

# Beyond Grammar: The Richness of English Language, or the Zero-Tolerance Approach to Rigid Rules

*Effective writers—  
professionals and  
students—break  
traditionally taught rules  
frequently. So why teach  
students rules that writers  
don't actually follow?*

One of the best ways to experience the richness of contemporary American nonfiction is to read the essays collected in the Houghton Mifflin *Best American Essays* series. Writers of these prize-winning essays draw on *all* the resources of the English language and frequently invent new ones. They also go “beyond grammar” frequently, though they do not violate the bedrock rules of English syntax. What they often do *not* do, however, is observe the advice and warnings commonly suggested by some style manuals, handbooks, and teachers.

The argument that one must learn the rules before one can break them has no validity if the rules to be learned are not rules in the first place.

As English teachers, we bear the responsibility of offering young writers guidance—of teaching them stylistic “rules,” if you will. But as thoughtful writing teachers, we are also responsible for observing what effective writers actually do, and if that contradicts the rules we’re teaching, then the rules must be overruled. Otherwise, our students will come away from our classes with misconceptions about good writing.

Through the following examples of good writing, I will illustrate that professional and student writers flout or ignore some commonly taught admonitions as they call on the rich resources of our language to express themselves with clarity and vigor. My primary interest is not simply naming the ill-advised “rules” but rather exploring *why* good writers do not follow them, and in demonstrating that there are valid reasons for breaking many of the style rules we commonly teach as unbreakable. I invite my readers to do the same.

## Writerly Richness: Richard Rodriguez and an Eleventh-Grade Student

The first selection below is a paragraph from Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory*; the second is the first, third, and fourth paragraphs of an essay written by an eleventh-grade student who was responding to a writing prompt in a state test. Both pieces have won high praise from English teachers, yet both violate the following admonitions:

- Avoid the passive voice.
- Avoid using forms of *be* as main verbs.
- Do not begin sentences with conjunctions.
- Do not write sentence fragments.

As you discover the violations, please ask yourself why the writers chose to express themselves as they did. After discussing each, I will present some facts about their use by good writers.

OPEN THE DOORS OF YOUR MIND WITH BOOKS, read the red and white poster over the nun’s desk in early September. It soon was apparent to me that reading was the classroom’s central activity. Each course had its own book. And the information gathered from a book was unquestioned. READ TO LEARN, the sign on the wall advised in December. I privately wondered: What was the connection between reading and learning? Did one learn something by reading it? Was an idea only an idea if it could be written down? In June, CONSIDER BOOKS YOUR BEST FRIENDS. Friends? Reading was, at best, only a chore. I needed to look up whole paragraphs of words in a dictionary. Lines of type were dizzying, the eye having to move slowly across the page,

then down, and across . . . The sentences of the first books I read were coolly impersonal. Toned hard. What most bothered me, however, was the isolation reading required. To console myself for the loneliness I'd feel when I read, I tried reading in a very soft voice. Until: "Who is doing all that talking to his neighbor?" Shortly after, remedial reading classes were arranged for me with a very old nun. (Rodriguez 63)

Sweet sixteen. Ahhh . . . driver's license, car, new found freedom and independence. These were the words which came to my mind on my sixteenth birthday. My parents paused my jubilation though when they uttered the words they associated with sixteen years old: get a job. The sheer thought of blindly going out and talking with strangers about my future employment status was absolutely terrifying. Rejection? Let's not even go there.

The first place I went into was a card shop. I smiled at the woman who gently informed me that they weren't hiring. Okay, I thought, move along. I thanked her and went on to the video store. Yes, they were looking for applicants. So I filled out an application (talk about tedious) and left my resume. I had gotten four more applications done by the time my mom came around again.

About three days went by without any word, when out of the blue came a call from Loafer's, a family-owned bread company. They wanted to interview me as soon as possible. My stomach was in knots as the questions were fired at me from a lanky guy partially hidden behind a stained white apron. He seemed about as friendly as I was nervous, extremely. He told me he would call the next day. (Schuster, *Breaking* 94)

### Avoid the passive voice.

Strunk and White say, simply, "Use the active voice" (18). George Orwell's fourth rule of good writing is "Never use the passive where you can use the active" (481). (Any passive can be converted to an active, as far as I know.) Stephen King writes: "*You should avoid the passive tense*" (116; emphasis in original). Yet in the passages above, both the professional and the student use a passive. Compare

their sentences with the active versions. Is the active or the passive the better choice?

Passive: . . . remedial reading classes were arranged for me with a very old nun.

Active: . . . the school arranged remedial reading classes for me with a very old nun.

Presumably, Rodriguez wanted the "object," or receiver—"remedial reading classes"—up front, which the passive allows. Moreover, the "subject" or agent—the arranger of the change—is of no consequence here.

Let's look at the student's passive and its active revision:

Passive: My stomach was in knots as the questions were fired at me from a lanky guy partially hidden behind a stained white apron.

Active: My stomach was in knots as a lanky guy partially hidden behind a stained white apron fired the questions at me.

The active version here would require the insertion of ten words before the reader learns why the author's stomach was "in knots."

**Some facts:** In reality, there are many good reasons for preferring the passive to the active. A reporter on that fateful day of November 22, 1963, in Dallas wrote, "The President was shot," not "Someone shot the President," and Willy Loman's wife bemoaned, "So attention must be paid," not "So you/society must pay attention." See Joseph M. Williams's comments on the passive in *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. Williams maintains that "the main reason the passive exists in the language [is] to improve cohesion and emphasis" (55). This is not a consideration typically discussed in handbooks or classrooms.

**The bottom line:** A much better rule than "Avoid the passive" is "Regard the passive as an evil only when the active would be more effective."

### Avoid using forms of *be* as main verbs.

The rationale for this admonition is that *be* is a static verb; students should hunt for more active verbs—forceful, even vivid verbs. But what do

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writers do? In the paragraph, Rodriguez uses a form of *be* (*was* or *were*) nine times, and he clearly is not seeking verbal wizardry in his other choices as a listing reveals: *read, was, was, had, was, advised, wondered, was, learn, was, written, was, look up, were, read, were, toned, bothered, was, required, feel, read, tried, arranged.*

The student uses *be* as a main verb only four times, but she too does not stretch for vividness of verbs. For instance, she uses *come* and *go* eight times.

**Some facts:** In a study of the verbs used in excerpts from essays by George Orwell and E. B. White, I found that Orwell used a form of *be* as a main verb 40% of the time; White, 46% of the time. In a favorite poem of mine, “Debris of Life and Mind,” Wallace Stevens used *be* forms as main verbs 54.5% of the time. Or consider the following passage by Annie Dillard, describing an eclipse and its sudden ending (bold treatment is mine):

In the sky **was** something that should not **be** there. In the black sky **was** a ring of light. It was a thin ring, an old, thin silver wedding band, an old, worn ring. It was an old wedding band in the sky, or a morsel of bone. There **were** stars. It was all over. (483)

**The bottom line:** Forms of *be* are natural, especially in descriptions. Moreover, alternatives may sound forced and artificial. Rodriguez might have written “Reading *consumed* the classroom time” rather than “Reading *was* the classroom’s central activity.” Would it have been an improvement?

Do not begin sentences with conjunctions.

Rodriguez wrote:

Each course had its own book. And the information gathered from a book was unquestioned.

Why the period after *book*, and would a comma have been just as good or better? Here, it seems to me, the author wanted separate emphasis on each of the two main clauses, a desire that would have been thwarted by using a comma. At the same time, *and* cannot be deleted.

The student used *so* to open a sentence near the end of her second paragraph:

Yes, they were looking for applicants. So I filled out an application (talk about tedious) and left my resume.

Would a comma before *so* have been better? If the sentence were in isolation, it might have been. But look at the whole paragraph. The sentence lengths are, respectively:

10, 13, 5, 10, 6, 13, 15

If she had used a comma before *so*, the lengths would have been:

10, 13, 5, 10, 19, 15

Quite a difference in rhythm, wouldn’t you agree? To be sure, the student may not have been conscious of what she was doing, but good student writers often have an intuitive sense for such things, probably because they are often also good readers.

**Some facts:** Whatever one may think about these particular examples, the fact is that good writers have been opening sentences with conjunctions regularly, and ever since the King James Bible (“And God saw that it was good”). And probably well before that. Figure 1 describes the practices of the 54 writers in Joyce Carol Oates and Robert Atwan’s anthology, *The Best American Essays of the Century*. (There are 55 writers, but Langston Hughes’s essay was not considered because it is exclusively dialogue.)

In these classic essays—from Mark Twain to Saul Bellow—an average of 14.7 sentences *per essay* start with coordinating conjunctions. Were we to add sentences starting with conjunctive adverbs (*however, therefore, nevertheless*), the number would be higher still. Professional writers *rarely* use anything other than a period before conjunctive adverbs in clause-initial position, regardless of what the handbooks say (see the research on initial conjunctive adverbs in my *Breaking the Rules* 176–79).

FIGURE 1. Sentences Opening with Coordinating Conjunctions

CONJUNCTION	NUMBER OF TIMES USED
but	354
and	258
so	59
yet	45
for	44
or	26
nor	8

**The bottom line:** It is long past time that we ceased to deprive students of this useful device.

Do not write sentence fragments.

As pointed out from the earliest editions of *The Harbrace Handbook of English* (1941) and *Warriner's Handbook of English* (1948), the unforgiveable sins in written English are fragments and run-ons. Let's take a close look at the two passages we are considering.

Especially interesting in Rodriguez's paragraph is his creative use of sentence fragments. There are four altogether. Here are the first two, with their full-sentence alternatives. Why might Rodriguez have chosen the fragments?

1 FRAG: In June, CONSIDER BOOKS YOUR BEST FRIENDS.

1 SENT: In June, the poster read, CONSIDER BOOKS YOUR BEST FRIENDS.

2 FRAG: Friends?

2 SENT: Books were my friends?

The third fragment might easily have been included in the sentence that precedes it. Why did Rodriguez use a period after *impersonal*, creating a fragment?

FRAG: The sentences were . . . coolly impersonal. Toned hard.

SENT: The sentences were . . . coolly impersonal, toned hard.

Not only does "toned hard" receive great emphasis by being isolated, but Rodriguez's "coolly impersonal" gets a bit more emphasis by being placed at the end of its sentence.

The last fragment is a kind of double fragment. The "until" clause is separated from its main clause, and it has neither subject nor verb. If Rodriguez had used full sentences, he would have written the following:

. . . I tried reading in a very soft voice, until the nun said, "Who is . . . ?"

. . . I tried reading in a very soft voice. Until: "Who is . . . ?"

Clearly, all of Rodriguez's fragments are rhetorically effective. They are more *economical* than the alternative versions. They are also more *emphatic*.

Notice, also, that they are *dramatic*, they draw us in, especially this last, where the reader has to supply the connection between the previous sentence and the one beginning, "Until." The reader must also determine who is speaking the quoted words.

The student's fragments are in the first, second, and penultimate "sentences" of her first paragraph. Would you agree that the alternative versions, once again, prove much less effective rhetorically?

1 FRAG: Sweet sixteen.

1 SENT: I was sweet sixteen.

2 FRAG: Ahhh . . . driver's license, car, new found freedom and independence.

2 SENT: Ahhh, now I would have my driver's license, a car, and new found freedom and independence.

3 FRAG: Rejection?

3 SENT: Might I experience rejection?

It seems to me that the full-sentence versions are pedestrian compared with the fragments. They are also wordier and less dramatic. Fragments are also often more *natural* than full sentences. This is especially true of responses to questions.

**Some facts:** In "A Fresh Look at Sentence Fragments," I studied the fragments from the 50 essays reprinted in *The Best American Essays of 2001* and *2003*, and I found that all but four of the essayists used at least one sentence fragment. The average per article (including those that did not use any fragments) was 10.1.

**The bottom line:** Fragments may create greater emphasis than full sentences. They may be more natural and more dramatic. And they are economical. If a fragment is rhetorically effective, a student should not be penalized for using it. Note: Not one of the several English teachers who read the student essay and gave it the highest grade possible in the state assessment made any remarks about the fragments. When making choices between formally grammatical sentences and rhetorically effective sentences, good writers often chose the latter.

### But What about Formal English?

The Rodriguez paragraph might be considered a memoir; the student essay is a personal narrative. In both genres, authors may not be expected to write



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in “formal English.” But are the standards of formal English necessarily very different from less formal? Are there stricter rules?

David Foster Wallace was among the best essay writers of our time. Here is the first paragraph of his essay introducing *The Best American Essays of 2007*, an essay that one might expect would be in a formal register. How many violations of formal admonitions can you find? My own list follows.

I think it’s unlikely that anyone is reading this as an introduction. Most of the people I know treat *Best American Essays* anthologies like Whitman Samplers. They skip around, pick and choose. There isn’t the same kind of linear commitment as in a regular book. Which means that the reader has more freedom of choice, which of course is part of what this country’s all about. If you’re like most of us, you’ll first check the table of contents for names of writers you like, and their pieces are what you’ll read first. Then you’ll go by title, or apparent subject, or sometimes even first line. There’s a kind of triage. The guest editor’s intro is last, if at all. (xii)

Wallace’s Violations:

*Avoid contractions.* Foster uses eight in this brief paragraph.

*Avoid first-person pronouns.* The essay is in first person and begins with *I*.

*Avoid you.* *You* is used four times in the sixth sentence alone, again in the seventh.

*Avoid expletive there.* Of the nine sentences, two (22%) are *there* patterns.

*Avoid informal word choices.* Many people would insist on spelling out *it’s* and would certainly fault the contraction of *is* in *country’s*. *Pieces* is rather informal for *essays*, as is *intro* for *introduction*; *skip around* and *pick and choose* are relatively informal verb choices.

*Vary sentence openings.* All but two sentences open with *there* or the subject noun phrase. (And note that most subjects are simple pronouns.) One sentence opens with a conjunction (“Then”) immediately followed by its subject. Only the sixth sentence has an unusual opening.

And here are two we have already discussed:

*Avoid sentence fragments.* Foster’s fifth sentence is a fragment; it “should” begin with “This” rather than “Which,” according to most traditional handbooks. The joining of the two fragments with a comma rather than a

semicolon would also make the “sentence” a comma splice.

*Avoid be verbs.* *Be* is used as a main verb **eight** times. All of Wallace’s other verbs are simple and monosyllabic: *think, read, know, treat, skip, pick, choose, mean, has, check, like, and go.*

There it is: David Foster Wallace breaks at least eight of the “rules” typically justified by those who would teach students to write “formal” (or more likely these days, “academic”) English. There will be time enough for students to learn how to write like academics when and if they become academicians. Meanwhile, let’s teach them to write like writers. 

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#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

“Analyzing Grammar Pet Peeves” asks students to begin by thinking about their own grammar pet peeves. They then read a Dear Abby column in which she lists several grammar pet peeves. Using a chart, students analyze each pet peeve and research it to determine its accuracy. By analyzing Dear Abby’s “rant” about bad grammar usage, students become aware that attitudes about race, social class, moral and ethical character, and “proper” language use are intertwined and that the rant reveals those attitudes. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/analyzing-grammar-peeves-1091.html>

## Candidates Announced for Section Elections; Watch for Your Ballot

The Secondary Section Nominating Committee has named the following candidates for Section offices in the NCTE spring elections:

**For Members of the Secondary Section Steering Committee** (one to be elected; term to expire in 2015): **Aurelia Davila de Silva**, San Antonio, Texas; **Steven Heller**, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Illinois.

**For Members of the Secondary Section Nominating Committee** (three to be elected; terms to expire in 2012): **Brandon Bolyard**, Vallivue High School, Caldwell, Idaho; **Diane Bondurant**, Tenoroc High School, Lakeland, Florida; **Walter Brown**, Caddo Parrish, Shreveport, Louisiana; **Linda Kerschner**, Conestoga High School, Berwyn, Pennsylvania; **Catherine Ross-Stroud**, Cleveland State University, Ohio; **Maja Wilson**, University of Maine, Orono.

Members of the 2010–11 Secondary Section Nominating Committee are Robert Gardner, Edina, Minnesota, chair; Calle Friesen, St. Mary’s High School, Storm Lake, Iowa; and Annette Sample, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.