

CHAPTER 5. LEARNING TO WRITE

One of my favorite punch lines is the response of an old man to the first thing said to him by a young reporter assigned to get his life story for a local newspaper:

“Bet you’ve seen a lot of changes in this town.”

“Yep. Hated every one of them.”

Unlike that old man, I have loved *almost* every one of the changes made in my time to the practice of writing, ranging all the way from the steel-nibbed wooden pens that we kids had to dip into inkwells back in the 1940s (yes, I started there!) all the way to the Intel-souled HP laptop on which I tickle out these words right now. I have also long since graduated from hunting down and paging my way through weighty reference books to tapping (quite *literally*!) into the vast reservoirs of Wikipedia, electronic dictionaries, and the fully searchable texts of almost anything I need to probe that’s out of copyright.

The only change I can’t abide is Chatbox, which threatens to do all our writing for us, and though I firmly believe that it will never learn to write so enchantingly as Virginia Heffernan (full disclosure: she’s my

daughter), I am also one of the many millions who firmly believed that Donald Trump would never win the presidency in 2016. So as I head for my last exit, I can only recycle the words of Louis XIV: *apres moi, le AI deluge!*

Also, at the end of my life, I can't help thinking too of these famous lines:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas, the ebullient Welsh bard whose irresistibly fierce lyric poetry made him internationally known in the mid-twentieth century, especially when delivered straight to the ear by his signature nasal drone, had good reason to rage when he wrote his famous villanelle in the summer of 1947. Though addressed to his then dying father, these irascible words also speak (if unwittingly) to his own mortality, for he succumbed to the Grim Reaper just six years later, in 1953, at the age of 39. Unlike Thomas, who drank himself to death, I have managed to live a good deal longer by turning the drunken bouts of

my misspent youth into a middle and old age of relative sobriety—though I generally take a glass or two of wine with dinner and have lately even gargled a Scotch and soda beforehand while watching Ari Melber and his pals on MSNBC vivisect yet again the rotting but still (*alas!*) breathing and indefatigably fulminating political corpse of Donald Trump.

In any case, having lived more than twice as long as Dylan Thomas, I do not rage against the dying of the light. On the contrary, my point of departure for this chapter is my own little twist on his angry couplet:

Do not go silent into that good night,

Write, write against the dying of the light.

Having written countless articles and ten books in the course of my 84 years, I am winding up the parade with this memoir, which has been great fun to write because the deep well of memory has proven a geyser, spilling drops that fall like pearls on the page before me as I tap them out. (Is that too much? Samuel Johnson's tutor once tried to banish such baubles from his prose by telling him, "Read through your writing, and

whenever you find something that strikes you as really fine, strike it out!” Sorry, Sam’s tutor, I won’t strike that pearly metaphor. I’ll clutch every one of my pearls to the bitter end.)

But to return to my present state: with no pain to speak of, Nancy and the kids treating me like a king, and good friends visiting or Zooming me almost every day, I’m having the time of my life. Lying awake in bed before dawn, I sometimes feel sentences racing through my brain, desperate to get out and land on the page. So to Nancy’s consternation I have more than once slipped out of bed around 5:00 AM, hiked up the stairs to my top floor study overlooking the town of Hanover and across the Connecticut River to the green mountains of Vermont, and booted up my HP laptop, which is what I’m using right now. Whether or not there is a heaven up there (see the next chapter), I feel as if I had found one right here on earth.

One of my favorite comments on the art of writing comes from the late 18th century *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

When I write, my ideas are arranged with the utmost difficulty. . . .I see nothing properly, cannot write a single word, and must wait till

it is over. Insensibly the agitation subsides, the chaos acquires form, and each circumstance takes its proper place. Have you never seen an opera in Italy? where during the change of scene everything is in confusion, . . . yet by little and little, everything is arranged, nothing appears wanting, and we feel surprised to see the tumult succeeded by the most delightful spectacle. This is a resemblance of what passes in my brain when I attempt to write. . .

Trans Christopher Kelly p. 95

Ever since writing summaries for Mr. McNamara's English class in the seventh grade at Boston Latin School in 1950-51, I have practiced the art of writing, and part of what makes me love the English language is that it's a game played by rules. As a mainstream mediocre athlete, I love tennis—my favorite sport—for the same reason. Its rules for when and where you can hit the ball without a fault or going out of bounds are perfectly clear. Standing on a back line of the court, the server has to hit the ball within the small box diagonally opposite, though a ball that

touches even the outer edge of the lines around that box is counted as landing inside. Once the ball has been served, it can be hit anywhere within the singles court (including the outer edge of its borderlines) if there is just one player on each side, and anywhere in the doubles court if there are two on a side. For me, the beauty of the game is that working within the simple framework of those rules, you can hit the ball in a literally infinite number of ways. And though I've lately had to give up the tennis I had long been playing with a small band of thoroughly congenial fellow geriatrics (Hi Tom! Hi Ellis!), I am still playing with the words and rules of the English language, and for better or worse will be doing so—if only inside my head—until I breathe my last.

As every English teacher knows, the most common response to the revelation of what you do for a living is or at least used to be, “I’d better watch what I say,” or “I’d better watch my grammar.” Years ago a friend of my wife came up with the perfect comeback to that line: “I never correct anyone’s grammar unless I’m getting paid to do so.” Having been well paid for correcting several thousand student papers in forty-one years of teaching, I happily second that comeback, though I must

also admit that the pedagogical habit of correcting grammatical mistakes can sometimes drive me just a little insane.

Many years ago, for instance, when I spotted a white door inside a local hardware store marked “Employee’s Only” in black letters, I desperately yearned to grab a paintbrush and white out the apostrophe. But I somehow restrained myself, and in my old age I have learned to sit silent and—perhaps somewhat grimly—smiling when my otherwise very well spoken granddaughter Kate says things like, “Me and Dylan loved that movie.” Nevertheless, I will now boldly and brashly seize this moment on my very own rhetorical podium to correct the one and only grammatical mistake habitually made by someone whose Rhodes Scholar command of the English language I have long admired just as much as her thoroughly well-informed broadcasts on MSNBC and her ground-breaking books on American politics: Rachel Maddow.

Rachel, I love you, but you habitually say things like this:

“Trump’s supporters have always backed him denying that he lost in 2020.”

The tricky thing here is that it's perfectly correct—though also crushingly obvious—to say that “Trump’s supporters have always backed *him*,” period. But once you add “denying that he lost in 2020,” *that’s* what Trump’s supporters are backing, and grammatically speaking, this whole set of six words is a verbal noun. You can clearly see it working like a noun in a sentence like this:

Denying that he lost in 2020 is Trump’s biggest lie.

And just as a pronoun used before an ordinary noun has to be *possessive*, so does a pronoun used before a verbal noun:

Trump’s supporters have long admired *his* long red neckties.

Trump’s supporters have long backed ~~him~~ *his* denying that he lost in 2020.

Got it, Rache? Good—and no charge. A tiny token of my thanks for all your wisdom, eloquence, and captivating wit.

But I must confess that 41 years of teaching have also bred in me an often irresistible urge to make the world stand at literary as well as grammatical attention. Many years ago, during a blissful winter week in a Key West cottage-with pool that we rented with our old friends Gene

and Sieglinde Hays, Nancy and I visited the Hemingway House and Museum, where Papa lived in the 1930s with his then-wife Pauline Pfeiffer and where he wrote—among other things—*To Have and Have Not*. During our tour of the house, our young woman guide for some reason quoted, or rather *misquoted*—a line from Blake’s prophetic poem, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.” Besides mangling this line (I forget just now), she also said it came from Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*. Since I had just been teaching both poems, I felt bound to correct her—to Nancy’s acute embarrassment, of course. But our guide would not be corrected!

After leaving Papa’s house we stepped across the road to the Key West Lighthouse, whose Keeper’s Quarters Museum exhibits—among other things-- what are said to be some remarkable poems composed by the keeper’s daughter. Since her handwritten “compositions” included these lines—

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,

Who never to himself hath said,

This is my own, my native land!

I wrote the museum afterwards to say that she had evidently *copied* these lines from a book of poetry written in the early 19th century by Walter Scott. But I never got a reply. So let me tell you this: if you ever hear a guide at the Hemingway Home misquoting and mis-identifying any lines of William Blake, or if you find the Key West Lighthouse Keeper's Museum passing off the poetry of Walter Scott as the precocious handiwork of the keeper's daughter, *don't blame me*.

On the other hand, since I co-authored five editions of a textbook—*Writing: A College Handbook* (Norton, 1982-2001)—that was used by hundreds of thousands of students in college composition courses from 1982 to about 2004, you might wish to *credit* me for playing a major role in correcting their grammatical errors. But without false modesty, I must tell you now that correcting errors of any kind is the *least effective* way of motivating young writers, of teaching anyone how to write prose that is not just readable but continuously engaging and engaged in the all-important battle to keep the reader from dozing off, tuning out, or switching screens.

Before unpacking that provocative claim, however, I must first confess that *Writing: A College Handbook* was itself first conceived as “a box of band-aids,” in the words of a Norton editor. Back in the early 1980s, its chief competitor was the *Harbrace Handbook* (i.e. the Harcourt Brace Handbook), which set out to “cover” the whole gore-scarred battlefield of common errors such as misplaced modifiers, sentence fragments, dangling modifiers, dis-agreement between subject and verb, run-on sentences, etc etc *ad nauseam* (i.e., pause for a puke before going on).

In the summer of 1977, in fact, just after I had been put in charge of First-Year English at Dartmouth, John Lincoln and I compiled our own handbook of lessons and exercises precisely to combat these common errors, and by distributing the handbook that fall among our fellow teachers of Freshman English as well as among their students, we aimed to alleviate the tedious work of grading. A teacher, we thought, could simply circle a dangling modifier, for instance, and then tell the student to “see Handbook p. 34” and do the exercises meant to “cure” this error.

This of course is the well-known “clinical” conception of how we learn to write. Since we are all or nearly all born with the birth defects variously known as “me-itis,” as in “me and Dylan really loved that movie,” or “ain’t -itis,” as in “I ain’t going,” or “double-negative-it is,” as in “I really don’t know nothin’,” the chief aim of college composition courses throughout the land is to purge such defects from student writing and thus “cure” them.

Unfortunately, however, curing a student even of *all* grammatical defects—which almost never happens anyway-- is no guarantee that he or she will ever write so much as one readable sentence. Take it from me: I’ve seen some grammatically impeccable essays that would put you to sleep faster than 10 milligrams of morphine.

Just imagine that you’ve missed a football game between, let’s say, Dartmouth and Columbia, and you ask a friend how it turned out. “Well,” says the friend (who’s been doing his damndest to combat “errors” in his writing), “Dartmouth lost only 45 yards in penalties—10 for holding, 15 for interference with the receiver, and 20 for delaying the game. But Columbia was penalized 85 yards!” **BUT WHO THE HELL**

WON THE GAME? you ask. “I don’t know,” he says, “I was just counting up penalty points.”

To highlight “errors” in student writing and to ignore almost everything else is to forget that the chief goal of writing is to *communicate*. Does anyone ever complain about the sentence fragments flaunted by Henry David Thoreau (“What news!”) or about the modifiers misplaced by Byron (“Awaking with a start, / The waters heave around me”), or dangled by Conrad, whose opening paragraph to one of the greatest novellas ever written contains this howler?

The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and *being bound down the river*, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

“Mr. Conrad,” says the dutiful teacher, “where is the noun modified by *being bound down the river*? It’s just not there at all, is it? So *being bound*, you see? is a **DANGLING MODIFIER!** Have you been to our writing clinic lately? You might also try the exercises on page 34 of our handbook. After all, we know very well that English is your second language, so we can hardly expect you to have mastered it.”

To which Conrad might reply, “When you can write a story as good as *Heart of Darkness*, show it to me. Until then, go inseminate yourself with your own dangler—if you can even get it up!”

Spotting grammatical errors is mostly a game that English teachers like to play—a *gotcha* game with gaffes like this:

My hope is that it’s going to make people feel a lot better about **who** they get as teachers and increase the confidence level in schools.

--John Lewis, Chairman of the New Hampshire

Board of Education, on the basic skills test given to all first-time teachers in the state (July 13, 1990)

Sorry, John, it appears you need a little more help with those basic skills yourself! Because of course your **who** should be **whom** as object of *they get*. Too bad, John!

Error, error on the wall: is fixing those pesky little grammatical tics *really* all it takes to make writing good? It so happens that even as far back in the late 1970s, when John and I started work on *Writing: A College Handbook* for Norton, we began to see just where this

blindfolded war on “error” (well before the war on terror!) was leading. Even though our own home-made Handbook of errors-plus-corrective-exercises was precisely what led Norton to recruit us for the writing of a comprehensive guide to composition, we began to see the need for a much more positive approach to the teaching of writing. And that’s when we formulated the axiom that eventually permeated every one of the five editions of *Writing*:

Good writing is not the absence of grammatical error but the presence of rhetorical power.

The beauty of this sentence, if I may narcissistically say so, is that its parallel structure *exemplifies* the lesson taught by its content. And not incidentally, that parallel structure speaks to the earliest beginnings of our lives, when—as I explained in Chapter 1—we learn *coordination* by instinctively crawling in perfect symmetry: first right hand and left leg, then left hand and right leg, and so on. In other words, whether or not we are afflicted with such common birth defects as “me-it is,” we are virtually *born* with a knowledge of parallel structure—one of the most powerful instruments of communication in the English language. And

again not incidentally, it's an instrument mastered and masterfully deployed—as also explained in Chapter 1—by that notorious dangler of modifiers and semi-literate Pole known as Joseph Conrad.

Very well: once you lead students back to their crawling days by *reminding* them of what they can do with parallel structure, why not ignite their imaginations with a daily dose of *metaphor*, which turns abstract ideas into *verbal pictures*? In fact I know no better way of launching a whole course in composition than by asking for comment on this way of defining the purpose of education, whose source I've been unable to find, but who needs the source anyway?

The purpose of education is not to fill a bucket but to light a fire.

Here you've got two radically different pictures packed into a perfectly wrought parallel frame. And together, those metaphorical pictures can put inside the heads of your students the kind of fire that will burn not just for an hour of discussion but for a lifetime, long after every kid in your class has forgotten what a dangling modifier is—if he or she ever knew. Now consider some other examples:

To conclude an essay arguing that newspapers have lost their

investigative edge because big corporations have the power to block their probes:

The watchdog has become a lap dog.

And here's a gem from my nephew Bert Jacobs, who co-founded with his brother John the hugely successful clothing company known as Life is Good. Since John is always cautious about everything and Bert is *always* pushing to "the next level," Bert said to me one day about the two of them:

I'm the gas, he's the brakes.

Is anybody worried about the run-on error here, with just a comma between the two independent clauses? Is a trip to the writing clinic needed? Are you kidding? This is a slam dunk *brilliant* pair of metaphors! No wonder Bert has succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, and gets such fat fees for his speeches.

OK: since this is a memoir, I should say a bit more about the writing of *Writing: A College Handbook*, which had its comic moments. John Lincoln, who taught high school English in the Hanover area as well as—for a time—first year English at Dartmouth, brought to the

handbook project a detailed command of grammatical terms such as *conjunctive adverb*, meaning an adverb that *conjoins* two sentences or clauses such as these:

After logging on to the Ticketmaster site I learned that the Valentine’s Day concert was sold out. *Therefore* I bought two tickets for the next day.

OR

After logging on to the Ticketmaster site I learned that the Valentine’s Day concert was sold out. Tickets for the next day, *however*, were readily available.

See how the conjunctive adverb joins those two sentences in each case?

So as a well-informed grammarian, John thought we simply *had* to include the term “conjunctive adverb” in our handbook, with a clear definition and examples such as those above. I hotly disagreed—because the last thing I wanted in this book was grammatical jargon. “John,” I told him, “let’s just call it a *therefore* word!” I actually lost my temper—as John never did. Smiling sweetly, he gradually made me realize the utter absurdity of calling “however,” for instance, a *therefore*

word. So even though he almost always graciously deferred to me in our collaboration, he won that point. There is simply no way to explain certain features of sentence structure without resort to grammatical terms.

But by itself, learning every one of those terms will not make anyone a good writer—let alone a great one. When I was a kid I learned to play scales on the violin (the basics) but never got so far with bowing and vibrato that I could even caress my own ears, let alone those of anyone else.

How then can anyone learn to write—to master or just *practice* the delicate art of courting the reader, stalking the reader, keeping the reader not just clearly informed but regularly surprised, relieved by variety (you've *got* to mix long sentences with short ones, and you've got to ask questions now and then), and above all *kept awake*? One possible answer to this question is that writing is a performing art, like acting. Just as a good actor does everything he or she can to prick the mind and heart of the audience, to make them laugh or cry or just *pay rapt attention*, a good writer is always or almost always conscious of

speaking to the reader, which means imagining just how the sound of a sentence strikes the reader's ear.

Compare for instance these two versions of a sentence by Churchill that I quoted in Chapter 1:

We shall not flag or fail even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous states have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule.

Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous states have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, **we shall not flag or fail.**

Both versions use exactly the same words, but the word order makes the second sentence *sound* dramatically different. Since both versions are grammatically correct, the weakness of the first has nothing to do with any kind of error and everything to do with what the reader *hears* first and last. In the first version, the main clause about standing firm (“we shall not flag or fail”) comes first, so that by the time you get to the end of this long sentence, its opening has faded—largely eclipsed by “the grip of the

Gestapo and all the apparatus of Nazi rule.” That’s *the last thing you hear as the sentence hits your ear*. But Churchill’s version holds its fire to the very end. Only *after* setting before us all the fearful weight of Nazi power in long and weighty polysyllables, only after building suspense with the lever of *even though* (which signals that *resistance* is coming), does Churchill fire a volley of six silver bullets—**we shall not flag or fail**—in such a way that we can never forget them.

How does anyone learn to write like this, to speak like this? The simplest answer is: by reading great writers, watching and—most important—*listening* to what they do with words. Just as Churchill learned to shape his sentences by studying the speeches of Edmund Burke, the great Irish orator of the British parliament in the late eighteenth century, Ted Sorenson learned from Churchill himself (as he told me once at a Renaissance Weekend dinner in Charleston, South Carolina) how to construct a memorably *chiastic* or flip-around sentence such as, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” Whoever composed that sentence (Sorenson wouldn’t say), JFK loved the English language quite as much as Sorenson did, and that one sentence probably

deserves the credit for most if not all of the 900 people who signed up for the Peace Corps in its very first year—1961.

But I realize that I'm now getting out ahead of my skis because I simply *have* to tackle one little pesky point of grammatical correctness before getting further into rhetoric. I call it **the great S-checkpoint** because for many kids, getting through it may be even tougher than getting from East to West Berlin at the height of the Cold War—or maybe talking your way out of getting shot if you're stopped by a cop for Driving While Black. Or retrieving from Microsoft a password that you last used seven years ago. OK, let's imagine that at the age of 5, I have just learned to write this:

Mary love Bill.

I hope you will agree that this is a specimen of good writing in the most elementary sense: it's readily legible—far more legible than my handwriting is now, in fact. If I were just learning to form my letters and you were my first grade teacher, you would surely say to me, “Very good, Jimmy! Well done!” Good handwriting deserves praise. Until the advent of the typewriter in the late nineteenth century and then word processing in the late twentieth, good handwriting was something

students were regularly taught to cultivate, and it has a long and distinguished history. To cite just a few examples, the art of calligraphy—which means beautiful handwriting—can be seen in Papyrus fragments dating from the fourth century B.C., in the wealth of elegantly sinuous Islamic inscriptions dating from the Middle Ages, and the multimedia works wrought by the literati of Old China, who used the very same brush to write and to draw.

I don't want to get nostalgic here for some golden age of pre-technological purity, because I love the computer and I've been doing nearly all my writing on it for almost twenty years. But for all sorts of reasons I do not believe the computer will ever make handwriting obsolete.

Having thus offered you a specimen of my own good handwriting, I now hasten to recognize what many of you have no doubt been aching to tell me: this may be good handwriting but it is not good *writing* because it is marred by a glaring grammatical error. Unless the writer is *ordering* Mary to love Bill, the word *love* should be *loves*. This is of course the sort of error that English teachers—the grammar police—are

paid to correct, and is commonly thought to be the sort of error that distinguishes good writing from bad. What it actually does is signify the socio-educational class of the writer: at the great S cross-roads of language learning, did he or she opt for Standard English—i.e. honky-talk—or Black English? In terms of pure content, this choice makes absolutely no difference. If I say, “John love Mary,” you know exactly what I mean. But unless I’m a little kid just learning to write, you also know that I’m either Black or for some reason channelling Black English. Take it from me. While white kids will routinely say, “Me and Dylan loved that movie,” you will seldom if ever hear them say, “Dylan *love* basketball.”

To see how and why this happens, you have to realize, first, that English verbs are mainly *uninflected*, free of special endings—especially when used in the present tense. The great exception is—get this—a verb that meets no less than **four criteria**:

PERSON: Must be *third* person. Must be talking not about me, pal, and not about you, but about somebody *else*.

NUMBER: Must be talking about just *one* person.

TENSE: Must be talking about what's happening or what's true *right now*, not any time in the past or future.

MOOD: Must be talking about something done *freely*, not under orders, as in "The king decreed that everyone *sing* his praises."

You see why the great S crossroads can be so hard to negotiate? Is it any wonder why so many Black kids opt to ditch all those honky-talk rules in favor of **NO S AT ALL**? I hope I am not sounding racist here. I'm just doing my damndest to state what I think is an inarguable fact. While many Black kids grow up to say—and presumably write—such things as "Al play pool every night," the overwhelming majority of white kids say *plays* pool. The great S crossroads thus mark a major parting of the ways. And it's also fair to say, I think, that Black kids who might want to take the S train are often pressured by their peers to let it slide right by—lest they sound like honkies. Likewise, I'm sure that the Reverend Al Sharpton knows perfectly well how to pronounce the word **ASKED**. But I strongly suspect that if he failed to pronounce it **AXED**, he might lose at least half his Black viewers. It's all about *signaling*, you see.

OK, now. Let's get back to Jimmy's first sentence:

Mary love Bill.

Presumably, my first grade teacher will soon tell me that yes, this is very good *handwriting* but it is not good *writing* because it is marred by a glaring grammatical error that has to be fixed asap:

This is of course the sort of error that English teachers—the grammar police—are paid to correct, and is commonly thought to be the sort of error that distinguishes good writing from bad. What it actually does is, as just explained, is identify the writer as educated or uneducated, or linguistically *assimilated* into Standard White English or nurtured on Black English.

So while I respect the rules of grammar, enforcing them too easily becomes a game of one-upmanship—a game played only on the edges of the field of communication. For if good writing means writing that can be readily understood, grammatical correctness has not very much to do with it. The kind of grammatical errors that people commonly make—the kind of errors that English teachers routinely correct—seldom

destroy the meaning of a sentence. In almost forty years of teaching, I have never seen a sentence like this in a student paper:

Loves Bill Mary.

This isn't just ungrammatical. It's pure gibberish-- because it violates one of the simplest and most basic rules of English syntax, which is that the subject comes before the verb and the object goes after it. But nobody who speaks any English at all makes this sort of mistake. In other words, the kind of grammatical errors that uneducated speakers and writers typically make help to keep English teachers employed—and I don't for a moment underestimate the importance of that—but they don't usually impede communication. If you tell me that Mary love Bill, I know exactly what you mean.

Likewise, we have no trouble understanding the words of a retired electrician named Frank Cooper who had just won 105 million dollars in the Powerball lottery. Asked what he would do with all that money, he replied, "I don't know yet. I ain't never been a millionaire before." Does anyone here have the least bit of trouble understanding what he means?

Now the grammarian may learnedly explain that a rule has been

broken here, because in English a double negative makes a positive. Quite aside from the vulgarity of “ain’t,” saying that that you “ain’t *never*” been a millionaire before means—by the rules of English grammar—that you *have* been a millionaire at some time. But we know perfectly well that Frank Cooper means nothing of the kind.

Sometimes grammar, like the law, is an ass. A double negative makes a positive in mathematics (minus minus 1 =plus 1), but language does not work like mathematics, and no matter how ungrammatical it may be, a double negative in English can serve to *emphasize* negation—as it does in French, where “je *ne* sais *pas*” means “I don’t know.” In statements like Cooper’s, the double negative crosses the line from grammar into rhetoric, the art of communication.

This does not mean that grammatical rules have nothing to do with communication. It means only that their effect on communication is primarily cultural. They serve as markers of class and educational status, and to that extent they affect the credibility of the speaker—what Aristotle called the *ethos* of a speech. If I tell you that grammar ain’t important to good writing, you understand perfectly well what I want to

say, but if you're educated, my use of "ain't" hurts my credibility, making it hard for you to trust anything else I might say about grammar. Thus bad grammar can hurt rhetorical effectiveness.

But sometimes it can serve a rhetorical purpose, as it did when an international team of researchers discovered that the neutrino—a subatomic particle long thought to have no mass, or weight—turned out to have mass after all. Whereupon a Nobel prize-winning physicist named Leon Lederman said, "It shows us that we really just don't know nothin'" about what gives particles their diversity of masses. "Double negative!" says the grammarian. "Fix the sentence!" But the rhetorician finds Socratic humility here. To dramatize his bafflement at the deepest mysteries of physics, the great physicist makes himself *sound* grammatically ignorant, and thus underscores how much this new discovery undermines what learned physicists think they know.

I hope you don't misunderstand me here. I'm not suggesting that we should now start teaching students to make grammatical errors, for they can do that very well without any help from their teachers. I am suggesting that the rules of grammar can teach us only a little of what

we need to know in order to write well. No football team ever won a game by simply obeying all the rules of the game, and no writer ever won a reader by simply making all of his or her sentences grammatically correct. To see how much more than grammar is needed to make a piece of writing do its job, let's return to our simple example:

Mary loves Bill.

If good writing means writing that is grammatically correct, this sentence qualifies. But if good writing means writing that seizes and holds the attention of the reader, this sentence has a long way to go. It needs development, and it needs to begin reflecting the complexity of human relations. Suppose we add the word “although” at the beginning:

Although Mary loves Bill.

Now two things happen at once. First of all, the sentence suddenly becomes a non-sentence—a sentence fragment. It is no longer a complete sentence. This is the weird thing about adding a word like “although,” which subordinates the sentence to something else. It turns the whole sentence into a dependent clause, which cannot stand alone. So what we have now is grammatically wrong.

On the other hand, it is also more interesting than the original. It begins to suggest conflict; it begins to reflect the complexity of human relations. It makes us want to read on, which is what any piece of writing has to do if it wants to be read by somebody who is not being paid to read it, correct it, and grade it.

Very well, then, let's try completing this sentence:

(DC) Although Mary (S) loves Bill (O), (IC) *she* (S) *wants to marry him* (O).

The sentence is now grammatically complete, and as referee, the grammarian will see no need to throw down any red flags. If you're curious about what makes it complete, the grammarian will patiently explain that we now have a complex sentence containing one dependent clause (DC) and one independent clause (IC)—each containing its own subject (S) and predicate (P). Since the independent clause can stand alone, it can also support a dependent clause, and together the two of them make one complete sentence.

But to the rhetorician, this perfectly grammatical sentence is a

perfectly confusing mess. Like a turn signal on a car, the word “although” signals a turn of thought coming up in the sentence—something that complicates Mary’s love of Bill. But the sentence never takes its turn; it just keeps on going straight ahead.

We all know what it’s like to follow a car that blinks and blinks and blinks and never turns; that’s what it’s like to read this sentence. To make this sentence rhetorically effective, we have to deliver on the promise made by the word “although.” We have to make the turn promised by the turn signal:

Although Mary loves Bill, he does not love her.

OR

Although Mary loves Bill, he loves Rita.

OR

Although Mary loves Bill, he loves Jack.

The possibilities, you see, are endless.

This quite simple example shows the fundamental difference between grammar and rhetoric, and also shows how the writer can organize two or more bits of information so as to stress one of them over the other, to

say that *this* point is more important than *that* one. We stress one point over another whenever we want to persuade someone else to adopt our point of view. “

“Although I totally wrecked your car, it was not my fault.”

“Although your mutual fund lost half its value last year, we know you’re with us for the long haul.” And so on.

Quite obviously this complex structure gives the writer various ways of spinning the facts, manipulating the relation between one fact and another, and in the hands of a skilled writer or great speechmaker, this kind of structure can become a lever of extraordinary force.

Consider again what Winston Churchill did with it in his speech to the British House of Commons on June 4, 1940, just after more than 300,000 Allied troops had been defeated in Belgium and France and had to be evacuated from Dunkirk by British ships. With the fall of Belgium and France now inevitable, Churchill knew only too well that Britain would soon stand alone against the rockets and bombs of the vast

German empire. In light of that fact, let's return to this sentence from the final paragraph of Churchill's speech:

Even though large tracts of Europe, and many old and famous states have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, **we shall not flag or fail.**

To hear those final words, to hear those six blunt monosyllables standing up beneath the vast weight of German power conveyed by the long dependent clause with all its ponderous polysyllables, is to know exactly what Edward R. Murrow meant when he said that Churchill "mobilized the English language and sent it into battle."

Now I know very well that Churchill could be captivated by his own voice and deaf to others. And I also know what revisionist historians tell us of Churchill: they remind us that he authorized the fire-bombing of Dresden, that at the end of the war he consigned the nations of Eastern Europe to the tender mercies of Josef Stalin, and that he was an incurable imperialist who fought to the end against the independence of India. I grant all that against Churchill, if you will only grant me this:

that when Britain stood alone against the mightiest war machine every assembled in the history of humankind, when Neville Chamberlain could hold against it nothing but a piece of peacemaking paper fluttering in the breeze, and when the Duke of Windsor—having traded his throne for the hand of Mrs. Wallis Simpson—was conspiring to trade his entire country for a promise of peace with the Nazis—in short, when all events seemed bent on driving Britain to its knees, it was Churchill who stood up on his hind legs and gave the British people the words they desperately needed to hear: “We shall not flag or fail.” That, is the rhetoric *of* leadership, and in times of crisis, it is the kind of rhetoric we will never cease to need.

But since this is a memoir, I should say a few more things about what I have done with my own writing in recent years. In a word, I have found that after many decades of *hard work* on the art of writing, it has simply become great fun—or rather—in my own version of Tanzania’s Serengeti Plain, as I said awhile back—a source of *endless play*.

Almost twenty years ago, at a New Year’s Renaissance Weekend in Santa Barbara in 2006, Arianna Huffington asked me if I would like

to contribute to her new Huffpost. Would I? You bet—and without asking for one dime in return. Because for years up to that point, I had been composing op-eds on all sorts of topics and firing them like paper airplanes—at overnight delivery rates-- to the *New York Times*, the *LA Times*, and the *Washington Post* in the pathetic hope and faith that the whole world was just waiting for my golden words. But none of those op-eds was ever acknowledged—let alone published.

Now, however, I could fire off a piece in the morning, file it with Huffpost by lunchtime, and see it right up there *within minutes!*

Incredible!

But let me show you what happened when I tried to have some fun with Dick Cheney in December 2006, when he must have felt deeply ambivalent—at the very least—over the precarious health of a Democratic Senator who might, if he recovered, stand in the way of the Bush-Cheney agenda:

Did You Know That Dick Cheney Is Praying For Tim Johnson?

Published in December 2006 on the Huffington Post, this post was taken down after just two days because some readers found it

“offensive.”

Washington, DC—An anonymous source in the office of Vice President Dick Cheney has furnished the following transcript of his prayer for Tim Johnson, newly elected Democratic Senator of South Dakota, who was rushed to George Washington Hospital on Wednesday, December 13 with a brain hemorrhage and is now in critical condition after brain surgery.

“Sir—and I call you Sir because I have no doubt, no doubt at all, that you’re a sir, no matter what these lesbo-maniacs call you, you won’t ever find me calling you Ma’am, no sir—anyway sir, let’s get one thing straight up front: I don’t kneel. Ever. I salute my chief, I salute the stars and stripes, I salute our fighting men in the war against terror, I even kiss Karl’s ring now and then, but I don’t kneel to anyone, not even you, and I’m sure you won’t take that personally. It’s just the way I am. Other presidents and vice presidents before us, you know, have sometimes knelt down in times of crisis. Lincoln maybe, in the civil war. And in the dark days of Watergate, some say, Dick Nixon hit the floor with Henry the K.

“And I’m sure that Clinton must have tried it once or twice in the hope of staving off impeachment, which of course he never did—though the slimy bastard finally beat the rap, and I have to say I’ve never forgiven you for letting him do it. But these guys--these oval office kneelers--they all traded away the powers of the office in return for some quick fix.

“I won’t do that. I want to leave this office—the office of the vice president, and the office of the president too, insofar as I control it, which of course I do—I want to leave both offices stronger than they were when we came in. So I don’t kneel, sir. I speak to you from a chair in my office that is reserved only for me. And here’s what I have to say.

“You know, because you know everything—sometimes I think you know even more than Karl, but of course that’s impossible—anyway, you know of course that the Democrat party now holds the

Senate by a bare majority of 51 to 49. And you know what the Democrat party will try to do us, to the war on terror, to American families, to American values, to the institution of marriage (lay off my daughter, by the way, that's a private matter), to the right to bear arms against all enemies, foreign and domestic (especially liberals), to the system of free enterprise, and above all to the Republican party.

“If the Democrat party gets control of the Senate, they will do all they can to undo what the president and I have done since we took office. They will take back our tax cuts. They will thrust their greedy hands into the pockets of hard-working American taxpayers. They will make the very richest of us—the people who make this economy grow, who build new businesses, who create jobs all around the country, who generously fund the Republican party and its greatest causes, like the war on abortion and a Marriage Amendment—they will make the richest of us pay even more in taxes than the intolerable pittance we are paying right now. And they will insist that we in this administration fight terror with our hands tied behind our backs, that we tell everyone—al Qaeda included, of course—just where in the world we are holding terrorists, that we charge every one of those terrorists with a specific crime (as if terrorism itself wasn't enough!), that we give every one of them the right to a complete trial, soup to nuts, access to all evidence, even classified information—hell, might as well hand them the keys to the CIA.

“And that's only the beginning. If the Democrat party takes over the Senate, they'll insist on drastic action against this phony scare called global warming—as if they'd never heard of air conditioning, for God's sake. They'll rant and rave about carbon emissions, as if they didn't know that we're all exhaling carbon dioxide every day of our lives (see I know a thing or two about chemistry myself). They'll choke the coal industry. They'll pile one regulation after another on the backs of American corporations until they suffocate. They'll want gay marriage in every state and abortion on demand in every town. Worst of all, they'll try to make us cut and run from Iraq, just when we're about to turn the corner, just when the Sunnis and the Shiites are about to

kill each other off entirely, once and for all, and leave the region's oil fields safe at last for American investors.

“Sir, you don't want that, I don't want it, the president doesn't want it, and regardless of how they voted in the last election, the American people don't want that either. That's why I'm praying today for Tim Johnson. If he dies, Governor Rounds of South Dakota—a good Republican, I can assure you of that—will replace him with a Republican, which would give us 50 seats in the Senate, and then of course I could tip the balance in any tie vote.

“Johnson is now recovering from his operation, they say, but still in critical condition. And in spite of what we've been told about his chances, I'm betting he's in pain. And even if he survives, even if he has a pretty good chance of full recovery, I'm betting he's likely to end up permanently incapacitated, with the fate of the Senate and the fate of the country and the fate of the entire world hanging in the balance. Don't let that happen, sir. Put him out of his misery. Now.”

FOLLOW-UP POST

NOW THAT CHENEY'S PRAYER FOR JOHNSON HAS OFFENDED YOU, MAY I TELL YOU WHAT OFFENDS ME?

[Posted on *The Huffington Post* in December 2006 and taken down in about 30 minutes]

For the first time since I started blogging here last winter, one of my posts has been found so offensive that it's been yanked from the site.

Here's a sample of the outrage sparked by my transcript of Dick Cheney's prayer for Tim Johnson:

“This is a shameful column, Mr. Hefferman. This is just the kind of hyper-disrespectful stuff that the Republicans love to use against their straw-man opposition. This is a blog site, but you should show some discipline as a journalist. We need worthwhile opposition, not

polarizing nonsense. I'm shocked this blog allowed this stuff to be posted.”

By: goofy2 on December 16, 2006 at 09:28pm

Flag: [[abusive](#)]

Several others thought better of the piece (it would be hard to think worse, of course), and the very last person to post a comment on it (which was also a comment on all the others) wrote as follows:

“There is nothing wrong with this post, as I am sure that Heffernan is not praying for Tim Johnson to die. In fact, I hope that nobody is because that would be sickening in my opinion. But personally, I think that that was one of the best rips on Cheney that I have ever read. "Lesbo-maniacs," that had me rolling, especially with knowledge of Cheney's stance on these things. If you have any political knowledge at all, you know that many of the statements here are actually based around Cheney's own personal statements on issues, and that **this was just for satire, nothing else**. Heffernan's job is to do up both serious and satirical articles, and this one should get an award. Great job Jim. Hope to see more stuff soon.”

By: DemocratExtemperDave on December 17, 2006 at 02:02am

Flag: [[abusive](#)]

Thanks, DED. In a roomful of people throwing eggs and rotten tomatoes at me, it's great to get even one bouquet.

But since I doubt that DED's comment will satisfy my detractors, let me simply ask them three questions:

1. Is it offensive to discuss the political implications of the illness of a United States Senator?
2. Do you believe that Vice President Cheney really wants Senator Johnson to recover, or that he considers Johnson's recovery more important than the Republican agenda?
3. Do you believe that any one of Johnson's family or friends believes either 1 or 2?

If you answered yes to question 1, you must be offended by just about every news story published on him so far, and so presumably have stopped reading newspapers and visiting web sites, including this one. If you answered yes to question 2, you must have been spending the last six years on the moon. And if you answered yes to question 3, you must believe that Johnson's friends and family live there too.

Let me tell you what my crime was. In the virtual hospital room that surrounds the bed on which Senator Tim Johnson is now slowly but surely recovering from brain surgery (for which I am profoundly grateful), I was barbarous enough to note the presence of a gigantic elephant. This is the elephant that trampled its way into a wholly unnecessary war that has so far killed nearly three thousand American soldiers, that has injured twenty thousand of them (many maimed for life), that has taken the lives of at least thirty thousand Iraqi civilians, that has cost us over three hundred billion dollars, and that has drained our armed forces to the point of exhaustion. That is what I find offensive.

Satire is a provocative form of expression. Its traditional enemies are vice and folly, which it attacks by means of ridicule. If the hide of this war-mongering elephant—the very embodiment of vice and folly-- is ever to be pricked, satire alone can do it.

With the click of a key, Huffpost has deleted my transcript of Cheney's prayer. If the click of any key could delete the suffering and death and misery that we have inflicted on Iraq, I would cheerfully crawl on my hands and knees through ashes and broken glass to beg the forgiveness of everyone who found the prayer offensive. But until you can find a way to delete the war, please don't ask me to apologize for my previous post.

And here's one other item from my collection of Huffposts—this one prompted by news that Pope Benedict was planning to resign. in 2013.

COULD STEPHEN COLBERT BE THE NEXT POPE?

Now that everyone is chuckling -- albeit some a little nervously -- about Stephen Colbert's campaign for the presidency of the United States, I want to raise a truly serious question.

Could he become the next pope?

Matt Moore, Executive Director of the South Carolina [Republican Party](#), obviously thinks not. "Stephen Colbert," he says, "has about as much a chance at being elected president in South Carolina as he does of being elected Pope."

But what if he has a BETTER chance of becoming Pope than of gaining the White House?

Just consider a few things.

First of all, Stephen Colbert is named for the very first martyr to the Christian faith: Saint Stephen, a man "full of faith and power" who "did great wonders among the people" (Acts of the Apostles 6:8) but who -- shortly after the crucifixion of Christ -- was stoned to death for preaching on His behalf (Acts 7:59). No man of our time resembles Saint Stephen more than Stephen Colbert, a staunch Roman Catholic with a devoted following of young people deeply inspired by his eloquent advocacy of strictly conservative values and Christian faith. A few years ago, I distinctly recall his proudly reciting from memory every word of the Apostles' Creed -- right in the middle of his show.

Furthermore, since I taught at Dartmouth for nearly 40 years, I knew

Stephen well as an undergraduate, and I can assure you that **at least once a week in his Dartmouth years he was totally stoned.**

Secondly, at a time when the great ship of Roman Catholicism is rocked by scandal and captained by a frail octogenarian, we desperately need a fresh and firm young hand at the helm. I say this with all due respect to Pope Benedict XVI, who -- to shift metaphors slightly -- has newly fortified the church's seawall of dogma and doctrine against all the raging tides of godless modernism: against contraception, abortion, homosexuality, married priests (except of course for ex-Episcopal ministers creeping in through the back door) and the ordination of women, who blindly and stubbornly fail to see that God never meant them to be priests, for otherwise He would have made them bearded Jewish fishermen. For all these reasons, Benedict XVI resoundingly deserves the everlasting gratitude and admiration of his worldwide flock.

Nevertheless, since this 85-year-old pontiff cannot live forever, it behooves us to begin thinking now about his successor. **And I can think of no one more worthy than Stephen Colbert.**

You may say, of course, that Stephen is not even a priest, let alone a cardinal, a prince of the church, and it is only from the college of cardinals that a pope may be chosen. But as a staunch defender of Roman Catholic conservative values, Stephen IS a prince of the church.

Furthermore, he is a man of cardinal importance to Catholicism in America, as well as a champion of red state values. Anyone who watches him closely on television can see that his handsome head is invisibly but unmistakably crowned by a cardinal's red hat. (In Greek, by the way, the word *stephanos* means crown.) **He is unquestionably the eminence rouge of our time.**

But, you will say, Stephen Colbert cannot possibly be pope because he is a married man. To which I reply that so was St. Peter, the Pope of Popes, the *petrus* -- the very rock -- on which Christ founded His church (Matthew 16:18). Scripture makes it absolutely clear that Peter was a married man. At Capernaum, we are told, Christ healed Peter's ailing

mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31), which incidentally may help to explain why Peter later denied Him three times (Luke 22:57-59).

And so my dear conservative brethren, let us dream together. Almost a thousand years after the death of the last Pope Stephen (Stephen IX) in the year 1058, let us dream that we will have another pope of that name, and that one fine day soon, after Benedict XVI goes to his eternal reward, a plume of white smoke rising from the chimney of the Sistine chapel will signify the election of the first American pontiff in the history of the Roman Catholic church. Then from the balcony of Saint Peter's will come the ringing words, ever ancient and ever new: "**Habemus Papam! Habemus Papam! Stephanus X!**" He will not even have to change his Christian name.

Though he may have a long commute to his Manhattan studio.

FINALLY, A FEW OF MY FAVORITE POEMS

Since most of my writing is prose, I'm strictly an amateur poet, and I have written a few poems in free verse—such as the “Noli timere” of Chapter 3. But unlike the overwhelming majority of professional poets at large today, I often relish the challenge of writing within the old-fashioned double strait jacket of rhyme and meter. Years ago, in fact, I decided to write a nominal *defense* of free verse while—like Houdini, as it were—wearing this strait jacket all the time:

FREE VERSE

Can anything be more ridiculous
 Than binding words in rhyme, as in a truss?
 Can anything in poetry be worse
 Than that old dog-trot called iambic verse?

Good poetry must be spontaneous,
 As Wordsworth long ago instructed us,

And poetry should come as naturally
As leaves uncurling greenly from a tree.

So said John Keats, who like a bird in spring
Instinctively knew how to soar and sing.
Yet even Keats's birdlike muse sublime
Most often sings within a cage of rhyme.
And even when his verse turns blank, like this,
It carefully preserves its metered gait.

Poor Keats! Fast manacled to metric rules,
The jingling handcuffs of benighted fools!
If only he had lived in our own time,
He could have spurned all meter and all rhyme.
He could have set his straining voice quite free
To sing just what his heart felt--naturally.

But could he have composed a single poem
Without the beat of meter's metronome?
And lacking rhymes like *hold* and *told* and *bold*,
Could he have ever minted lines of gold?

We'll never know, nor do we need to know,
For now free verse can bravely, boldly go
Where no mere mincing, meter-shackled foot
Could ever lunge, or leap, or spin, or strut.

I also like to play with the sonnet form, and this one is prompted by the
amazing fact that the English language has not even *one* transitive verb

that can decently designate an act essential to the propagation of the human race:

THE PASSIONATE PHILOLOGIST TO HIS LOVE

Can you conceive a problem more absurd?
 Can you imagine just how much I'm stuck?
 In all the English language, crammed with words,
 The only verb for what I crave sounds just like *yuck*.
 Oh yes, of course, I know, there's *copulate*,
 But that's a verb intransitive, my dear,
 Which means I can't--although my lust is great--
 Do that to you grammatically, I fear.
 So from the lexicon of Chaucer's time
 I pray you let me ardently revive
 A verb whose simple yet seductive chime
 Sounds just the note I need: then let us . . . *swyve*!
 If I swyve you, and transitively, see?
 Then just as surely, you'll be swyving me.

For the future of the human race, dear friends, we badly need to revive *swyve*, don't you think? And please don't tell me to fuck off.

Because anyway, it's high time I wound up this romp through my life as a writer.