebody is saying they are sorry for doing something to you."

It is done to beautiful effect.

I have tried to defend adverbs before and gotten a big smackdown. We hear that adverbs are bad, that they should be excised from our prose. But weren't adverbs invented for a reason? Does not Jane Austen use them most flatly and deliciously?

Hemingway and other greats used them generously at the right moment. Adverbs are a spice to be used sparingly and judiciously, but they are not the Voldemort of Parts of Speech as some like to make them out to be. Just be aware.

House at Pooh Corner

This passage from one of my favorite books:
"But he first thought that he would knock very loudly just to make quite sure… and while he waited for Piglet not to answer, he jumped up and down to keep warm, and a hum came suddenly into his head, which seemed to him a Good Hum, such as is Hummed Hopefully to Others."

I can see my grade six teacher, to whom I am forever indebted for teaching me the rudiments of grammar and punctuation, taking his red pen to this sentence. Beginning a sentence with a conjunction, the needless intensifiers "very" and "quite," the ellipsis for no good reason, the use of the word suddenly, which in grade six I was taught never to use, the strange capitals, and what it is technically a run-on sentence.

And yet. I recently read Dostoyevsky's *War and Peace*, and however brilliant it was, I found no single sentence in it that surpassed the genius of this Pooh sentence. This is a sentence to make one immortal. This is a sentence to make one fall in love with a Bear of Very Little Brain. Notice

the itensifier in Bear of Very Little Brain. How perfect for Pooh Bear. This book with all its grammar deviations makes one want to lick one's Kindle.

So what are the rules about breaking the rules?
There are only two rules that I know of.

1) **Be sure it is needed, that the form you choose reflects the content.**
2) **Remember that the main rule in creative grammar is to consistently follow whatever rules you establish from the beginning.**

This kind of consistency can actually drive you and your copyeditor a bit mad, as I discovered with Angel and also with Calvin. I had quite the job of it, at times, writing an entire book without dialogue tags. So be sure it's worth it to you, be sure the form reflects the content in a meaningful way.

conclusion
In conclusion, let us reason together.

Perhaps we will not be much like the 17th century essayist and grammarian, **73. Dominique Bonhours,** who, on his deathbed, turned to those gathered around his bed and whispered, "I am about to – or I am going to – die; either expression is used."

But perhaps we will be students of the language, novitiates in the ever-changing matter of clear usage. We can agree, perhaps, that graceful grammar encourages comprehension and provides a support to and confirmation of exquisite style. Perhaps when it is brought to our attention that we have made an error in usage, we will apply ourselves to a little study. As we come to understand the conventions that have evolved over hundreds of years, we can use and even misuse those conventions in powerful ways for our own intent.