Breaking the rules: editing with prescription and description

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I write for a literary magazine aimed at Australian school children. As a former teacher, my task is to devise activities based on the texts in the magazine that help children understand and appreciate language in a range of different forms. In my time of writing, I have created a variety of activities that delve into language—such as studying the rhyming patterns in poetry, exploring the structure of a nonfiction article and composing biographies. I'm also required to come up with fun, useful and interesting lesson plans about grammar. When I tell friends and family about this last point, their eyebrows raise. 'Those words don't go together, do they?' said my aunt on one occasion. I think she may have shuddered. But then she did attend primary school in the 1950s, where she recalls grammar as a set of dry and dusty rules that was never to be broken. English composition was combed over for 'mistakes'—split infinitives, using 'who' where 'whom' should be—and graded severely.

I don't quite relate to this. My primary education took place in the 1980s, where a bit of free love concerning language was going on. We were immersed in English, a joyful splashing about that barely flicked the odd drop on books of grammatical terms. The best I can remember from those days is that verbs were 'doing' words. But quite what they were doing in a sentence I was never sure.

In today's classroom, things are changing. A middle ground somewhere between prescriptivism (how language 'should' be used) and descriptivism (how language is actually used) is being taught. Grammar is being thrown into the pool to join the language party. While the basic rules are being covered—how we form plurals, what makes a clause or how to use pronouns—students are also investigating grammatical terms and English expression in particular contexts and considering the role of words. For example, a typical content elaboration for Year 6 from the Australian Curriculum states that students should '(know) that verbs often represent actions and that the choice of more expressive verbs makes an action more vivid' <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/>. What is interesting is that there is not one mention in the curriculum of some of the more doubtful grammatical rules; what Mark Tredinnick in *The little red writing book* calls 'pieces of fashionable usage' or 'false gods of grammar', such as the ones that tell us not to split an infinitive or begin a sentence with 'and', 'but' or because' (2006, p. 60).

I think the Australian Curriculum has got something right here. As editors, we should also be finding a middle ground between prescriptivism and

descriptivism, using the best of both approaches. We can't avoid being prescriptive—it's part of the job description—but we also need to be flexible and wise enough to understand which grammar rules ought to be enforced and when. To do this, we need some understanding of how the English language developed. And discover where Tredinnick's false gods originate.

Politeness and correctness

If we were to travel back to Anglo-Saxon times, we would discover that the concept of a 'correct' English would make no sense, according to linguistics professor and author David Crystal. This is because a canon of great literature that would have fed grammars or dictionaries simply didn't exist (2006, p. 3). In fact, there wasn't even such a thing as a standard English, just different dialects. The 1500s was the first time that writers discussed the attributes of 'good' English, drawing a snobbish difference between the 'better' language of the court and that spoken in the country.

English grammar was first properly analysed in the eighteenth century. This was partly due to the publication of the first English dictionary by Samuel Johnson in 1755. His collection of 43 000 words 'heralded and triggered a cavalcade of grammars,' says author Melvyn Bragg. 'Everyone wanted to get hold of English and tell it how to behave. They could not wait to lay their hands on this unruly mob of words and smarten it up, sort it out, establish some discipline down there' (2003, p. 216).

Two of the most influential grammarians of the day were Robert Lowth and Lindley Murray. They published rules governing correct grammatical usage that they felt demonstrated polite language. In doing so, they criticised the work of such writers as Swift, Milton and Shakespeare, merely because they had used grammatical constructions that were common to their time. Crystal says: 'The prescriptive grammarians noticed a real problem in clarity, in some sentences, and then in their obsession with bringing the language under total control, so that there are never any exceptions, tried to convince us that there is always a problem' (2006, p. 153). Many of the 'false gods' were laid down in Lowth's and Murray's works, although they were not always the originators. For example, they ruled against ending sentences with a preposition based on author John Dryden's personal dislike of the construction (Crystal 2006, p. 110). Other rules were based on Latin grammar. And both men, it seemed, contributed their own dislikes of particular usages. Lowth's and Murray's books were widely read. They were particularly welcomed by the middle class, who were keen for guidance on how to master 'polite' language. 'People were anxious to find clear-cut ways to distinguish 'us' from 'them,' says Crystal, and grammar was 'an easy way to do it' (2006, p. 110).

A small minority disagreed with this prescriptive approach. One of these was critic Joseph Priestley. In his *Rudiments of English grammar*, he argued that

'grammar is defined by common usage and should not be dictated by self-styled grammarians' (Bragg 2003, p. 216). Furthermore, he thought it 'impossible to reduce all variation in language to a single set of rules' (cited in Crystal 2002, p. 28). However, it seemed the general public weren't interested in his descriptivist views. The popularity of Lynne Truss's prescriptivist-based 2003 bestseller *Eats, shoots & leaves* shows that it perhaps still isn't. This may not be so surprising, given that people do still judge someone's writing by its grammatical and spelling errors.

Flexibility and sensitivity

That was rather a potted history, but I think it goes some way to showing the complexity editors are faced with when enforcing grammar rules. Apart from the problem of knowing when and why to intervene, there is an additional difficulty. What do we do when faced with a client who insists on outdated grammatical constructions? Let's begin with the first issue.

Apart from an understanding of English language history and correct grammatical terminology (which may require regular 'brushing up') I believe that editors can have a better understanding of how and when to make changes if they also write, preferably in a range of genres. I don't think it especially matters if you are not a great writer. We learn by doing, and I think that writing helps to oil the language gears in our minds and allows us to directly gain an understanding of the difficulties a writer might face. There is something striking about moving around words that you have composed yourself.

Further, although of course editors need to become familiar with characteristics of style, they shouldn't be mindlessly reliant on style manuals. 'If you're arguing with someone about a style choice, you don't automatically win just because you can say "Strunk and White [insert any other style manual here] said so"', says 'Grammar girl' Mignon Fogarty <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/strunk-and-white>. Australian editor Janet Mackenzie agrees: 'When you turn to reference books for a ruling, you may find that there are as many opinions as there are experts. In these cases, it's up to you to exercise editorial judgement' (2011, p. 99). Style manuals will also date and may not reflect the way English is currently being used. We need to always bear in mind that language is constantly changing and that 'it's not enough to condemn a new usage and expect the problem to go away' (Crystal 2006, p. 90). Crystal feels strongly that language is not getting worse, only changing. And there is not a lot we can do about this as editors. 'When the mass of English speakers make up their minds, a few valiant editors cannot halt the tide' (Mackenzie 2011, p. 99). All we can do is attempt to keep up with changes, however much we might mourn the loss of some warm and comforting grammatical rule. 'It's confusing when the rules that were drilled into us as kids no longer seem to hold true,' blogs editor Samantha Enslen. '(But) if everyone uses and

understands a certain construction, we can't very well call it "wrong", at least in less formal writing' <http://dragonflyeditorial.com/everybody-put-down-the-switchblades-english-changes-and-thats-okay/>.

To be more specific, we need to remember that communicating clearly and with impact might mean using grammar and expressions that are far from what is prescriptively 'perfect'. A split infinitive might have a pleasing rhythm. Ending a sentence with a preposition might create a neater sentence than the alternatives. Sometimes the rules do need to be broken—competent writers over time show this again and again. As Mackenzie says, 'subjunctives and gerunds can sparkle in the right text, but in some kinds of writing such refinements are absurdly out of place, like crystal at a barbecue' (2011, p. 100). Identifying such problems of course comes with experience, but it is a vital skill to develop. Clients expect and have the right to hire someone who knows the rules. But that doesn't mean being inflexible. We must always keep our passion for language at the forefront. We are not just there to pick up errors for the sake of it—it must be more informed than that. We need to be open to the various ways of using language, just as the classroom teachers of today are trying to do.

We need to balance all of this knowledge with sensitivity to the client's preferences and needs. What if they want grammar that is outdated? Of course it depends on the type of writing. A business communication that sounds old-fashioned and pompous might give the wrong impression to its potential clients. But a fiction manuscript set back in another era might need hints of yesteryear in some of its language and sentence constructions.

Above all, we need to remember that clients are paying us to do the job. If a client doesn't like sentences that begin with conjunctions, we need to be flexible enough to work around that, perhaps recasting sentences to make it work as much as possible. If not, an editor needs to be able to explain why a rule is outmoded, without condescension or scorn. The general public is unsure enough of using language as it is.

Let's hope that today's Australian teachers work with the curriculum to teach students not only to appreciate the power and beauty of language, but also to apply the rules, unhindered by those baseless ones that are neither relevant nor conducive to better writing. This represents the best mix of the descriptive and prescriptive approaches, which we should also apply to our editing work. Editor Jonathon Owen calls it an 'informed prescriptivism, based on facts about current and historical usage, with a healthy dose of scepticism towards the rhetoric coming from the more fundamental prescriptivists' <http://www.arrantpedantry.com/2008/02/04/how-i-became-a-descriptivist/>. Virginia Durksen puts it this way: 'As editors we prescribe … but a skilled editor should also learn to observe and describe writing, as a way to help writers become aware of the effect their writing has on readers. We demonstrate literacy as much by our awareness of readers as by our

knowledge of the rules we writers and editors apply for a living' < http://blog.editors.ca/2013/07/the-inner-editor-the-useful-conversation/>.

I don't think we could do much better than to follow this advice before we embark on an editing task. And now I feel the need to use a sentence that begins with a conjunction. I think it helps to create the feeling that this blog post is about to conclude. You may not like my choice of grammar but I hope at least you might agree that I am allowed to break a rule.

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