Breaking the Rules in Style

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Third-grader Justin is one of the best writers in class. He loves reading, is sensitive to language, enjoys crafting stories. In his latest piece, one sentence reads, "I ate blugurt in the morning."

“What’s blugurt?” I ask him.

“You know how you can put two words together to make one?” Justin says. “Like can and not make can’t?”

“A contraction.”

“Right. Well blugurt is my combined word for blueberry yogurt.”

Ninth-grader Dianna’s paper about the Cleveland Browns’ miserable losing streak has received an 82%. Nine errors are marked; no teacher comments appear on the paper.

In one spot Dianna has written, “When asked about the Browns’ record, quarterback Brian Sipe said, ‘I don’t know. There’s just something wrong with the Browns.’ Something wrong indeed!”

“Something wrong indeed!”—that nicely timed rhetorical phrase revealing Dianna’s voice and ironic sensibility had been dutifully labeled “SE.”

Patty, a high-school junior, is reading The Color Purple, written primarily in protagonist Celie’s rich black dialect. One day I ask the students to explain what they have learned about writing from the novels they are reading. Patty writes, “Alice Walker taught me that you can break the rules of writing I learned in tenth grade and write one of the best books ever.”

Justin, Dianna, and Patty are not the first writers to realize that conventions of standard writing may be altered or broken for the sake of meaning. Walt Whitman knew it, too.


And so does Winston Weathers, author of An Alternate Style: Options in Composition (1980, Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook), a book for all who love linguistic innovation, rhetorical experimentation, boundary-breaking written expression, and above all, glorious human diversity. Through the work of many writers, Weathers offers numerous examples of effective writing that have broken the rules of conventional style, or “Grammar A,” as he calls it. Yes, he shows us you can break the rules of writing and still write exceedingly well.

For centuries now some of our best authors have done that. They have not written exclusively in Grammar A but have, instead, employed an alternate style, a “Grammar B.”

Weathers identifies and explains about a dozen traits or stylistic devices that he attributes to Grammar B; among them, sentence fragments, labyrinthine sentences, double voice, lists, orthographic variations, and crots. I’ll illustrate these concepts through the writing of my high-school juniors and seniors.

Early in our study of Grammar B, Chris experimented with sentence fragments, creating a poem in the tradition of Gertrude Stein.

I. Once. No. Many times.
   Tried to ignore it.
   But woke still. With my cat.
   Walking. On my chest.
   Licking. My face.

I asked Chris why he decided to take sentence fragments to such extremes. “I wanted to slow readers down,” he told me. “I wanted them to look at every word.”
The students also tried labyrinthine sentences. Erin, whose writing had always been characterized by a cautious restraint, used this lengthy, meandering sentence type to cut loose on a roller coaster ride that rose with fond description, plunged to righteous indignation, and leveled off to a hard-won tranquility. In addition, she took purposeful liberties with spelling and sentence fragments in order to highlight double meaning and communicate her quiet commitment.

The waves are crashing down on white, sandy beaches as we take our morning walk, for the third day in a row, to celebrate the spring break and a get away from the city, schools, and familiar neighbors who seem to know all that happens whether at school, on a date, or inside our house, where no body should interfere, especially not those that are jealous because we get a Florida vacation while they sit at home, dreaming about the palm trees, the shining sand, glistening water and savage tans.

The sights fill me with memories or things I might never see again. Return soon though. Eye will never forget these seven daze of onederful sites, clear beautiful sees, and a gorgeous state. Can't wait to come back. Will come back. Planning.

Standard English already permits some orthographic variation: dialogue/dialog, judgment/judgement, cyanide/cyanid. In the alternate style, however, variations in spelling are not merely used when dictionaries permit. Orthographic variation is created to cause a jolt of meaning (e.g., if a student’s paper contained three errors, the teacher assigned it an F—automaniacally.)

Although teachers often press students to argue one side or another, to straddle no fences, Weathers notes that sometimes contrasting ideas are valid and opposing points of view are equally interesting. In fact, psychologist Jerome Bruner maintains that often “depth is better achieved by looking from two points at once” (Actual Minds, Possible Worlds, 1986, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 10).

Instead of dealing with one point of view or idea then the other, or minimizing one in favor of the other, a writer may choose to employ “double voice,” a stylistic maneuver that presents the points simultaneously. Scott, for example, engages double voice to indicate a hormonal dilemma and the probability of double dealing:

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Girl friend . . . Girl friend
I love you.
Only one for me
Always and forever.
Who's she?
Always be together.
Is she new here?
Spend eternity together.
Do you know what her name is?
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Double voice may appear many ways. One voice may be italicized or placed in parentheses. The voices may alternate sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph. Often the double voices are set side by side in paragraphs or columns to emphasize the duality of the two ideas or points of view. Such arrangement further suggests synchronicity—“all things present in the present moment” (Weathers 35)—another characteristic of the alternate style, one which accounts for its plentiful use of present tense.

“The list,” simple, unexplained, sometimes poetic, is usually presented in a column with one item per line, much like a grocery list. It may be used to present abundant detail, enabling readers to see an untainted holistic picture. Weathers compares the list to a “still life” (20).

Chad, who thought highly of Tom Wolfe and who dismissed the columnar list as “too much like a poem,” incorporated a list of items into a narrative about his visit to a college campus at the behest of its soccer coach.

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So after the coach leaves, I get a feel for what a college dorm room is like: Snipped-snaps of Jordan, Kareem, Bird, Tony Perez, a goldfish tank, paper, an Algebra III text, Diadora's crusted with dry mud, phone hung upside down on the wall, a stereo singing softly with four speakers, a picture of a girl, Athens license plates tacked to the wall, Mousse and soap and toothpaste, and speedstick wedged tightly into a basket, draped with a towel like warm bread, a nerf basketball hoop jutting from the wall, a dead sock hanging on a makeshift clothesline, Tide.

"The crot" is the concept of Grammar B that gave my students the most trouble. "Crot," Weathers explains, "is an obsolete word meaning 'bit' or 'fragment'... A basic element in the alternate grammar of style, and comparable somewhat to the stanza in poetry, the crot may range in length from one sentence to twenty or thirty sentences" (14).

In a piece of writing, crots are not connected with transitional words or phrases. In fact, they are nearly always "separated one from the other by white space." And although a series of crots is meant to create a cumulative effect, each crot in the series may often stand alone, ending abruptly, making a point in itself, possessing "some sharp, arresting, or provocative quality." A piece written entirely in crots, writes Weathers, "is similar to a slide show," each slide unique in composition, clear in image, precise in idea (15).

Chad's list of the dorm room, ending abruptly and ironically with "Tide," surely qualifies as a crot. And I opened this article with three crots—

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the self-contained literacy sketches of Justin, Dianna, and Patty.

Weathers' book excited me. I told a friend about it, explained my intentions of introducing high-school students to the alternate style. "I'm hoping it will spur them to take some chances," I said. "I want them to cut loose in their writing."

"Looks like you're going to do what you've always done," he said.

I blinked. He was right. For years I've sought to free students from restrictions, to create an atmosphere that removes impediments to exploration and communicating. But I'd never actively pushed students to break conventional rules of writing, to employ specific stylistic devices systematically as a means of liberating their voices and driving home their ideas. Until now.

I created a handout that defined many Grammar B concepts and included examples of them from Weathers' book and from my own reading and writing.

"When you first gave us that packet to read," wrote one girl, "I could've hit you. But when we talked about it together and tried some stuff, things became clear (even though I hate the word 'crot')."

For homework we wrote lists, double-voice pieces, and series of crots. We experimented with orthographic variation and sentence form, both fragmentary and labyrinthine. Each day we shared, sometimes reading in a circle, sometimes putting our efforts on the chalkboard, opaque, or overhead.

The sharing became an instructive delight, for the students' enthusiasm often turned these brief assignments into satisfying pieces of writing. Some were later published in the school magazine. A creative current flowed in the classroom, and everyone tapped into it. Yes, my students were discovering you can break the rules of writing.

After the positive experience of sharing homework, I asked the students to compose longer pieces in the alternate style. As always, they were free to choose their own topics. We began processes of drafting, conferring, revising, editing, and publishing. The literacy work was exhilarating, surpassing any idea of success I'd hoped for when we began exploring the possibilities of Grammar B. The students invested themselves in the writing. Most wrote their longest, most effective pieces. There were book reviews, short stories, exposés, meditations, essays, remembrances, satires, travel pieces—all singularly original in form, all ranging more freely in language experimentation and vision than any of the writers had ever ranged before.

For many of the students the alternate style was a liberation akin to the women's suffrage amendment. It was long overdue; it emboldened them; they were never the same after it. One girl echoed the sentiments of her classmates when she wrote,

The alternate style adds freedom to do what we've always wanted to do but we always felt we'd get an F. This style enabled me to get what I really thought
down on paper without worrying about structure. All of our class pieces came out more truthful and, I think, interesting in the process.

The students broke rules of writing and began ruling writing. In their alteration of standard style, they wrote with more purpose than ever before, paying closer attention to punctuation, word choice, and the structures they created. In paper after paper I saw evidence of intellect and intent, or students vitally aware of their roles as writers, as makers and shapers of meaning through language.

I asked students if their concentrated work with Grammar B stylistic techniques had affected their day-to-day writing. Most believed it had. Some students, in fact, had quite specific thoughts about this. “For the first time,” said Teri, “I began thinking about the way my writing would look on the page.”

Jon, one of those language-gifted students, had felt a substantial impact. As a sophomore he had been fond of unreeling one lengthy sentence after another. His conscious use of sentence fragments a year later, he told me, made him think about the power of individual words. His written voice expanded to include “ terser sentences.”

Perhaps Lilac best explained the overall effect of the alternate style on my students: “It makes you work with your words,” said Lilac. “It makes you think about rearranging parts into a different order to get a more precise meaning over to the reader.”

One student kept calling the alternate style the “ultimate style.” For many it was. They saw Grammar B as a genre in itself. I looked upon it differently though. I saw the alternate style as a resource, offering writers further stylistic options—nontraditional ones, to be sure—but no less legitimate and with ample precedent in our diverse literary heritage. I wanted the Grammar B technique to become part of a versatile rhetorical repertoire for each of my students.

The three weeks of actively breaking some rules of standard English, of creating with an alternate style, increased my students’ confidence. Their vision became expansive, their language adventurous, their use of line and page inventive. Instead of wearing ruts in safe, beaten paths, my students broke new trails when their purposes demanded. In addition, writing and reading in the alternate style made them more open-minded about literature. Wrote one student,

[Working with Grammar B] taught me that there are "alternate" styles in writing. I would have never thought of turning something like it in for a grade. I really loved this writing assignment. The whole class had a ball with it. As a writer I see that there isn’t just one "way" of doing things.

The most important aspect of the alternate style, however, has little to do with crots, orthographic variation, or labyrinthine sentences.

The important thing is the spirit of the alternate style and its implications for nurturing all student writers, elementary school through college.

High-school or university students whose writing reflects their reading of Faulkner and Ginsberg, are employing alternate styles and evolving original voices. Elementary-school students whose writing repertoire includes invented spellings, drawings, speechmarks, and supplemental talk are also employing alternate styles—eminently appropriate ones—and they, too, are evolving original voices.

Some English teachers have admonished me for encouraging rule breaking in my students, for
neglecting to stress standard grammar, usage, and form.

One contended that my students will create "maverick" essays that will earn them poor grades once they leave my classroom. Our foray into the alternate style lasts only three weeks. Many times during a semester I remind students that readers have expectations about the way print should look and that we must weigh our violations of those expectations against the results we hope to achieve.

But I must confess, I'd like to see students using the techniques of Grammar B and purposefully breaking other rules of standard style a lot more often in their future writing. I'd much prefer they...

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...do whatever necessary to generate original thinking and language than to heed slavishly the grammatical amenities of Grammar A.

As writing teachers, we don't have to worry much about socializing most students to the conventions of standard style. That socialization will occur if they engage often in real literacy—writing frequently for their own purposes, reading frequently from the vast world of print. The bulk of what students read will be written quite conventionally. Combine that reading experience with the patient teaching of editing skills within the context of their own writing, and students will gradually move toward mastery of the standard conventions of composition.

What we writing teachers should worry about, however, is our students' linguistic confidence. I want students to develop a willingness to be bold with language, to press forward with words. I want them to be versatile and practiced enough to interact readily with the writing they create, and to do so with imagination, logic, and originality.

One of my students pointed out that the alternate style "really helps writers understand their voices." I think he's right. My students pushed beyond self-imposed boundaries of written expression. They surprised themselves and learned something about limits. Such self-understanding of the power and range of their voices is crucial to students' maturation as writers. Voice is the vitality of a writer, both the root and point of growth. We write about personally important matters and through a lifetime develop our voices.

We extend them, we adapt them, we learn with them. The alternate style options explained by Winston Weathers let my students participate in this development in ways new and exciting to them. They trusted both instinct and intellect, practicing possibilities, evolving their voices. Yes, my students broke rules of writing. With style. And learned.

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