

Breaking All the Rules

By Marilyn Reeves

Everything I learned about writing I learned from two great English teachers. Beginning with Mrs. Griffith in junior high and culminating with Mr. Custer my senior year of high school, they challenged me to write correctly, precisely, and – in some instances – creatively.

Mrs. Griffith taught me that every sentence had to have a subject and a predicate. Which is to say – at the very least – a noun and a verb. Names, states, and descriptive phrases were all set off by commas. She taught me the difference between commas and semi-colons, and between semi-colons and colons. She taught me the difference between the words ‘lie’ and ‘lay,’ ‘further’ and ‘farther.’

Mr. Custer taught me some of the finer nuances of good writing, such as not to use fancy words like ‘nuances’ more than once in any given piece. He taught me that the ‘T’ in the word ‘often’ is supposed to be silent. And he taught me to try to avoid using repetitive words, except when making a point, being poetic, or trying to achieve a desired effect. So today, once my piece has been written, I always check it over for repetitive words, and often refer to my thesaurus to find substitute words that convey the same meaning.

Nowadays, many of the rules of good writing have been relaxed. It’s now acceptable, under certain circumstances, to use incomplete sentences ... when you’re striving for a more lively effect. You just need to have a sense of when it’s appropriate. Like when you’re writing a work of fiction. Or an exposition of this nature, which is filled with incomplete sentences.

And nowadays, it’s okay to begin a sentence with an ‘and’ or a ‘but’ or an ‘or.’ And to eliminate at least some of those cumbersome commas.

The excellent English teachers I had in my youth would have a fit if they were to see the way I write today – I break so many of the rules they taught me. But I do so, knowing that I do so. And in most cases – except in this particular piece – I try to avoid repetition. But I did it for effect.