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# Whatever It Takes: Breaking the Rules in Style

*Reading exploratory, imaginative writing gives me ideas for my next paper. The alternate style is the spark of creation for pieces yet to be born. I think, "Hmm, maybe I'll try that," or "Oh! That would be fun." Grammar B is like getting in the car and being the only one on a deserted country road, with a guarantee that you won't be caught for speeding. There are no grammar cops in sight, so you step on the gas. A little harder. A little harder still. Before you know it you're flying down the road with the wind in your hair, never looking back. How fast am I going? you wonder. But it doesn't matter; you're free. You're creative. You're breaking the rules in style.*

MEG MCKINNON, College Junior

In Brian De Palma's film *The Untouchables* (1986), Eliot Ness—played by Kevin Costner—tries to enlist the aid of a tough Irish street cop named Malone—played by Sean Connery. Ness wants Malone to join his fledgling group of crime fighters to battle the Chicago mob led by Al Capone—played by Robert De Niro. Malone is reluctant to join, even a little hostile. He has seen his share of prima donna crusaders. He needs to see how serious Ness is.

"What are you prepared to do?" Malone asks.

"Everything within the law," says Ness.

"And then what are you prepared to do?"

I could ask you the same question: What are you prepared to do to move students to write with strong voices?

Think about that a moment.

How far will you go? To what lengths? What sacrifice will you make?

Donald Murray reminds us of a key point in our approach to language:

> It is the responsibility of schools to teach the rules educated people follow most of the time when they speak, write, and read, successfully communicating with each other. But it should also be the responsibility of schools to teach the other times when the rules can be broken to achieve clarity. Language should not be taught as an absolute, a matter of clear right and wrong. The history of language is the history of change; the rules evolve. (1998, 161)

It is the last three sentences of that passage that interest me most, that part about showing students the flexibility of language, the possibility it offers for productive rule breaking. Since the mid-1980s, I've been interested in pushing students to break rules of standard written English as a way of communicating with élan and voice.

In the effort to ignite students' voices, I'm down for just about anything. Rule breaking is the most drastic pedagogical tack I've taken. This idea quickened in me when I read Winston Weathers' wonderful book (though ignominiously out of print for some time now) *An Alternate Style: Options in Composition* (1980).

In a scholarly treatise, Weathers looks to professional writers, both classic and contemporary, to discover the many ways in which they have broken the rules of standard written English and written exceedingly well. He cites rule breaking from the writing of Robert Frost, e. e. cummings, Virginia Woolfe, Tom Wolfe, Tillie Olsen, Anne Sexton, John Dos Passos, E. M. Forster, and many more.

I formally introduce students to ways in which they can break the rules in style. They read two chapters I've written about what Weathers has called Grammar B, the alternative to Grammar A, which is the standard, traditional, conservative form of written English enshrined by most publications, standardized tests, and just about every English teacher who has ever written *frag*, *awk*, and *RO*, including me (Romano 1995). I demonstrate how professional writers and past students have effectively used sentence fragments, lists, double voice, labyrinthine sentences, and orthographic variation (respelling of words). These unconventional language moves leave the norm of Grammar A. They break the rules. It isn't anything students haven't seen before.

> In high school I began to notice that we were reading books that didn't adhere to the rules we were meant to. I found it hypocritical that I was being berated for doing the same things my teachers were praising as great literature.
>
> *Julia Porter, College Freshman*

Look at the first six paragraphs of sportswriter John Erardi's Cincinnati *Enquirer* piece about a high school basketball rivalry, "Woodward vs. Withrow":

Maurice Williams, 13, sat on his bed in his room in his mother's apartment on Reading Road in Avondale, dribbling a basketball. Left hand, right hand, left-right-left-right, leftrightleftright, so quickly that it was a blur to even him.

*Woodward, Withrow, Woodward, Withrow,* he whispered.

He dribbled the basketball around his legs, between his legs, out the other side. Leftrightleftrightleftright.

*Woodward, Withrow, Woodward, Withrow.*

"I grew up watching Woodward-Withrow games," said Williams. "I wasn't sure where I'd wind up going to school. I was hoping it would be one school or the other. I wanted to play in that game someday."

That someday is tonight. (1996, A1)

In the second sentence, Erardi uses a sentence fragment to contain a hyphenated word he's invented, then he removes the hyphens, jams the words together to further show the speed of the dribbling. The boy's spoken words—cast in italics instead of quotation marks—become a psychological mantra three lines later. The boy is passionate, single-minded, trancelike. Erardi's rule breaking to make written language match the physical action of dribbling a basketball and the boy's obsession with the two schools makes the writer's voice playful, dramatic, and respectful.

In an *Esquire* piece, Ron Rosenbaum writes about "dangerous women." At one point in his article he uses double voice to throw two points of view into sharp contrast:

Lauren . . . argue[s] that men are really talking through their hats when they say they want Dangerous Women, because when they find one, they just can't handle it, particularly when it comes to sex.

Lauren has been dangerous in her time: A deceptively seductive yet innocent-looking blond, smart and knowing, she has strong feelings about men who say they like dangerousness.

"I prefer to call it intensity," she says. "Men always say they want real intensity, particularly in bed, but if you *really* show it to them, it scares them. They run."

She talked about the way the male vocabulary for dangerousness in women so often misses the reality she sees. And so, as an educational public service to men, here is what one Dangerous Woman thinks is really going on:

| **When A Guy Says . . .** | **What He Really Means Is . . .** |
|---|---|
| "She's too neurotic." | "She's smarter than me." |
| "She's too intense." | "She's more interesting than me." |
| "She's too difficult." | "She's more independent than me." |

"She's too out of control." "She's not under *my* control."
"She's too dangerous." "She's braver than me."
(1996, 108)

Writing that bends and breaks rules is out there, and not just in the world of email, instant messaging, and journal writing, but in mainstream publications, too. Most of my students take readily to breaking the rules in style. For some it's like unleashing a long-pent-up need:

> Dr. Romano, why have you been holding out on us like this? I have been waiting for Grammar B to be professionally noted and praised my whole life. Breaking the rules of traditional standard English is the reason I go on writing. Well, I don't write to specifically break the rules, but being able to break the rules is that little something extra that keeps me going. It makes it fun and exciting. It makes it original. Sure, all writing is original, but breaking the rules inside of already original writing is where kings are born.
>
> *Sir Nathan Stevens, College Junior*

## The Sentence Fragment

One useful tool for rule breaking is the sentence fragment, that sometimes verbless, sometimes subjectless, sometimes bothless group of words that appears in students' writing, usually unwittingly. Most of their writing lives, students have been nailed for using sentence fragments, regardless of whether they intended the fragment or not. Professional writers, however, don't hesitate to use fragments when their use makes meaningful points. Michael Pollan's first chapter in *The Botany of Desire* (2001) is about the apple, which originated in central Europe. We learn all kinds of facts about the history and mythology of the apple and its chief proponent, John Chapman, aka Johnny Appleseed. In the section that precedes the following excerpt, Pollan writes about how the apple figures into Protestantism and the view of America as a new Eden. His sentence fragment could have easily been unfragmented by hooking it to the previous sentence with a comma. Instead, Pollan uses a sentence fragment to emphasize his point. He even gives it a prominent position. What should properly be the final words in a paragraph become the opening words of the next paragraph:

> [R]ecreating a promised land anywhere in the New World without an apple tree would have been unthinkable.
>
> Especially to a Protestant. There was an old tradition in northern Europe linking the grape, which flourished all through Latin Christendom, with the

> corruption of the Catholic Church, while casting the apple as the wholesome fruit of Protestantism. Wine figured in the Eucharist; also, the Old Testament warned against the temptations of the grape. But the Bible didn't have a bad word to say about the apple or even the strong drink that could be made from it. Even the most God-fearing Puritan could persuade himself that cider had been given a theological free pass. (20–21)

One of my students wrote a multigenre research paper about punk rock. As befits her antiestablishment subject, she purposely broke a lot of rules in her writing. "I didn't know a thing about punk rock," writes Jamie in the preface to her paper. "Really. Nothing, not the name of one band, the origins of the movement, the significance of it. Just this past weekend, there was a small punk rock concert outside Havighurst Hall. I quote the drummer: 'I wrote this song when I was pissed off.' This seems to be the overriding fuel behind punk rock's fire today."

In one part of her paper, Jamie embodies some of that anger by creating a character. Note Jamie's use of sentence fragments and the key three-word repetition that she alters slightly in the last three sentences when she presents readers with an unexpected insight:

> "I AM PUNK," she screams. Eyes wrenched shut, mouth stretched wide, teeth crooked in defiance. As if she wanted that one word to swallow her whole identity. Punk like the posters that sheathe her walls, the edges curling down. Loud labels and semi-famous rockers curling with them. "I am punk." She's become angry now, as if you wished to strip her of the title she's earned by wearing a dog collar and cutting her hair short. "I am punk." She stamps her feet, a maniacal dance tribute to her idols. Rebelling against everything, until there is nothing left to rebel against. An unexplainable need to cry "F you" at the world, at those controlling her, at the countless grabbing hands, coming at her from every direction. Shouting, shaking fists at the air she believes is choking her. She is punk, to hide that, deep inside, she is soft, a girl who likes to be pretty. She is punk along with thousands of others so that she'll never have to feel alone with herself and her anger. Kept safe here, she is punk.
>
> *Jamie Fuhrman, College Freshman*

## The List

The list is another strategy that assumes prominence in the alternate style. The words or phrases often appear just like a grocery list diagonally down the page. They can, however, appear as part of a perfectly grammatical sentence, though it

isn't often that you see long lists such as the following one by Joy Fowler. Joy is a writing teacher at the Cincinnati School for Creative and Performing Arts. She earned a doctorate in creative writing and children's literature through the Union Institute. For part of the requirements of her dissertation, Joy wrote a young adult historical novel, *Redheaded Angel* (2001), set during the American Civil War, or the War of Northern Aggression, as she sometimes calls it. The narrative is told from the southern point of view through the eyes of an eleven-year-old girl named Cully. In an epilogue to the novel, Joy has her expository say about the ghastliness of this particular nineteenth-century war. In this excerpt, she uses a long list to communicate some of that horror and misery:

> I cannot imagine living on a daily basis for years with the likelihood of being shot, shooting someone, having a limb sawed off on the edge of a corpse-strewn field with no anesthesia, sleeping on frozen ground, fording rivers in the winter, having all my clothes freeze stiff to my skin, being blinded by gun powder burns, never seeing my family again, having my house burnt, being raped by the enemy, being dismembered, riding twenty-five miles without sleep or food on horseback, often, then staying awake to scout, fight, or do sentry duty, seeing my friends explode, having my eardrums burst from cannon fire, watching my leg rot yellow from gangrene, dying of measles, dysentery, pneumonia by the thousands, deserting, getting caught, court-marshaled, captured, imprisoned, tortured, hanged, having my horse shot out from under me, reading untrue newspaper accounts of my actions when I was trying my hardest, hearing of a sick, maybe dying, family member and not being able to go home, being responsible for so many other trusting souls, having to keep my spirits up for appearances, keeping on in the face of insurmountable odds, believing the odds are not insurmountable.
>
> *Joy Fowler, Teacher*

Students can often use the list to cover a lot of territory and build momentum, even reaching insight, as Joy did in her final item. Students' voices are revealed in the details, meaning, and urgency of their lists.

## Double Voice

Another alternate style device popular with students is double voice. I'm not talking about dialog here but rather two voices, perhaps within the same author: an objective voice and a subjective voice, a rational voice and an emotional voice, a factual voice and an imaginative voice. Roisin O'Brien writes from competing

feelings she had after she learned she had been accepted into the graduate program in English education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Look how Roisin uses an internal debate to reveal her exhilaration and anxiety. One internal voice is conservative and safe, the other liberal and risky.

*We got in!*

Yeah, I know. Now what?

*What do you mean?*

How do we explain to people why we turned down a chance to live in New York?

*We're not turning down a chance to live in New York. We're going. "New York, New York it's a wonderful town. The Bronx is up and the Battery's down. The people ride in a hole in the ground. New York, New York."*

You can't be serious. We've lived in Boston our whole lives. We can't just uproot ourselves now and move to a city where we know almost no one. How sadistic! How depressing! Not to mention what we're in for. I mean you read the packet the English Ed. Department sent. We have to do two semesters of student teaching as part of our graduate program.

*Yeah.*

In two separate schools.

*Yeah.*

In two separate New York City public schools.

*Yeah!*

How can that sound appealing to you?

*It's life, man. How is that not appealing? I mean, come on, whatever happened to that stuff we learned in college? Didn't anything sink in? Whatever happened to sucking the marrow out of life and choosing the road less traveled? You know—poetry from experience that speaks to people like us in a time of decision. What about Shakespeare? To thine own self be true. Remember? We're only hurting ourselves if we let this opportunity pass us by.*

Yeah. (sigh). I forgot about Shakespeare. That one gets me every time. So, we're moving to New York.

*Roisin O'Brien, Teacher*

In the same multigenre paper, Roisin wrote a piece about how students dealt with her name and also how she dealt with the sexual tension and intimidation that young female high school teachers often contend with in the classroom. She communicates this through alternate style techniques—multiple voices, word fusions, graphic textual variety, the dispensing of conventional paragraphing, and

labyrinthine phrasing within a sentence fragment to more closely reflect her interior turmoil and professional resolve. Note that the first and last sentences are in perfect Grammar A form, but, oh, the inbetween is royalty:

**Rasheen Dawg**

At West Manhattan Outreach Center, the students wrote to me. Hey Rashene Hey Risheen Hey Rashid my paper is late cuz my kid was sick last night and I had to care for her. Once I got a Rasheen Dawg after I wrote to a student that his last poem was totally inappropriate so go back and rethink it. He respected that so the Dawg was a gift of acceptance. Unlike Lenny who used to call me RaSHEEN with a smirk like he knew something about me that was secret an' lowdown dirty like it was an intense turn-on to call me because we were closer in age which made me a possibility in his eyes. One night he sickened me as I read his poetry portfolio at 3 a.m. full of raped words forcingthrustingslapping on every page until I stopped and said NO. I'M NOT GRADING THIS LENNY. But miss, I did it. Ha' com? Smirkwink. It's offensive, Lenny. What? Where? C'you sit with me an' work out where? Smirkwink. Why don't you go back and put on the mindset of a woman. Then take out anything that offends you. Got it? I received it back the next day in gradable form.

*Roisin O'Brien, Teacher*

My students know we're in dangerous territory with our use of alternate style techniques. But as Meg notes in the epigraph to the chapter, the rule breaking is exhilarating. And many of my students are given pause. Most of them are going to be English teachers one day. They will be responsible for preparing students to take standardized writing tests and to write academic essays in high school and college. Their students will be required to produce "correct" writing for writing worlds in which imagination, creativity, and meaningful language play are not expected and often not recognized as revealing intelligence, intentionality, and meaning.

My students and I have vigorous discussions about "proper" grammar, audience awareness, variant word spellings, topic and voice restrictions, language change over time, grammatically high-strung fastidiousness, and the place of Grammar B in academia. One evening even a colleague of mine—a reading teacher, fine writer himself, and dedicated teacher of writing—heard our talk from the hallway and stepped into the classroom to join our discussion.

I've heard many arguments against Grammar B:

- Students need to know the rules before they break them.
- Students will produce maverick essays on formal tests of writing skills.

- Students will become irresponsible writers, sacrificing depth for glitz.
- Students will develop a great sense of freedom but no discipline.
- If students are allowed to break rules, they will not develop respect for them.

These arguments don't sway me. I teach Grammar B and also emphasize Grammar A. They are not mutually exclusive. We learn of the black space between the stars at the same time that we admire the stars. Without the dark night sky, we wouldn't even see the stars. Learning how to effectively break rules helps us learn awareness of rules. As students learn to forge and manipulate language, their respect for the craft increases. Crucial in any writing circumstance is audience awareness; alternate style techniques are not always appropriate. Smart writers scope out the needs and biases of their audience. My initial response to a student's writing always addresses meaning. When style and voice do not contribute to meaning—when they are just for show—that's bad writing. For writers the flip side of freedom is discipline. Responsible teachers emphasize both. Good writers cherish both.

Your students, like mine, might benefit from purposeful rule breaking. Prepare a handout with examples of effective sentence fragments, double voice, orthographic variation, labyrinthine sentences, and lists. Over a series of class periods, require students to break the rules in style. I encourage you to experiment with each alternate style device, too. The sharing of writing and talk about rules will lead students to deeper understanding of "correct" language use and the possibility for effective writing that breaks the rules.

Some years back I brought a piece of writing I was working on into a classroom of high school seniors. I put the poem on the overhead and began reading. Before I got far, one student interrupted me: "Hey, wait a minute. You can't break rules like that."

I could. And what's more, I did. You can too. So can your students. Purposeful rule breaking might help their voices break into the open.

Again, what are you prepared to do?

**The Day School Gives Out**
this poems gonna make you mad
maybe madder then you every been before
you seen this coming din't you
its june and your sick is rising
to many papers to many nights with them

so alls you can do now is
get your finger and thumb up under your glasses
and rub the sides of your nose
this making you mad yet
how could it miss when I aint
doing what you want and I don't
care cause its your headache not mine
in ten minutes I'll be summer
and wont touch pencils til september
so see it dont matter if this
poem fufills its purpose like you always bleive they should
you can make it say what you want
you can shove in terpretations where you damn well please
just like you done with emily dickersons poems
she been dead so long it dont matter to her anyway
an five minutes from now—just five minutes
when I'm driving my pickup
the windows down so wind blows in
rock cranked and jumping
Julie beside me with her hair mussed
an her hand against the back of my neck
my fingers slipped through the rip in her jeans
her naked knee and all that means mine
it sure as hell wont matter to me

—*Tom Romano* (1990)