

These two brief essays are excerpted from

**MOTHER MILLER'S
HOW TO WRITE GOOD BOOK**

by Sasha Miller

published by FoxAcre Press

ISBN 0-9671783-1-2

see end of excerpt for ordering information

Essay One: Nuts and Bolts

The emphasis in this work is on the technical aspects of writing—the nuts and bolts. This is the punctuation, the grammar, the microwriting.

Microwriting is the way words are put together to convey what the writer has in mind instead of their going astray and winding up as something altogether different and sometimes—too often, actually—unintentionally hilarious.

If a good (i.e. competent in the technical sense) ms.'s purpose is to provide adequate traffic signs to guide the reader toward a close semblance of the story the writer has conceived in her mind, the sloppy techniques one runs into too often these days—shrugging or sitting or grinning dialogue, wildly incorrect punctuation, shabby grammar where sentences (yea, entire paragraphs) make no logical sense and sometimes say the opposite of what the author (presumably) intended and otherwise clutter up the landscape with billboards and political posters from two campaigns ago. The reader either has to fight her way through the unnecessary verbal underbrush or close the book quietly and go away, never to return. This is something every writer has to learn, that he is not in charge.

The reader has the ultimate power.

All I can teach is technical competence—to help the writer transmit the story that's in her head onto the paper in a clear enough form that the reader has a shot at re-creating a close approximation of it in *his* head as well. If there's no story to begin with, that pretty much writes paid to the whole effort.

Of course, the finest technical proficiency will not make up for a thing if the would-be writer lacks the story-telling instinct. Without a well-oiled story-telling instinct, the person who is schooled only in the technical aspects of language will put out finely constructed drivel that will bore a reader to tears. Story-telling instinct can't be taught; either you have it or you don't. But technical skills can be taught, and without them, the would-be writer is operating with both hands firmly tied behind her back. There may be a story lying somewhere beneath the clumsy verbiage, the poor phrasing, the incoherent sentence structures, but it is suffocating for lack of readers who will attempt to fight their way through the garbage to get to it. And editors—those people who buy works of fiction—won't bother.

It trots in tandem. Those who work with words must hone and refine their skills constantly so they can transfer that wonderful story that has taken shape in their heads onto the page clearly enough that it has a hope of being re-created in the head of the reader and have it survive this process as intact as possible. To accomplish this miracle, these language skills must be integrated into a writer's very bones so they become tools of her trade, and not self-conscious techniques.

All it takes to see this too clearly in action is to have a quick read through a few amateur mss. to see why some amateurs are likely to remain so. One of the quickest way to get a ms. rejected, and never mind the story the ms. is trying to

relay, is poor handling of our mother tongue. Adverbial clauses, dangling participles, and other atrocities abound and scream “Amateur Hour”!

One of the big things an acquiring editor looks at is how much work she will have to put into a ms. to make it publishable. Think about it. You turn in a messy ms., you are, in effect, shooting yourself in the foot before you ever get off the ground, if you don’t mind a mangled metaphor. If your ms. is *really* a grammatical horror show, you won’t even get far enough with an editor for him to find out if the story is decent.

To be fair, grammatical law-breaking is not usually a calculated assault on the rules of the language. Rather, they are mistakes of ignorance.

Whether we like it or not, whether we think it is “fair” or not, grammar and punctuation do have rules, and they are rules we must learn, each and every one of us, and furthermore, they are rules that must be followed. Yes, there is a little latitude, but precious little. You don’t want to hurl your reader out of the dream by some mistake that is easily corrected if only you had known how to do it.

That’s what grammar, punctuation, etc. is all about. If a would-be writer thinks learning all this is just too boring for words and doesn’t want to bother with it, then Mother Miller strongly suggests he ought to sit down and seriously re-think his ambitions along these lines.

Essay Two: Punctuation Or: Never Start A Sentence With A Comma

Punctuation exists to create a series of guideposts designed to help the reader find her way among the words, in hopes that by setting up these guideposts the author can persuade the reader to perceive something similar to the story the author set out to tell.

Without the proper punctuation, in a sentence like

“He put on the gray fur lined mittens and slung the brown skinned pack over his shoulder”

the reader is all at sea about whether the mittens or the fur is gray, whether the pack is brown or has just been skinned and is now brown—or anything else that is going on. Readers—not to mention editors—don’t like playing mystery games like this, and will set the work aside at once.

When dealing with compound adjectives, as above, the mnemonic is to separate the two adjectives and see if they can stand alone. If they can’t, hyphenate them. Thus, one may have a brown pack but not, logically, a skinned pack. One therefore has a brown-skinned pack and that’s wrong also because the pack is made of skin instead of having been skinned. This sloppy syntax, by the way, was taken directly from a writing student’s ms. and Mother Miller certainly hopes Gentle Reader does not think she composed it all by herself.

a plain brown wrapper

a poison-laced cucumber sandwich

It is a convention in this country to put the quotation mark after the period or comma. This dates back to the days when type was set by hand, and doing it otherwise allowed the quote mark to slip down out of place. We carry the tradition on today although some of the strictness is loosening. If there is non-dialogue, quoted material in the text that has nothing to do with a subsequent comma or semicolon, the punctuation can go outside the quote mark and the world will continue to wag.

In this country, the single quotation mark is used only inside the double quote mark, to indicate a quotation within a quotation. Any other usage is incorrect. Mother Miller has noted a distressing tendency for people to try to use single quotes for material that is not dialogue. This is wrong. All quoted material, whether dialogue or not, goes in double quotes; single quote marks are reserved for quotes contained therein. This is not negotiable.

There are two spaces after the end of a sentence, and two spaces after a colon. This calls attention to the end of the sentence and helps keep the colon from being mistaken for a semi-colon. It also is vital in doing printer's word counts, which is different from ms. word counts, being based on en-spaces, a given number of which constitute a "printer's word".

Punctuation in dialogue causes a lot of problems.

"Meet me in the gazebo." Gwendolyn said.

This is wrong. "Meet me in the gazebo" is not a complete sentence because it is connected to "Gwendolyn said." If it stood alone, the period would be fine. You must use a comma.

"I am consumed with delight," Stanley said, "I'll meet you at half-past six."

This is wrong because Stanley has spoken two complete sentences and they cannot be joined by a comma. The “logical” spot for the period (after the word *delight*) is already occupied by another conventional usage, the comma. Therefore, the only other spot for it is after “*said*.”

“If I am late,” Stanley said, “Start without me.”

The capital *S* is wrong because it is in the middle of a line of dialogue that is a single complete sentence, interrupted by “*Stanley said*.” Use a lower-case *S*.

“If I am late,” Stanley scampered playfully from the gazebo, “start without me.”

To be correct, a line of dialogue can be interrupted only by a vocality-phrase like “*he said*”, “*she muttered*”, etc. Action-phrases, or, as they are sometimes called, business-phrases, must utilize dashes instead:

“If I am late—” Stanley scampered playfully from the gazebo “—start without me.”

Both dashes go inside the quotation marks, taking the place of the comma, question mark, etc. Em-dashes conventionally indicate an interruption in speech, and this is a convention that indicates the taking up again of the interrupted speech when done by the original speaker. Doing it the “logical” way would leave the end word in the action phrase (in this case, “*gazebo*”) without any punctuation of its own.

For dashes, use two hyphens--like this--without any spaces around them. This is called an em-dash, and must be

marked for the typesetter. If the author includes spaces fore and aft as well -- like this -- they must be deleted, by hand, each and every one. It costs so little to gain a few points by making some poor copyeditor's life easier. *The Chicago Manual of Style* uses this convention and if it's good enough for them, rest assured it's good enough for the rest of us.

Mother Miller too often runs across places in mss. where the author, apparently despairing of her ability to get the point across any other way, resorts to stacked punctuation, like this!! Or this !?!?! Don't commit this error. If your prose isn't strong enough to begin with, no amount of excess punctuation, is going to salvage it.

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www.foxacre.com
info@foxacre.com
401 Ethan Allen Avenue
Takoma Park, Maryland 20912