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Cornelia Paraskevas

The Craft of Writing: Breaking Conventions

When writers think of conventions as falling along a continuum from syntactic to rhetorical choices rather than as absolute rules, they better understand the roles conventions can play in communicating meaning. Using examples from popular publications, Cornelia Paraskevas argues for productively flouting conventions.

For fifteen years, students have asked the same questions when I teach composition: "Is it OK to use dashes? Can I have fragments? Can I start my sentences with and? Can I use I?" And, instead of telling, I show the students what happens in real life: in newspapers, magazines, books, and fliers, students can see what real writers do, how they break conventions in published work. This demonstration leads to a discussion about the nature and purpose of conventions.

Instead of seeing conventions as absolute rules, we should see them as ways writers help readers make meaning. Conventions serve as road maps that guide readers or road signs that tell readers when to come to a complete stop, yield, pay attention, and skim over the text. And, instead of seeing unconventional use as an error, we can see it as rhetorical, as intent to craft language and text.

This is exactly what happens when we look at the language of newspapers and magazines. (I bring these to class—as opposed to literary examples—because I want to show students that craft in conventions can be found anywhere and that all good writers use it in their work, provided we know what to look for.) When the authors in Sunset write, "And, always, to the West, extends the region's most enduring and defining feature, the Pacific" (Taggart and Schneider 89), they are doing two things. By creating a separate sentence, they are emphasizing meaning and content. By using and to begin the sentence, they are emphasizing the connection of this sentence to the rest of the paragraph.

When they write, "[A] sea otter popped up, then another—they are really just bundles of charisma wrapped in fur—dark heads in the kelp" (Taggart and Schneider 86), they choose to use dashes instead of parentheses, making the reader pay attention to the clause because that is the purpose of dashes: to direct the reader's attention to those parts of a sentence that the writers want to emphasize.

Punctuation

Punctuation is a fairly recent creation (approximately 1500), originally meant to guide speakers in the oral delivery of texts written by others (Bolton 178). Commas guided orators to pause briefly while full stops (periods), as their name reveals, guided orators to stop for a longer period of time.

Because punctuation is arbitrary in that the punctuation symbols do not bear any natural connection to their meaning yet conventional in that we agree to play by the same rules, it has been changing over time. In texts from the 1900s, we notice heavy punctuation—commas were used to separate introductory phrases regardless of their length (Stott 103). Current practice, however, allows us to omit a comma after a short introductory phrase as long as the omission does not result in loss of clarity (Lunsford and Connors 462). Further, since punctuation is arbitrary, it can differ across countries that share the same language. In British English, for example, some punctuation marks go outside the quotation marks that in American English go inside (Crystal 283).
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Despite all we know about punctuation, the school texts and handbooks available to students present punctuation as a set of absolute rules instead of "tendencies" (Quirk, et al. 1616–17). Even though handbooks consider dashes, for example, to be informal punctuation marks usually reserved for emphasizing appositives (O'Hare and Kline 347), we often find dashes rather than semicolons joining independent clauses in newspapers and magazines: "Summer after summer, the river didn't seem to change much—the rope swing was usually where we left it ..." (Tamony 8).

Basic syntactic punctuation is learned over time, often with little explicit instruction. Most high school and college students—whether accomplished writers or not—know how to use terminal punctuation, quotations, commas for items in a list or introductory phrases, and colons to introduce certain lists. Few, however, know how to use rhetorical punctuation as a tool to add meaning to their text.

Dawkins has shown that established writers like Annie Dillard often use punctuation in unconventional ways to guide readers to their intended meaning. This unconventional use is bound to confuse students who believe that there is only one way to punctuate constructions and that any deviation represents error. For example, when students see Annie Dillard's sentence, "Later the child wakes and discovers this mother—and adds facts to impressions, and historical understanding to facts" (35), they might consider the dash wrong—after all, there is a conjunction (and) there, so there doesn't seem to be any need for punctuation. Yet, that dash is a choice Dillard made to enhance the meaning of the sentence, to tell the reader to slow down because what follows is important.

The principles Dawkins has set forth—as simplified here—are easy to present in a composition classroom, provided students know how to identify an independent clause using Noguchi's structural tests rather than the traditional sentence-as-a-complete-thought definition. According to Noguchi, an independent clause can be

> made into a Yes-No Question [This test identifies the leftmost boundary of the clause.]
> made into a Tag Question [This test identifies the rightmost boundary of the clause.]
>
> placed into the frame: They refused to believe the idea that ______. (54–55)

The last test—the sentence frame—can be modified to "I know that ______." Whatever fits into that slot will be an independent clause.

Any construction that works with all three tests is an independent clause. For example, we know that Dillard's construction, "The skin on my mother's face was smooth, fair, and tender" (25), is an independent clause because it can be turned into questions and fits the "I know that" frame:

> Yes-No Question: Was the skin on my mother's face smooth, fair, and tender?
> Tag Question: The skin on my mother's face was smooth, fair, and tender, wasn't it?
> Frame: I know that the skin on my mother's face was smooth, fair, and tender.

We can see that "Which is hard to explain" is not an independent clause because only one of the tests will work: it cannot be made into a yes-no question (Is which hard to explain?), it cannot be fit into the "I know that" frame (I know that which is hard to explain), but it can be made into a tag (Which is hard to explain, isn't it?). Not only are these tests particularly useful for teaching punctuation (Weaver 144), but they also help students understand the difference between an independent and a dependent clause since it is a dependent clause that fails the tests. I use the tests all the time with my students—in any class. Once they understand how to use these tests, students not only recognize run-ons and fragments but also recognize that certain elements in a clause are necessary and have fairly fixed positions (the subject and the predicate) while others are optional and movable within a sentence (modifiers). This knowledge proves particularly useful when they start working on sentence craft.

Dawkins' first principle is that punctuation marks may be ordered in a hierarchy based on the separation they provide: periods, question marks, and exclamation marks provide maximum separation; semicolons, dashes, and colons provide medium separation; commas or no marks provide minimum separation, suggesting connection instead of separation. For example, the decision to use a period or a semicolon is more rhetorical than syntactic in the following sentence: "But McNeal acquired enough churros to build a herd; with his wife, Nancy, he formed the
Navajo Sheep Project to reintroduce the breed" (Fish 160). By using a semicolon instead of a period, the writer establishes the close relationship between the two clauses; had he wanted to emphasize their separateness, he would have used a period.

Dawkins’ second principle addresses the constructions that punctuation marks separate: periods and semicolons separate independent clauses; dashes and colons separate either independent clauses from each other or from dependent elements; commas separate dependent elements from independent clauses. In other words, commas differ from dashes and colons with respect to the boundaries they mark: dashes and colons can be used to separate either independent clauses from each other or from dependent elements—which obviously includes dependent clauses—whereas commas can separate only independent clauses from dependent elements. In the sentence “Five hours after starting out, we pass our first car: Everybody waves” (Lorton 103), the colon separates two independent clauses—a comma could not be used since it cannot separate independent clauses. In the following sentence, the colon separates an independent clause from a dependent element—an appositive: “These stops are among the last places in the state where you’ll find a doorway into the early days of the Alaska frontier: the roadhouse” (102).

Writers choose to raise or lower punctuation marks to emphasize separateness or connectedness between elements, respectively. If they want to show the close connection between elements, they will choose no punctuation—if appropriate—or punctuation that provides minimum separation, like commas. If, on the other hand, they want to indicate separation, they will choose punctuation that provides the maximum separation—periods. This raising and lowering of the marks may result in run-ons and fragments, both of which are evidence of craft rather than error in the following examples:

We were whole, we were pleasing to ourselves. (Dillard 24)

Ellie sometimes liked to call Joe her big brother. But never aloud. (Rylant 20)

Dawkins’ principles are demonstrated in this sentence from Dillard’s An American Childhood: “Adults had misshapen, knuckly hands loose in their skin like bones in bags; it was a wonder they could open jars” (24). According to the first principle, Dillard chose a semicolon instead of a period to indicate medium separation between the two independent clauses. According to the second principle, the only options she had were the period and the semicolon, since these are the only two punctuation marks that can separate independent clauses. Finally, according to the third principle, Dillard chose to lower the punctuation by using a semicolon that provides medium separation, indicating the connectedness between the two clauses.

As teachers, we must show students the rhetorical power of punctuation conventions as well as the effect of violating (flouting) those conventions. Intentional run-ons and fragments appear in a number of texts:

I will die for you if it will save you.
Anything. (Paulsen 7)
Chilly, lovely, and aloof in spring.
(Patterson 27)
Strange to say, but this is why we’re here.
Not to get stranded, certainly. (Jaffe 42)

Are we to consider these as errors? Absolutely not! Instead, we can help students to see them as part of the writer’s craft, as techniques the writer used to advance the meaning of a text. By using a period and creating a fragment, Rylant (in “Ellie sometimes . . .”) and Paulsen have chosen to provide maximum separation for emphasis and focus. By using a comma to join independent clauses, Dillard, in “We were whole, we were pleasing to ourselves,” has chosen to emphasize the meaning connection between the two clauses.

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a particular context, and the reader must recognize it as a deliberate move, as evidence of craft, similar to other crafting techniques used in the text. If readers fail to recognize the intent behind these violations of conventions, they are likely to see fragments, run-ons, and nonconventional punctuation in general as "very serious" errors, as Hairston learned, instead of seeing them as rhetorical choices (Weaver 112–14). The responsibility then lies with both writers and readers: writers must provide the rhetorical punctuation clues, but readers must know how to appropriately interpret them and use them to arrive at the intended meaning. The dash in "Summer after summer, the river didn’t seem to change much—the rope swing was usually where we left it, and we always saw at least one couple in a canoe lose their balance and tip over" (Tamony 8) could be considered an error; after all, it connects independent clauses, something not allowed by current handbooks. Yet, since the sentence came from a magazine that pays particular attention to its editing, we must try to uncover the writer’s intent: the dash is the writer’s evidence of craft, her signal to the reader that she wants the two independent clauses to be closely connected with the emphasis on the second clause. Working through such examples aloud is the best way to show students how the writer’s mind works, how writers provide clues to their readers about their intent. Some of them often ask me, “How do you know that this is what the writer wanted to do?” “Well,” I reply, “I don’t really know for sure but this is my best guess; I look at what they’ve done with the rest of their punctuation and I can make an educated guess as to why they chose the marks they did. And this is the most important part—not to know 100 percent but to be able to make an educated guess and to be able to justify it.”

Students are in awe of what they can do after they understand sentence craft. Valerie, for example—a junior majoring in elementary education—told me as we were discussing sentence craft:

When I first started college, I only knew about commas and periods—and that’s all I used. Now I know how to emphasize and separate things to get my readers to see what is more important; now that I have the basic knowledge, I know the possibilities. Look at this sentence that I wrote: "This school of thought glosses over the need for content training—the foundations of teaching." I chose an appositive and a dash to make my point—I wanted separation and emphasis. I would have never done that before because I didn’t know I could; I would have probably made two separate sentences instead of using the appositive.

**Sentence Structure**

Students also ask about using *and* to begin their sentences or using *I* in their writing, which points to another aspect of conventions and mechanics, namely, sentence structure and word choice. Many of their previous instructors have been well versed in prescriptive grammar—the grammar that prescribes a single form that a sentence should take. These instructors believe that their role is to preserve the “purity” of the English language and refuse to accept that all languages change, one of the basic tenets of linguistics. Any deviation from prescriptive principles leads to improper writing, to constructions that must be eradicated if students are to master Standard Written English. So, they perpetuate the use of the mythrules (Schuster xii), the prescriptive rules that pervade some writing instruction. However, disobeying the mythrules leads to better writing, as Katie Wood Ray has shown, writing that is carefully crafted and appropriate for a particular rhetorical context.

Breaking the mythrule that one should never begin a sentence with a conjunction allows the writer to emphasize that sentence by setting it apart through punctuation. And this is exactly what Rylant does: “Sometimes he’d send them a picture. He had grown a beard. And in one picture, he was holding a board on which sat a live (so he said) scorpion” (21). Similarly, the *Sunset* writer chose to begin the final sentence with *but* to contrast with the preceding sentences and to emphasize “the area’s greatest attraction” by creating a separate sentence:

The region’s other great water recreation is river rafting. The raftable section of the Salmon River
CRAFTING SENTENCES

When writers craft their sentences, they are able—through sentence structure—to guide readers to their intended emphasis and focus. This can be achieved in different ways: through movement of elements (fronting, out-of-order adjectives), restructuring (passive, there-constructions, clefting), paragraphing (creating one-sentence paragraphs), or word choice.

Passive: Using a passive construction emphasizes the result of the action and contributes to the thematic connection of a piece.

The area is still known for two classic Western salmon runs that, like the gold, are all but played out. “Redfish Lake was named for one of those runs . . . .” (Phillips, “In the Shadow” 30)

There-Constructions: Beginning with there allows the writer to move the subject from its low-emphasis position into a high-focus position inside the predicate.

There have been other great river days since then. (Tamony 8)

It-Cleft: In cleft sentences beginning with it, the focus is at the end of the first clause, on the construction following the be verb; these constructions are particularly useful for emphasizing contrast.

It was here, in present-day Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon, that the corps met its most formidable challenges—grizzly bears, river portages, mountain travel. (Fanselow 46)

What-Cleft (pseudo-cleft): In what-cleft sentences, the focus is at the end of the sentence, after the be verb. As was the case with the it-cleft, what-clefts are particularly useful for emphasizing contrast.

What they had won was an education. (Bowling 145)

Fronting: Moving a modifier (word, phrase, or clause) to the beginning of a sentence brings it into the limelight, capturing the reader’s attention.

Still sleek despite her age, this is Cobra, a retired 284-foot Russian submarine. (McGarry 34)

Out-of-Order Adjectives: Moving adjectives after the noun they modify emphasizes the modifiers.

Do you want a casual planting or a sculptural one? Bold or lacy? Vertical or horizontal? Tall or short? (Swezey 102)

One-Sentence Paragraphs: When a sentence is set off as its own paragraph, it is emphasized.

He let the tiller go again and with one hand on the wooden handrail that was bolted to the top of the cabin he clambered forward, impatient to be sailing, heading home, away from this place in the sea where Owen’s ashes were floating. (Paulsen 34)

Striking Verbs: Instead of giving students a list of not-to-be-used verbs—the most popular of which is the be verb—we can show them how a carefully chosen verb makes a sentence come alive:

Giant kelp wrapped long green tentacles around our paddles. (Taggart and Schneider 86)

Striking Modifiers: Striking modifiers—like striking verbs—give energy to a sentence; instead of telling students to simply add adjectives, I ask them to first describe the scene and then reduce those descriptions to modifiers. The result is often a new word, a word that really catches the reader’s attention, or an unusual combination as in the following examples from Sunset:

It’s split by the fishable—and raftable—Salmon River. (Phillips, “In the Shadow” 28)

At least one is within splashing distance of where you live. (Phillips, “The West’s Best” 77)

below Stanley ranges from a white-knuckled maelstrom of class IV rapids . . . to a tame class II family adventure . . . . But the area’s greatest attraction is its hiking. (Phillips, “In the Shadow” 30, 32)

Students consistently recognize the same mythrules—those that typically involve either sentence structure or word choice. The most common mythrules include the following:

> do not have one-sentence paragraphs
> do not use be verbs

Remembering these mythrules creates discomfort for novice writers and brings them a sense of inadequacy about writing. The solution? Instead of overwhelming students with these mythrules, we should demystify them and exploit them for stylistic effect; we should show, in other words, how violating these mythrules can actually lead to elegant, crafted sentences (see sidebar).
Toward Productively Flouting Conventions

We should rethink our positions about conventions and flouting them. Conventions are part of a continuum, ranging from basic, syntactic choices to more advanced, rhetorical choices writers make. They are an integral part of style, of the distinctive, idiosyncratic choices writers make to reveal their personal voices. We could consider conventions as being similar to dialects: We each have our own dialect range, and we can adjust dialects to fit the discourse context and the image we want to project. Choosing a nonstandard form is often a mark of extra meaning; similarly, choosing to flout conventions is a mark of an intention to craft writing distinctively, to use punctuation and mechanics as part of style.

In a classroom where conventions are seen as tendencies and evidence of craft, students don’t ask whether fragments or passive sentences are allowed; rather, their questions focus on the best choice they can make to fit the rhetorical situation.

Works Cited


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