

## CHAPTER ONE

# Why Writers Lose Their Original Voices



*I did not begin to write novels until I had forgotten all I had learned at school and college.*—JOHN GALSWORTHY

Da rules.

*That's* how we lose our voices. One of the ways, anyway. One of the biggest ways.

Huh? (I can hear you now.) Whaddya mean, *da rules*?

Way back in P.S. 101, the rules are what Missus Grundy drummed into our pointy little heads. You know—those carved-in-granite commands of the English language—as administered by that well-meaning, sweetheart dragon in the third grade.

In this chapter, we'll take a look at just how those rules keep us from getting to our individual voice in our writing. We'll also look at some ways to overcome what may appear at first glance to be a formidable obstacle in our journey toward publication, but is actually easily overcome, as you'll see.

Now . . . I don't mean to impugn each and every English teacher that ever drew squeaky chalk across the blackboard as she explained sentence diagramming . . . but, boy! There sure are more than one of those characters who did his or her very best to drum all the creativity

and original expression out of their charges by over-relying on the rules of grammar and formal writing. To be fair, there are also more than a few who inspired their students to become wondrous scribes. To be even fairer, I think a great teacher is behind most of us who have decided to become writers.

Alas, I think those wonderful mentors sometimes find themselves sharing caffeine in the teacher's lounge with a few more unimaginative colleagues . . .

Example: "Johnny, this is an incomplete sentence. A sentence requires a subject and a predicate. A noun and a verb. What is this I see? *Simple, Jack?* Here's the way this should be written: *It is simple, Jack.* See the difference? Now, go back to your seat, and write *It is simple, Jack.*

Remember that day? Do you realize also, that after that day, that a little evil genie (Critic Nag Dude) popped up on your shoulder and every blessed time after that incident when your fingers typed out an incomplete sentence, Critic Nag Dude smacked you up alongside your stupid head? Think about it. Bet it's true, isn't it? Oops. Sorry, Missus Grundy. I meant to say, *I will* bet it is true, isn't it?

Well, if you want to write prose containing 100 percent genuine, certified complete sentences, don't expect to be paid for your work. Why? *Simple, Jack.* The reader is guaranteed to fall asleep. Editors realize that. And editors are the ladies and gentlemen who decide if your work gets published. And they don't usually buy prose that makes people nod off after the third or fourth paragraph unless they're related to you or you have something incriminating on them.

On the tails' side of that coin, how many times did you get a paper back with "run-on sentence" or "this sentence is too long—break it up" marked in glaring red? More than once, I betcha. Maybe Jamaica Kincaid missed that admonishment—she must have, or she could have never written her brilliant short story titled "Girl"—which is a *single sentence of six hundred and eighty-six words.* (How'd you like to diagram that puppy?)

Those are but a couple of the dozens of examples of how Missus Grundy hammered your own, original, peculiar, particular, *unique*

writing style into submission, driving it closer and closer to the accepted standard. Throughout the course of this book I'll get into more such examples of how the brakes are applied to the engine of creativity.

Taking you further and further from your own voice . . .

A caveat: Don't take this to mean that you should disregard every single "rule" you've been told to follow in writing. Lots of those rules and conventions make sense, and, if followed, help you to get published. Run-on sentences aren't the kind of thing you want to break the rules with. The example of Kincaid's story isn't really a run-on sentence, but actually a very complex sentence. She's used the correct punctuation to make it work.

There are lots of other instances in which the rules and conventions of writing are sound and should be followed. We're not quarreling with most of those. Just the ones that are designed to force you to deliver that bland voice. And the way that sometimes trying too hard to follow those rules in drafts can lead to stiff writing or no writing at all.

How can you tell which "rules" to follow and which ones to ignore or break? That's a great question and a difficult one to answer. First of all, you need to recognize when a particular rule or custom may apply and you should follow it and there are other instances when it's best to forget you ever heard of the rule or the customary usage. Remember that tradition keeps changing as well as customs. It's the nature of the beast (language and prose structure—both fiction and nonfiction) we're dealing with. Keep in mind that for many of the so-called rules of writing, the particular situation at hand is the key factor in determining whether you should employ it or not. There are several ways to ascertain what the particular situation calls for.

### *Trust Your Instincts!*

First and foremost; trust your instincts. I keep relearning this. More than anything else, your own gut feeling may be the best guide to what you should do. Most of us as writers are readers and just about all of us have read a great deal of material in our lives. Just plain reading lots of stuff is the single best way to learn how to write. All that reading

## *Rules and Techniques That Will Help Take You Away From Your Voice*

Some of those rules and writing techniques being taught are:

1. **Always use complete sentences.**
2. **Combine actions with “as” and “-ing” sentence constructions.** Example: “As I stepped into the tent, I began pulling my trousers off, yanking out my choppers and blowing my nose.” First of all, many times the actions described cannot possibly be performed simultaneously as the writer intends to show. The reason I know students are being taught this is that my then-sixth-grade-son Mike had a homework assignment last year in which they were to do just that—create sentences combining actions with “as” and “-ing” constructions! Made me fume a bit, as I spend time with my writing class students urging them to quit doing that very thing! (Note: That was a *fictional* example. I don’t have false teeth. I don’t go near tents either, as they’re usually located in mosquito-infested areas . . .)
3. **Don’t use run-on sentences.** (Don’t tell that to Jamaica Kincaid!)
4. **Use the pyramid style for articles and essays.** In some (many?) journalism classes, this is still being taught. Basically, it’s a system of article-writing in which the most important info is included at the beginning of the article or story and the less important stuff at the end. The purpose of the pyramid is to allow the editor to lop off the latter paragraphs if space so dictates. As Pulitzer Prize-winning author and editor James B. Stewart clearly shows in his brilliant book, *Follow the Story: How to Write Successful Nonfiction* this method of article construction is guaranteed to lose the reader after a few paragraphs. He promulgates the technique used by writers of the publication he formerly edited, *The Wall Street Journal*, whereby articles are developed and written much like short stories, in which the important stuff is built up to and arrived in the end. This technique is the main reason the *Journal* enjoys the highest “read-through” percentages in the business (besides extraordinary writing talent by their reporters). (By the way, this is a superb book for fiction writers as well as nonfiction scribes and I cannot recommend it highly enough.)
5. **Archaic dialogue tag constructions.** “He/she/name said” is the accepted contemporary usage. “Said he/she/name is considered archaic. Also, using words

other than “said” in speaker attributions. Said should be used 99.9 percent of the time, instead of all those other synonyms such as replied, stated, shouted, screamed, breathed, yelled, and so on. The word said is almost not a word anymore. The reader sees it more as a punctuation, and as such it becomes invisible and doesn’t slow the read by making the reader aware that someone is writing the story or article.

**6. Clichés.** Last year, my son Mike brought home a sixth-grade creative-writing assignment that gave an example (of how they were to write their stories) consisting of a short-story excerpt. The example contained twenty-four sentences. And—I’m not making this up!—twenty-three of those sentences contained at least one cliché and some had several! (I had to be rushed to the hospital as I went into a deep coma from striking my head on the floor when I passed out.)

**7. Wordiness.** Students are often urged to “fluff up” essays by including lots of meaningless filler material.

**8. Overemphasis on chunks of static descriptions.** ‘Nuff said.

**9. Overemphasis on transitions between scenes.** This especially applies to transitive sentences containing connective words such as “however,” “therefore,” “on the other hand,” “furthermore,” “thus,” “in fact,” “and,” “similarly,” “and” “moreover.” Again, a rather archaic concept, as nowadays, influenced as we are by jump cuts in movies and television, transitions are increasingly short and sweet or aren’t used at all. Instead, we simply “go” to the next scene, signaled mostly by a simple line break.

**10. Being “politically correct” in content and opinion expressed.** This is (or should be!) the anathema of writers, at least those who aren’t officially employed by *Pravda*. This kind of mindset is what drives us most away from our own voices—when we have to couch our language and thoughts to fit some group’s sensibilities.

These are but a few of the rules and techniques of writing you may have been taught and encouraged to use that will keep you from effectively finding and using your own unique voice. There are many more and we’ll get to most of them as we go along.

has honed our writing instincts to the point when our senses know when something we've written "feels right" or doesn't. Trust those senses! When you realize after you've written something that you've broken a rule, reread it and see if the passage is effective and does what you wanted it to do. If it does, then leave it alone. If it doesn't achieve your purpose, try rewriting it according to whatever rule you may have broken and see if that doesn't "fix" it.

### *Research the Rules*

A second way to figure out which of those many rules are bogus is just by doing what you're doing now. Read all the writing "how-to" books and articles you can. By and by, you'll begin to see which advice is good for you and which isn't.

(Hint) If you don't yet have a standard by which to judge whether a writing book is good or not, this one is a particularly good one.

### *Get Another Opinion*

A third way is to run your material by another reader. Running it by several readers is even better. Have them tell you any "mistakes" they may spot. If more than one of your friendly readers notes the same things—especially in places in the writing where you may have consciously or subconsciously broken a rule—then you should probably be adhering to the rule there.

Be aware that some readers may not "get" what you're doing." By that, and as an example, I mean that you may have included in your style incomplete sentences (hope so!) and your friendly readers, being trained just as you were to eliminate these critters, may easily misunderstand their usage. In cases like this, be polite and thank them, but follow your own credo.

In the case of a particular rule, ask yourself how long it's been "on the books." Usually, common sense and your own knowledge of your craft will tell you if it's been there forever or not. For instance, reading books like this and observing contemporary writing will help make you aware that "said he/she/name" is nowadays considered incorrect usage.

If the particular “rule” or usage has been there a long time, look at it suspiciously. English is a living, mutating language and it’s important to realize that the rules go through many metamorphoses. Many times the textbooks and articles you find them stated in are simply lagging behind the times and the current usages.

For example, how about all that time Missus Grundy had you spend dreaming up the soufflés of writing—the similes and metaphors? Most English teachers of my acquaintance are absolutely batty about such things. Similes and metaphors by themselves ain’t that bad, but what is bad is that the teach inevitably persuades the neophyte writer to include them in deadly-dull, static description breathlessly referred to as “poetry”—usually, the two-hundred-year-old brand of poetry. You know—that stale crap about “inundating waves, slithering up like molten fiery lava onto the golden shifting sands . . .” She may have even trotted out and held up for admiration and example that hoary and hopelessly syrupy-sweet paean that begins, “I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree . . .” Yuck! Who else feels acne begin popping out on their nose when they hear stuff like that? Feel the sugar rush? If you were the kind of kid who wanted to make note of Alphonse Dingus next door who beat his retarded son every Sunday before church to be sure he remained properly quiet during the homilies, you were doomed before you began with the tools you acquired in school. To be successful, such a subject requires words like “bastard” and “shithead” more than the language of Booth Tarkington.

In truth, that kind of writing language was okay at the time it was written. There was a period in literary history when it was okay to write like that and the reader of the time enjoyed it. But . . . things change. People change. Writing changes, which means *writers* need to change as well. And, many teachers just need to realize and incorporate into their reading recommendations and assignments the caveat to judge these authors and what they’ve produced in the context of their times.

It’s certainly okay for you to enjoy prose that’s now considered dated or archaic. But, it’s counterproductive to produce material that’s no longer in vogue if you expect to get your work published. Look at the

old guys and gals, and be attentive to the stages writing techniques have progressed through, and you'll truly learn something about the craft, and what rules are still in action.

### *An Example of How Writing Stuff Has Changed . . .*

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (two volumes, over nine hundred pages) is considered by many to be the first fully-developed "psychological novel" ever written.

Written in an epistolary style, the novel is a series of letters from the title character back home to her mum from her post as a servant to Mr. B. who's trying to sleep with her, the fiction enjoyed huge success when it came out in Merrie Olde England in 1740. The good Mr. B. is doing his level best to bed the fair Pamela and she's frantically scribbling accounts of these attempts and how she's holding out for marriage. You can almost see her, trapped inside a closet, one hand on the door to keep out her amorous boss and the other writing furiously home to mom about what a pickle she's in. The fiction came out in serial form and when the last installment was released and Mr. B. finally broke down in defeat and asked for Pamela's hand in marriage, villagers rang the church bells and hooted and hollered all over England like their team had just won the NCAA national basketball championship. Pamela's "victory" represented a huge step forward for democracy. One of the lower classes managed to actually wed a member of the nobility, unheard of in that day. Stirring stuff, in those days. Readers couldn't wait for the next installment to see how Pam was making out.

Today, we'd kind of wonder why Pam even wanted to marry the boob. Why she didn't just hike on down to Starbucks and meet a nice young stockbroker . . . Or one of those cool creative types . . . like a writer. Today, it would bomb at the box office. That was then, this is now.

Besides being overlong, the other reason it would fail is because of the influence of television and the Internet affecting society's attention span. We no longer are willing (or have the time!) to wade through

voluminous books such as *Pamela*. Even literary fiction has to move fast these days.

That's the point I'm trying to make here. Not that you shouldn't appreciate older writing, but that you should move ahead with the times. Also, it's not just older writing you probably shouldn't be imitating in your own efforts. Aping current authors is sometimes just as bad. Just be yourself!

### *The Problem With Synonyms*

At this precise moment, my own son is being drilled on something called *synonyms* in class sessions. Only teachers are aware of such a thing as a synonym. Writers—at least *good* writers—find out early on that no such thing exists. There is only the one perfect word. Or, to paraphrase Mark Twain, “The difference between *lightning* and *lightning bug* be humongous, homeboy.”

That's a bit facetious. Of course, there are such animals as synonyms. It's also probably important to know of their existence. The problem lies when we're advised to just pick up a thesaurus and choose a substitute. The result is usually a text loaded with those kinds of obvious substitutions. Which only mutilates your own voice and personality on the page. Instead of (your name here)'s voice, we get Mr. Roget's.

### *The Reason for Synonyms*

In the case of synonyms, it would help if we were also aware of why exactly we use 'em.

Three reasons. Ranked in order of importance, for most cases.

#### **1. We change to new words for meaning.**

The original word didn't quite convey the exact meaning we were after. This is probably the best of all reasons to seek out a synonym. There is, after all, only one perfect word. Many times, in our first draft, we're just trying to get the material down. That deal where we turn off the left brain . . . Then, when we go back, we see the word we've chosen has been the choice that would have been made by a writer with the

brain power of Cheez Doodles and doesn't say what we really mean to say. Or, we've got both sides of the skull engaged (as I prefer to do) and we stop until we figure out the only right word. Either way is fine. The problem comes when we get lazy again and just pick the first substitute that sounds half-way right. That's when our use of synonyms fails to reach the goal.

For an interesting "real-life" example of when a writer might change words, one of my editors at *Writer's Digest Books* told me of an incident that happened to her. In Rachel Vater's own words: "Once I interviewed an agent and I wanted to say in the article that she chose the authors she represented very carefully, that she was \_\_\_\_\_. I couldn't find the word. I put choosey for the first draft, and when I let the agent review it, she asked me to switch the word to 'discerning.' That still wasn't the word I wanted. It was more of a character trait than an adjective to describe the process rather than the agent. I tried again with 'particular,' but that sounded too snobbish. Finally, I had my 'Eureka!' experience when I found the exact word I meant: 'selective.' It adequately conveyed the meaning that she couldn't take everything that came across her desk. Not because she was mean, condescending or snobby, but because she had limited amounts of time and resources to devote to her clients."

As Raymond Obstfeld tells us in his excellent book, *Fiction First Aid*, voice is the most important element of style. It's the one component that is unique to the individual author. And, how you achieve your own voice is governed largely by the words you select to place on the page. When you select the *only* word *you* feel fits in a particular sentence, then you've made *your* choice—a choice many others wouldn't have made—and the accumulation of those choices is largely what determines your own style.



Okay!

Cool!

That's all you need to do. Now, put this book down and get cracking, writing.

Kidding . . .

There's more.



Obstfeld compares the writer's voice to Aristotle's definition of "*essence*," which was: "The essence of something is that special quality without which that something would no longer be what it is." He (Obstfeld, not Aristotle) gives the example of a horse to illustrate this. He tells us, "Though there are many possible ways to describe a horse (e.g., an animal with four legs, an animal that can be ridden), these descriptions aren't exclusive to a horse. A cow or even some dogs will fit. But there is something about a horse, its essence, that makes it uniquely a horse and not any other animal. Without that essence, it would cease being a horse."

And that's the only synonym you should want. The word that best fits the "horse" you're trying to convey to the reader. Your choice will be different than mine. Or, maybe not. But, when you apply this standard to all of your word choices and the synonyms you seek out, the accumulation of those choices will reveal your style and will be different from the choices I make. Or that anyone else will make.

Unless . . . Unless, you just pick the first handy substitute from your Roget's. That method of choosing is what gives synonyms a bad name and is the basis for my statement that, "good writers—find out early on that no such thing (a synonym) exists."

## **2. The second reason we reach for a synonym is for *sound*.**

This is a very good reason for you to seek out a different word than the one you plunked down originally. As you know, reading is largely an *aural* experience. We "hear" the narrator relating the story. If the voice jars or bores or represents a cliché, we switch it off by putting down the story or article. It therefore behooves us as authors to provide a pleasant and interesting "sound" of our voices for the reader. One

of the reasons it's important to always read your stuff aloud when rewriting it. To give the piece the rhythm and pleasurable combinations of words that fall delightfully on the ear. To make the writing simply *sound* better is a wonderful reason to look for a synonym.

Example: *He was a big man.*

Better: *He was a fat man.*

No, wait! That wasn't the one.

Better: *He was an "I've-quit-counting-calories" man.*

Or, here's a great example from Francois Camoin, one of my mentors at Vermont College, in his short story, "Baby, Baby, Baby."

First, how *I* would have probably written it:

Bad example (mine): *On the far side of the room, under the frolicking dogs, the twins are playing.*

Francois's excellent version: *On the far side of the room, under the moiling dogs, the twins are playing.*

Moiling! What a fantastic word!

Here's one mo'. From my own story, "Blue Skies" in my collection titled *Monday's Meal*.

First writing: *I was getting anxious to get back to Houma and get out a canvas.*

Rewritten (and much better, I think): *I was getting itchy to get back to Houma and get out a canvas.*

A lot of poets know this. More fiction and nonfiction writers should.

Just watch that you don't sacrifice the perfect meaning of the word you want for its sound. Look for the only word—and there will be only one perfect word—that does both. Conveys the perfect meaning (according to your lamps)—*and* carries the right sound that reflects *your* voice.

### **3. Lastly, the third reason we use synonyms is because we want to avoid repetition.**

This, I suspect, is the reason most of us look for a different word. The weakest of reasons. Not that it's not important to avoid overusing words, but not if the only reason you grab the thesaurus is that you've

noticed you've used the word "beguiling" four times in the last three pages. It's a given that you don't want to use a word like this that much, but the sin is when the person who wrote this reaches for the thesaurus (or worse, clicks on the godawful ("godawful" in this instance is a synonym for "stupid") thesaurus in most word processing programs!) and uses the first word he or she sees for a substitute.

If you don't believe word processing program thesauruses are terrible (sorry, Mr. Gates), I just clicked mine on for the word "beguiling." Here's the choices it gave: *pleasant, gratifying, delightful, agreeable, enjoyable* and *amusing*. Huh? *Gratifying* means much the same thing as *beguiling*? Or any of those? I'd had some prior experience with these kinds of thesauruses, so I can't say I was knocked to the floor overcome with hysterical giggles by the choices offered—well, maybe just a titch—but it does make you kind of wonder who compiles these things, doesn't it! Curious, I keyed in the word "beguile" to see what Computer Thesaurus Monkey would give me. This proved a bit more accurate. The choices offered for that were: *deceive, hoax, trick, cheat, victimize, delude, mislead, swindle* and *seduce*. Do you suppose the same person came up with the synonyms for each form of the word? Maybe somebody on the same committee, but probably not the same person. My guess is that the author of the original list needs to hie himself to a dictionary first and learn the meaning of the word before he begins listing synonyms for it! At least talk to his co-committee pal.

Synonyms have their place in the writer's toolbox, but maybe not quite in the ways some of us have been instructed to use them. Certainly not in just substituting to avoid repetition, which is the most common reason to do so given by many of those in charge of our young, eager writer's minds.

Use synonyms . . . but use them for the right reasons. And, for gosh sakes!—use the only *perfect* word. Not the first one that looks halfway right. Don't stop looking until you find the only word that's right for what you're trying to say. To say in *your* voice.

Do you begin to see how the Stovetop Originality Stuffing was

knocked out of you? The advice and instruction generally given just on synonyms is only one example, but I think an illustrative one.

### *The Role of Rules*

Don't get the wrong idea. This isn't meant to be a harangue against the rules of the English language. Rules are important. The thing is, they're not IMPORTANT. Meaning, they're not all-inclusive, meant never to be broken. Therein lies much of the problem, said problem being an inflexible approach by more than one writing authority figure in her teaching of writing skills, bound by the chains of standardized writing.

The "standardized" version of writing taught in say, the sixth grade? "You must have five paragraphs in your essay, and the first paragraph must have a thesis sentence in which you specify the three main points of your paper, and each paragraph must have four to seven sentences, and each sentence must have eight to ten words."

Well, okay . . .

(You, there in the back row. Tracy Kidder. You just got an F . . . I don't care how many books you've sold, mister. . . .)

### *How We Learn vs. How We're Taught*

Reading lots and lots of books and stories that have attained actual print is how published writers learn their craft. The more you read, the more you'll learn that what you're reading breaks just about every "rule" and goes against just about every example you were exposed to back in P.S. 101. Or in college, even, although the odds get better in higher education that you'll be exposed to a teacher who recognizes some of those things. For one thing, more than a few college creative writing profs are hired on the basis of their own publications. And that means they've figured out that what Missus Grundy taught them years ago was perhaps not altogether the Gospel According to Joshua The Wordsmith. Literature profs are a different story, however . . .

When I begin teaching a new class on creative writing, I'm always amazed at the one or two people who always show up who have just

decided they have a burning ambition to become a writer . . . and haven't opened a book in years except maybe to attain a larger striking area to hit that pesky fly with. I don't think theirs is going to be an easy road to success . . .

I've spent some time here bashing English teachers and I apologize to those who don't fit the examples I've provided. For there are many teachers who do a wonderful job. Usually, they're up against it, as what they're teaching doesn't adhere to the pedagogy and they know going in they'll be in the minority of their colleagues. These are some downright brave souls! As a disclaimer, I really don't mean to create or perpetuate a stereotype of English teachers as a whole. The fact remains, however, that a certain number of those teachers are just about the worst thing that can appear in a budding writer's life.

Like many such things, the rationale behind teaching a set of rules is well-intentioned and has a worthy purpose at the heart of it. When we begin writing as kids, we're undisciplined in general and just haven't read all that much. Most five-year-olds have barely dipped into the canon, as a matter of fact . . . As writing is communication, it's the teacher's job to guide us so that we're understandable to others on paper. Almost all of the rules being taught were created with that purpose in mind.

Nothing wrong with that! In fact, for most students, a good thing. Most people aren't going to become writers. They're going to become engineers, dentists, retail clerks, cab drivers, arsonists and a million other things. Following the rules of writing is important to most folks so they can communicate on a basic level.

As writers who hope to be published, we're different. We *have* to be different! We have to escape a neutral, "faceless" voice and recapture our own if we want to be successful. Exactly what we're about here . . .

It's also one thing to cast aspersions at the behavior of a person or a group—that's easy enough to do—but the job is only half-done (and will appear "whiny") if it's left at that. To offer up a solution is the really important work of such a discourse.

And . . . I just happen to have a solution!

It's a simple one and can be described in one word: Context.

### *How It Was vs. How It Is*

There is nothing wrong with reading and paying attention to, for example, the work of the past “masters” of literature as models for good writing. As one of our best writers, Jim Harrison said when asked for advice to beginning writers, “Just start at page one and write like a son of a bitch.” No, wait. That was for something else. For our purpose here, he said, “*Be totally familiar with the entirety of the western literary tradition. How can you write well unless you know what passes for the best; in the last three or four hundred years?*” It's vitally important to be acquainted intimately with the work of those geniuses who preceded us, as Mr. Harrison so eloquently pointed out. The mistake many of us make in doing so, is to study these authors without a necessary caveat. A qualification of context. It's important to study Faulkner and Thackeray and Pope . . . but *in the context of the period in which they were writing*. That's the vital ingredient that's missing in most such instruction and advice to the writer. *In the context . . .*

If you're unfamiliar with Harrison's work, check out his collection of three novellas, titled *The Woman Lit by Fireflies* or any of his other novels and nonfiction books. You may also have seen the movie made of one of his novels by the same name, *Legends of the Fall*. He's a brilliant writer and worthy of study. He's also an epicurean and used to write a cooking column for *Esquire* magazine. Each year, he hosts a wild game feast at his home in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and I have two recurring daydreams that will represent literary success for me should either occur—the first of which is being invited to Harrison's annual gourmet feast (I hear he's great with whitefish!)—and the second is knocking back brewskies with Woody Allen and Norman Mailer at Elaine's . . .

(If any of you guys are reading this, my phone number's listed and I can be there in a nanosecond . . .)

## Stream-of-Consciousness Prose

For instance, the aforementioned Faulkner and Proust were the first to provide “*stream-of-consciousness*” in their prose. Alas, compared to the stream-of-consciousness of today’s writers, their efforts were somewhat clunky. Just as the designers of the Model T and the Stutz-Bearcat came up with revolutionary and exciting designs for the automobile, those designs are regarded in today’s eyes as awkward when compared to the sleek car models of today, so are Mssrs. Faulkner and Proust’s efforts. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t revere the earlier auto designs, nor should we pay less homage to earlier authors. The thing is, if Billy Faulkner were alive and writing in today’s era, his books would be written much differently. He would have had the benefit of all the advances in writing craft since his day. And, being the genius he was, he would be pushing the envelop in an entirely different way. *That* information is what is usually not taken into account when we look at the example of *As I Lay Dying* for instance. Along with Mssrs. Faulkner and Proust, it’d be a good idea to take a look at a story or two of Gordon Lish’s who does the stream-of-consciousness thing a whole lot slicker.

Hey, he (Lish) *should* be doing it better! He’s a smart guy and he’s also had the advantage of seeing stream-of-consciousness evolve from its early days until the present. If Faulkner had had the same advantage, who knows to what new heights he would have taken the technique!

There seems to often be a connection between the teaching of the rules of writing and the teaching of the canon itself. Sci-fi writers call this phenomenon “trapped in a time warp.” (So do non-sci-fi writers . . .) Punctuation rules are a good example of this. The thing is, punctuation and syntax and all those things have changed, but sometimes you’re not being apprised of that.

Have a look at the punctuation that’s used in some older work. Notice anything? How about colons? Bet you a dollar, you spot at least a few of those puppies in work over fifty years old. *As I Lay Dying* is chock-full of them. Colons were a much-used punctuation in those days. Today, they’ve fallen into disfavor (as have semicolons) and when we encounter them, they have a kind of “musty” look to them. Today,

the double dash or “em” dash has pretty well taken their place. Makes the work—especially fiction—look a lot less formal than it used to.

### Syntax

Check out the noticeable paucity of sentence fragments in older work. You’ll find a few, but by and large, sentences were complex (and complete) back in the “day.” Check out anything by the James’ brothers, Mssrs. Henry Jr. and William, those preeminent scholars, philosophers and psychologists, who wrote those weighty (literally!) tomes, *Portrait of a Lady* (Henry), and *The Meaning of Truth* (William).

Just one more thing that used to be a “rule” (complete sentences), that these days is considered fine and dandy to not follow. Your work needs partial and incomplete sentences to be contemporary. Necessary, if you want to provide the kind of voice that readers want these days. *Your* voice. How many complete sentences do *you* utter in the course of your average conversation?

Another good example might be Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. While I personally think Mr. Melville would find it hard to get published under *any* circumstance today unless he was able to track down a consortium of English professors who owned a printing press, if he did, the editor would cut the first third of his “classic.” It’s basically a treatise on “everything you never wanted to know about whales.” In his day, this was fascinating stuff.

Folks back then didn’t have the Discovery Channel, for instance, and unless you lived in a whaling town in Massachusetts, you probably didn’t know squat about whales, and the kind of info Herm gave in his book was doubtlessly riveting to the reader in that age. Again, Melville would have written the same book in a vastly different style and with totally different content for much of it, should he be alive and putting quill to paper today. (Although, he’d most likely be sitting down before a keyboard!) Also, *Moby Dick* (like most books of that era) is full of large chunks of languorous, slow-moving static description, a technique that has pretty near vanished these days. Today’s description is active and doesn’t interrupt the flow of the narrative as it did in

Herman's slower day when information and entertainment wasn't being blasted at folks from every quarter imaginable. Today's books have to compete with TV sitcoms, feature movies, direct-to-video offerings at Blockbuster, and presidential contests (and misdeeds) on CNN. Nobody's going to sit and read sixty pages of a whale's migrating habits unless they just have entirely too much time on their hands! Would you?

To repeat: The key component that's missing in much of the advice we're given in looking at past writers is simply *context*. Insert that into the equation, and we'll all be better off, writers *and* readers. You really should read those grand old dames and gents of the literary arts . . . but juxtapose what they did against the backdrop of their times and you'll come away from the experience with lots of worthwhile tips to help your own writing. Use that basic Model-T body you've just learned about to design a vehicle that looks more like something you'd see on Pacific Coast Highway or the Dan Ryan Expressway today.

Here's a fun exercise that will give you a clear idea of how writing has changed.



### *Context Exercise*

Choose a book, a short story or an article from your favorite writer, one whose work is at least fifty years old. Select a favorite passage and type it out. Try to analyze how the sentences work. Compare it with a piece of your own that uses similar material, paying particular attention to how you both handle the elements listed below.

1. Scenery descriptions (active or passive?)
2. Dialogue
3. Flashbacks or backstory
4. Dialogue tags or attributions
5. Use of adverbs and adjectives
6. Use of punctuation and grammar
7. Elaborate transitions
8. Any idiosyncrasy that seems archaic or "odd" to you

Take notes on the differences. Underline the sentences, words, punctuation, etc., that seems to be “different,” or that you felt violated current usage.

That done, rewrite your selected author’s passage, this time in your own style, consulting the notes you took on the differences.

Here’s an example of how to do this exercise. Let’s say the author you picked was Charlotte Brontë and the book, her classic, *Jane Eyre*. You decided to type out a portion of chapter one and have underlined various sentences that you felt were dated or using techniques, punctuation, grammar, etc., that’s not used these days. (I’ve numbered each instance for ease of reference in the commentary that follows.)

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning;<sup>1</sup> but since dinner (*Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early*)<sup>2</sup> the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further *out-door*<sup>3</sup> exercise was now out of the question.

I was glad of it:<sup>4</sup> I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons:<sup>5</sup> dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed.

*The said*<sup>6</sup> Eliza, John, and Georgiana were now clustered round their mama in the drawing-room;<sup>7</sup> she lay reclined on a sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings about her (*for the time neither quarreling nor crying*)<sup>8</sup> looked perfectly happy. Me, she had dispensed from joining the group;<sup>9</sup> saying, “*She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance;*<sup>10</sup> *but that until she heard from Bessie, and could discover by her own observation that I was endeavouring*<sup>11</sup> *in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner,—*<sup>12</sup> *something*

*lighter, franker, more natural as it were—she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy, little children*<sup>13</sup>.”<sup>14</sup>

“What does Bessie say I have done?” *I asked*<sup>15</sup>.

I’ve marked fifteen different instances in which Brontë did something that we wouldn’t see in contemporary prose. Language, spelling, punctuation, etc., that were fine to use in 1847 but don’t fly in the early part of the twenty-first century. I could have pointed out more, but this is enough to give you a good idea of how much writing has changed. Let’s go over each of them in the order they appear.

**1. Semicolon:** Here, Brontë has used a semicolon. Semicolons and colons are considered mostly archaic punctuations in fiction these days. They’re still used in more formal writing forms such as company reports, research papers, academic papers, and the like, but in fiction semicolons have been replaced by commas and colons have been replaced with double- or em-dashes. Or, sometimes by simply ending the sentence at that point with a period. In this instance, a contemporary writer would most likely have used a comma instead of a semicolon as Brontë did here.

**2. Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early:** Here, the offending punctuation is the use of parentheses. This is a form of addressing the reader—that “Dear Reader” style that was very much in vogue in those days. Writers (and readers) in the 1800s viewed such a technique as a way to provide a kind of intimacy with the reader. These days, we see such variations of the “Dear Reader” technique as not desirable, as it interrupts the fictive dream by making the reader aware that someone is writing it. *Jane Eyre* is chock-full of such parenthetical asides, as is much of the literature of that period. The “fictive dream” refers to that “dream-like state” we want to transport our readers into, which is the entire purpose of fiction and a large part of effective nonfiction, a state in which the readers “suspend their disbelief.”

**3. Out-door:** This is relatively minor. Nowadays, this word

wouldn't be hyphenated, but spelled "outdoor." Hyphenated words come about from pairing two words which weren't used in combination much before, but after repeated usage over time, the hyphen is dropped and the word is spelled as a single word. No biggie—it simply shows us a word that has evolved from Brontë's day.

**4. and 5. Colons:** We've already talked about semicolons and colons. While you may sometimes still see a semicolon from time-to-time, colons are pretty much out. A double-dash or an em dash is used today instead. (Em-dashes are like this—while double-dashes are like this--. Both do the same thing.) Where you might see such punctuation in current usage is usually in the work of an older writer, for whom, when they began writing, such punctuation was considered proper. You also might see it in the work of writers from other countries, particularly in the writings of those from England, Canada, and other societies with close cultural ties to western European countries. A writer such as the brilliant Canadian author Margaret Atwood, for instance, will be able to get away with these punctuations and that's fine for them. A newer Canadian writer and novelist, such as my buddy and classmate from Vermont College, Julie Brickman, may not.

**6. The said:** "The said" or "the aforementioned" is simply a case of dated language no longer used when referring to a character. It's just too stiffly formal these days.

**7. through 10. Semicolons and parentheses:** You'll notice these examples are used throughout the passage, and so won't be singled out here.

**11. endeavouring:** Archaic, "English" spelling. Still used in Canada and England and a few other countries, but the U.S. spelling would be "endeavoring."

**12. comma, immediately followed by a double dash or an em dash:** Most definitely an archaic form of punctuation! *Never* is a comma followed by a double dash or an em dash used today. The comma needs to disappear.

**13. contented, happy, little children:** Again, not a biggie and this one may be open to argument or a different interpretation. The "error"

I see here is in the profusion of adjectives. A common fault of many writers is to provide more than one adjective in a description in an effort to make the description “stronger.” The same thing is often done with verbs and adverbs. What actually happens, is that with each addition, the effect desired is weakened by half. As great a writer as Brontë was, I think this applies also to her sentence above. The word “little” is not needed at all for the word “children” implies that they’re little. Also, “happy” is a very similar synonym for “contented” and is likewise not necessary. I think her sentence would be more powerful if she completely lost the word “little” and also just used one of the two remaining adjectives. The style in her time was a more effusive, “wordy” kind of writing, and this wouldn’t have jarred the sensibilities of a reader in 1847, but chances are pretty good it would today.

**14. This refers to the dialogue as a whole:** Brontë has given the reader summarized dialogue, but presented it as direct dialogue as evidenced by the quotation marks around it. Today, such summarized dialogue wouldn’t be presented with quotation marks, but either in italics or more probably, just without the quote marks to indicate it isn’t a direct quote from the character. The overall language is also decidedly of another era. Such ornate language today would be considered stifling and overly-formal. She’s also pairing bunches of adjectives which we don’t do much of these days, having found that with the addition of each new adjective the effect is weakened.

**15. I asked:** Again, this isn’t a major example if it were simply an occasional usage, but I’ve included it because in Brontë’s novels, this is an often-recurring technique of hers—using other verbs for dialogue attribution other than the ubiquitous “said.” Today, writers are aware that he/she/name “said” should be used 99.9 percent of the time, as “said” has become nearly invisible with usage—it’s almost a punctuation rather than a word these days—and so doesn’t intrude upon the read, providing a speed bump in the fictive dream. Back in her day, writers were still encouraged to find substitutes for “said.” Sadly, many teachers today are still providing the same mistaken encouragement. ■

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## *Transitions*

I didn't get into transitions with the above example, so will expound a bit on those puppies. Teachers used to (still do?) spend a lot of time on teaching neophyte writers how to create transitions between scenes. Don't use 'em these days. At least not as much and they're short if they're even in there. Why not? Well, because it seems that in this country, we spend a lot of time watching movies. We spend a lot of money at the ol' Bijou. Something like eighteen trillion dollars is spent per month at the theater in the U.S.A. (My figures could be a little off, but I think I'm in the ballpark here.) Anyway, check out old movies and look at the transitions made then—pretty much like the ones that used to be taught in writing. Long, labored and absolutely screaming to the viewer that, *Hey!, we're going someplace else now! Pay attention!* Then, check out how they make transitions in current flicks. Nowadays, instead of clever and lengthy transitions for when the movie goes from the bedroom of the lovers in midtown Manhattan to the war raging in Switzerland, the director uses a technique called a *jump cut*. Meaning, it just “jumps” to the next scene. No transition. Which is what we're doing in fiction these days. No transitions other than a space break, or at the most, skimpy transitions. We just leap forward to the next scene and the reader “gets it” just as the movie viewer does. We've been trained by the movies to do so. Makes the eighteen trillion we spend on them a month a worthwhile investment, doesn't it . . .

Getting back to the rest of the analysis shown earlier, this is the sort of scrutiny you should use when you perform your own exercise. What will happen is you will become more and more aware of how much writing has changed over the years, and knowing its evolution will only help you gain your own, *contemporary* voice. The voice that will get you published.

Each time you do this exercise you'll see more examples of archaic writing and writing technique than you did the previous time.

And what do you do with that information?

By becoming more and more aware of what *used* to pass as good writing and what is required in *today's* world, you'll begin to develop

a more acute sense of what you may have picked up and included in your own writing that needs to be changed or updated.

A sense that gets you even closer to your own voice.



Listen to what famed writer and playwright George Bernard Shaw has to say about gaining your own voice. Shaw says, “In literature, the ambition of the novice is to acquire the literary language; the struggle of the adept is to get rid of it.”

He’s nailed it.



Da rules.

Understand ’em.

So you can break the shackles they impose.

Past masters in literature.

Know their work.

Know the context of their work.

So you can go beyond what they did.

Come with me as we learn how to do just that.



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### *Exercise*

Ready to do some writing? Let’s begin by uncomplicating our language. Take a recent event in the news and write a three paragraph story or article about it as if you were involved as a character or participant.

Only . . . except for proper nouns, you’re only allowed to use words of one syllable!

You’ll find what you come up with to be minus the flowery verbiage and close to the voice you had long ago and have since misplaced, perhaps.

This is how we start to regain our voices. ■

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1. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, by Janet Burroway. (The rest of these and the rest of my “recommendations” that follow could be arranged in any order, but Burroway’s book, in my opinion, is the single best text on writing craft in print at this time.)
2. *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, Lajos Egri.
3. *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*, by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter.
4. *Fiction First Aid*, by Raymond Obstfeld.
5. *Your Life as Story: Discovering the “New Autobiography” and Writing Memoir as Literature*, by Tristine Rainer.
6. *On Writing Well*, by William Zinsser.
7. *Follow the Story: How to Write Successful Nonfiction*, James B. Stewart.
8. *On Becoming a Novelist*, John Gardner.
9. *Revision*, David Michael Kaplan.
10. *Writing a Book That Makes a Difference*, Philip Gerard.
11. *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell.
12. *Story*, Robert McKee.
13. *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster.
- 13A. (Okay, so I cheated. So sue me . . . I just had to get this one in here. Think of it this way—you’re getting a big, fat baker’s dozen . . .) *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera.
- 13B. (Okay, okay! So I’m a big fat liar and my pants are on fire! How’s that for a couple of clichés I for one never hear enough . . . How can I leave this one out of my top tomes?) *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*, Rust Hills. (If you haven’t read this, after you do I dare you to tell me I shoulda left it out . . .)



Remember, these are only my selections and are based on my own needs as a writer. Your list may and probably will be, quite different. These are just the books I return to, time and again, and except for

*Fiction First Aid*, which came out relatively recently, I've read and reread the others for years. I expect to do the same with Obstfeld's book as well.

The following are all books I own and found useful.

1. *The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes (And How to Avoid Them)*, Jack M. Bickham.
2. *Magazine Writing That Sells*, Don McKinney.
3. *Starting From Scratch*, Rita Mae Brown.
4. *Writers and Company*, Eleanor Wachtel.
5. *Write From Life: Turning Your Personal Experiences Into Compelling Stories*, Meg Files.
6. *Finding Your Writer's Voice: A Guide to Creative Fiction*, Thaisa Frank and Dorothy Wall.
7. *Characters and Viewpoint*, Orson Scott Card.
8. *Drinking, Smoking and Screwing: Great Writers on Good Times*, edited by Sara Nickles.
9. *The Right to Write: An Invitation and Initiation Into the Writing Life* and *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron.
10. *Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction—And Get it Published*, Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato.
11. *Building Fiction: How to Develop Plot and Structure*, Jesse Lee Kercheval.
12. *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*, edited by Christopher W. French.
13. *How to Write a Book Proposal*, Michael Larsen.
14. *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, edited by James D. Hart.
15. *Spider, Spin Me a Web*, Lawrence Block.
16. *You Can Write a Memoir*, Susan Carol Hauser.
17. *Strictly Murder: A Writer's Guide to Criminal Homicide*, Martin Roth.
18. *How to Write and Sell Your First Nonfiction Book*, Oscar Collier with Frances Spatz Leighton.
19. *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, Evan Marshall.