

Grammar Gremlins and Brazen Bugbears

By Terri Elders

You've heard this before, but it's true. The more you write, the better you write. Even though I've been writing since before I'd edged into my teens, I'm certain that my sentences are sharper and my paragraphs more provocative than they used to be.

No new muse nestles on my shoulder. I'm not suddenly any more talented or inspired. The secret is that I've become a better self-editor. I've learned to grapple with grammar gremlins and banish brazen bugbears. You can, too. Here are some tips on what to watch for:

Grammar Gremlins

Gremlins mangle your sentence so you haven't said what you thought you said.

Misplaced modifiers will confuse your reader. In these examples you can resolve the confusion by simply moving the modifying language closer to what is being modified.

Problem: The red-haired girl walked a dog in a pair of tight jeans. (Does the pooch wear clothes? No, the girl does.)

Solution: The red-haired girl in a pair of tight jeans walked a dog.



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Problem: Suspend any doubts from your mind, if you have any. (Is the writer calling me mindless? No, the writer wants me to suspend doubts from my mind.)

Solution: Suspend any doubts, if you have any, from your mind.

Dangling Participles can lead to hilarity. You really haven't said what you meant to say.

Problem: Walking down the street, the sun rose. (The sun never has walked down any of my streets, but maybe I have at dawn.)

Solution: As I walked down the street, the sun rose.

Problem: Being my father, I thought he'd be upset. (I'm my own dad?)

Solution: Knowing my father, I thought he'd be upset.

Brazen Bugbears

Bugbears are those creatures that can annoy your reader:

Verbal Tics are unconscious repetitions of the same word.

This little bugbear can squirm in anywhere, unnoticed by the writer, but obvious to the reader. I once read a mystery novel where every character "smiled broadly." By the second chapter those broad smiles had already showed up seven times. I lost track of the plot as I kept count of the tics. I hungered for a narrow smile or even a gruesome grin, just to vary the pace, but nary a variation showed its mouth.

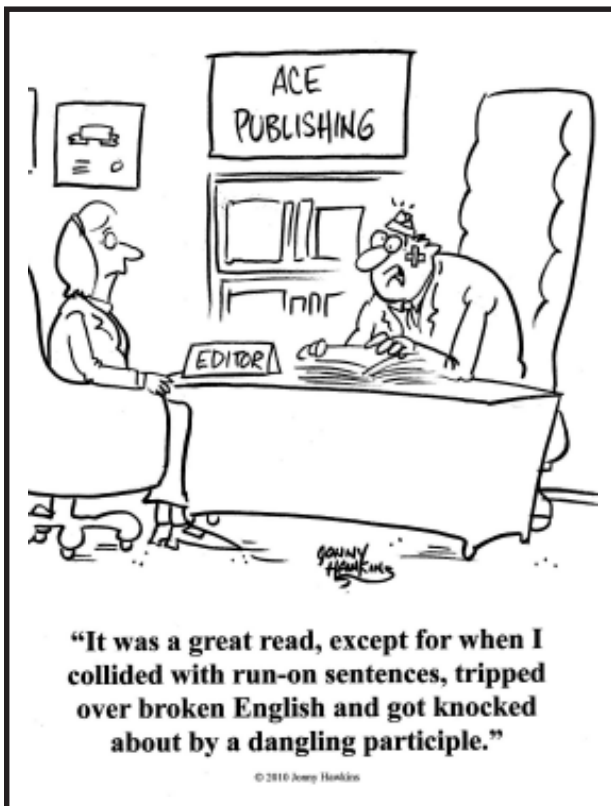
One book I recently edited contained an astonishingly *generous* collection of characters. They all *shared*. Nobody ever announced, explained, offered, suggested, answered, claimed or said. "I love living here," she shared. "It's going to be a boon year," he shared. When I pointed it out, the writer shared that she'd been unaware. Well, that's what she said, claimed, announced and averred.

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In Microsoft Word it’s easy to check how many times you’ve used the same word. With your document open, go to Edit >Find, and click in the box for “Highlight all items found in” and then click Find All. You’ll see how many times the selected word appears in your document...and you might be surprised. My personal tic is “just.” For some reason it slinks into every other sentence if I’m not on the alert. I recently finished an essay of over 4000 words. I blushed when I found that “just” wiggled in nearly a hundred times. In most instances, the word had no real reason to be there...pure filler. I deleted all but nine, thus reducing my word count while strengthening my prose.

Latinitis—Though Latin-based words tend to be more formal, it’s not dumbing down to use an Anglo-Saxon word if it cuts to the chase. Polysyllabic Latin words can slow down your prose even as they show

off your vocabulary. So why choose Anglo Saxon words over Latin? They tend to be shorter, punchier and more direct, while Latin words tend to be longer and more abstract. Consider these examples:

- When it wails, do you desire to provide the infant with a maternal embrace...or do you wanna give the baby a motherly hug?
- As a dragon bounds towards you, do you ruminate about your impending expiration...or do you think about your upcoming death?

My Personal Peeve—“Due to” means “caused by,” not “because of.” The wordy phrase, “due to the fact that,” can be replaced simply by “since” or “because.” For example, “The avalanche was due to the heavy rains.”

Incorrect: Due to rain, the game was postponed.

Correct: Because of rain, the game was postponed.

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When to Capitalize Relatives—If you allude to relatives by the relationship, not their specific names, do capitalize. It's Mama or Mom, rather than Luella, or Grandfather or Gramps, rather than Louis. But if you insert a pronoun in front of it, don't capitalize. It's my mother, your sister, her aunt. If you're addressing your spouse, it's "Bring me my pipe, Wife," but it's "two of the wives of Henry VIII lost their heads." Never capitalize if it's general—it's "all the mothers in Transylvania make blood sausage."

Terri's Recommended Online Resources

When you're overwhelmed with gremlins and bugbears, lighten up with:

Teaching with Writing: http://writing.umn.edu/tww/grammar/self_humorous.html

Great Grammar Guides:

Easy Writer: <http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/easywriter3e/20errors/>

Writing English: <http://writingenglish.wordpress.com/2006/09/18/ten-common-writing-mistakes-your-spell-checker-won%E2%80%99t-find/>

Subscribe or Follow:

Daniel Scocco: <http://www.dailywritingtips.com/>

Tom Gillespie: <http://tg-editor-proofreader.blogspot.com/>

Assorted Pros: <http://www.copyblogger.com/grammar-writing-mistakes/>

Style Manuals and Writing Guides: <http://www.calstatela.edu/library/styleman.htm>

From Dahlynn and Ken...

Guest columnist Terri Elders keeps our verbal wanderings in check. Terri was the editor of our latest winery-destination book, the one in which she referred to in her article above that had the generous helping of "shares" throughout! Oops! Terri is a great editor *and* a great friend!

If you have a grammar question or two for Terri, e-mail her at telders@hotmail.com. Come on, challenge her! And check out Terri's fun blog: <http://atouchoftarragon.blogspot.com>

Big News!

Publishing Syndicate is proud to announce two new anthology series!



My Story is Out: High School Years

The first book in this groundbreaking anthology—which was brought to Publishing Syndicate by award-winning author and full-time writer Lyndsey D’Arcangelo—will be a collection of personal real-life stories about surviving high school as an LGBT teen and *coming out* on the other side.

(“LGBT” stands for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered.) As publishers, we have identified a real need for this type of anthology series and look forward to providing a source of inspiration for the LGBT community.

Through the MSIO website, Lyndsey will be looking for humorous, heart-warming, wistful and inspiring stories written by straight, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered individuals 25 years old and younger. She invites you to share your personal experience, which, if published, will touch the hearts, lives and souls of LGBT teens all over the world. Submission guidelines and more information can be found at www.MyStoryIsOut.com. Story deadline: January 1, 2012



Lyndsey D’Arcangelo

OMG! My Reality...

This anthology series—also presented by Publishing Syndicate—will focus on kids, preteens and teens. We are in negotiations with the prospective author at this time and more information will be announced in May’s newsletter. As with the MSIO series above, this anthology series will accept stories for consideration from those 25 years and younger.

Not to worry, fellow pens: we will be announcing an all-inclusive anthology series this summer, open to one and all regardless of age or anything else! We’ll have you writing like crazy!

HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF!

As of April 28, 2011



My Story is Out: High School Years

The nation's newest anthology series for the LGBT community!

We are excited to present this newest anthology series, one that will help LGBT teens. See page five of this newsletter to learn more or go to www.MyStoryIsOut.com. Deadline: January 1, 2012

Dream of ThingsSM

www.DreamofThings.com

(Find story information under the "Workshop" tab.)

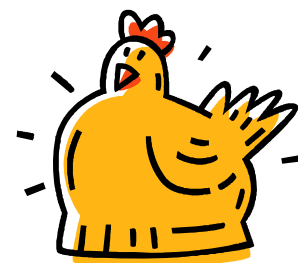
Coffee Shop Stories *Travel Stories*
Holiday Stories *Stories about Great*
Stories of Forgiveness *Teachers*
Advice You'd Like to Pass On to Others
Making Waves: Stories about Role Models and People Who Inspire and Motivate Us

All *Dream of Things* anthology call-outs are open until there are enough stories to fill a book.

Chicken Soup for the Soul

www.ChickenSoup.com

Food and Love: 5/15/11 *Find Your Happiness: 5/15/11*
Family Caregiver: 7/15/11 *Christmas Stories: 6/30/11*
Brides and Weddings: 6/30/11 *Home Sweet Home: 8/30/11*
Marriage and Married Life: 5/30/11 *Think Positive for Kids: 12/31/11*



Go for it! Get published!