What You Can, Can't, and Can't Not:
How to Decipher What Writing "Rules" Apply and When

Abbie O'Ryan

In this article, O'Ryan breaks down the writing rules that we have always known and explains what the "real rules" are and aren't. In order to find out what rules apply when and where, writers must dive into the conventions of language, style, and genre. Every writing situation is different. Should the rules be different, too?

Throughout my education, I have been hounded by teachers about writing rules. Proper writing **doesn't** use contractions. "**Don't begin sentences or paragraphs with quotations**," said the teacher. **Don't** use **no** double negatives. Wait, did I get that right? I guess it *should* be that proper writing **does not** use contractions. When implementing quotations, "**embed them into the sentence or paragraph**," corrected the teacher. Multiple negation, commonly called double negatives, should **not** be used. What is the point of all of these rules? Here's a spoiler: these rules don't even apply if a writer decides that they don't matter. It all depends on the writing situation and the genre in which the writer is composing his or her piece.

For the beginning years of many students' writing careers, they write in academic settings where, yes, these rules do apply. But think of how many different writing situations can be encountered in the rest of a student's lifetime, or even just today. Today, I am a college student. I will write a to-do list for my week. I will write down what assignments I have for my classes. I will fill in important dates on my calendar. I will text message my friends and family. I will e-mail my academic advisor about what classes to take next semester. I will comment on Facebook pictures. I will tweet about something funny my teacher said. And I will

write a press release for my public relations class. Furthermore, even though I am in school now, I will have just as many writing opportunities after I go out into the "real" world. My purposes may be different in the future, but I will still have to make to-do lists, compose e-mails, and hopefully write press releases (if I get a job in PR). The idea here is that in each of these different writing situations, certain conventions are expected from the audience. Using contractions, implanted quotations, and multiple negation are not always "dos" or "don'ts." The regulation on whether writers should use or avoid these "writing rules" depends on the genre.

Contractions

In school, students are taught that a contraction is two words blended together to create a shorter word, and they learn where to insert the apostrophe. Once students learn these things, they are often told, later on in their schooling, that contractions are not appropriate to use in academic writing, such as a research paper. Outside of academia, though, contractions are probably used more than not on a daily basis. Below are some examples of genres with and without the convention to use contractions.

Title: "A Framework Explaining How Consumers Plan and Book Travel Online"
Source: *International Journal of Management and Marketing Research*
Author: Michael Conyette

Also, there was no relationship between enjoyment of booking with a travel agent and ease of researching travel with the Internet. This implies respondents who <u>did not</u> enjoy researching with the Internet or found it difficult would book with a travel agent. Thus, the predictor variables having no association with the response variables were dropped from further analysis.

Figure 1. A scholarly article refraining from contraction use."[1]

Title: "Sandy slams N.J., plunges parts of NYC into darkness"
Source: *Chicago Sun-Times*

At least half a million people had been ordered to evacuate, including 375,000 from low-lying parts of New York City, and by the afternoon authorities were warning that it could be too late for people who <u>had not</u> left already.

Figure 2. A newspaper article refraining from contraction use."[2]

Source: Facebook
Author: E! Online

Pregnant Kate Middleton returns home from the hopsital with Prince William. http://eonli.ne/RbxNW6

"LIKE" if you think <u>she's</u> got that motherly glow!

Figure 3. A Facebook post using a contraction. [3]

Title: "The School"
Source: *Sixty Stories*
Author: Donald Barthelme

And the trees all died. They were orange trees. I <u>don't</u> know why they died, they just died. Something wrong with the soil possibly or maybe the stuff we got from the nursery <u>wasn't</u> the best. We complained about it. So <u>we've</u> got thirty kids there, each kid had his or her own little tree to plant and <u>we've</u> got these thirty dead trees. All these kids looking at these little brown sticks, it was depressing.

Figure 4. A short story with several contractions.[4]

As you can see, the scholarly article and the newspaper article omit contractions, while the Facebook post and the short story allow them. This basically comes down to formality. In general, if a genre is going to be used academically or is going to be formally published, writers should not use contractions. There are exceptions to this, though. Creative writing, such as a short story, can be found in academic and magazine articles that are published, and sometimes these genres have contractions. Why? Over the years, the language patterns of what is sometimes called "standard written English" have become more fixed, particularly because these patterns have been and are taught in schools. These "rules" for grammar are now generally recognized, and writers try to follow these rules in order to display their writing expertise. We can justify the contractions "rule" more thoroughly when accounting for genre, sub-genre, and writing situation in order to decide which "writing rules" to use when.

Genre categorizes texts or language.[5] Fiction, poetry, and drama are all examples of genres. Sub-genres are categories within genres, such as an historical play, a persuasive poem, or a fantasy novel. The writing situation includes the scene in which a writer writes as well as the purpose for which a writer writes. Figuring out when certain "rules" apply can be difficult. There is never a right or wrong way that is set in stone. Quite frankly, this can be fortunate or unfortunate depending on the writer's perspective. Just because

a rule is not set in stone does not mean that a writer cannot be "wrong." To help with this, authors can study examples of the particular genres they're planning to write before writing. It helps to take notice of conventions that would not usually be used when just sitting down to write without planning.

Quotations

Quotations are used in writing to establish credibility, to relay information, and to make statements that writers cannot restate better themselves. In different genres, conventions for using quotations differ. Look at the following examples of ways to use quotations in scholarly articles as well as newspaper articles.

Title: "A Framework Explaining How Consumers Plan and Book Travel Online"
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Therefore, rationally, consumers' search should increase when the importance of the purchase increases. However, search activity for the information itself casts consumers as well. <u>Perceived cost of information search is defined as "the consumer's subjective assessment of monetary, time, physical effort, and psychological sacrifice that he or she expends searching for information"</u> (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996, p. 253).

Figure 5. A scholarly article with an embedded quotation.[6]

Title: "Sandy slams N.J., plunges parts of NYC into darkness"
Source: *Chicago Sun-Times*

President Barack Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney canceled their campaign appearances at the very height of the race, with just over a week to go before Election Day. The president pledged the government's help and made a direct plea from the White House to those in the storm's path.

<u>"When they tell you to evacuate, you need to evacuate," Obama said.</u> "Don't delay, don't pause, don't question the instructions that are being given, because this is a powerful storm."

Figure 6. A newspaper article using a quotation to expand on the reader's knowledge.[7]

Quotations are implemented differently in each of the above genres. The author of the scholarly article chose to introduce the quotation and embed it into his sentence. This seems to be the general way that students are taught to use quotations. My teachers told me that I cannot let a quotation just hang out by itself—the quotation means nothing if it has no explanation to back it up. While this is all well and good, it is not always the case. The general theme, here, is that nothing can always be the case with writing. For instance, the given example in Figure 6 above uses a quotation to keep the reader's attention after reading the comprehensive lead. This is a common practice in journalism because audiences will feel more personally connected to a story with the use of a quotation after learning the important facts. Using a quotation here is a must in journalism to keep the reader interested in the story, but it can also be found in many other genres of writing, such as an academic essay. Thus, my genre research suggests that there is not only one way of embedding a quotation, especially because some news articles actually take a more "scholarly" approach and embed quotations into the sentences and paragraphs. Furthermore, some authors may write differently solely based on personal style. If a writer chooses to repetitively embed a quotation in a certain way, or make any consistent style choice for that matter, he or she is creating his or her own personal writing style. Adhering to personal style, in itself, is a convention that is accepted more or less by different genres. For example, news writing is typically factual and straightforward (omitting personal style), while song writing is all about creativity (embracing personal style).

Multiple Negation

Multiple negation is a language feature that is commonly perceived to be incorrect. What is accepted as Standard English does not allow for multiple negation, but who actually *speaks* Standard English? (Hint: no one.) Why are we taught the standardized features of grammar and writing throughout our lives, yet nobody adheres to every rule of Standard English in his or her everyday speech? In many languages, such as Spanish and African American English (AAE), multiple negation is part of the grammar of the language. In Spanish, "a negative particle such as *nunca* (never) that follows the main verb in the sentence must be accompanied by the word *no* (not) preceding the verb, creating a double negation." [8] Because of the proper use of multiple negation in Spanish, many native Spanish speakers who take on English as a second language continue to practice multiple negation in their translations. Meijer and Fox Tree also state, "Although Standard English does not allow the double negation construction, African-American Vernacular English does." [9] Green explains that "[t]he system of using multiple negative elements in one

sentence to express a single negative shows that the fact that two negatives make a positive in math does not hold in negative marking in AAE."[10] The use of multiple negation by speakers of Spanish and AAE is not a style choice, necessarily, but instead is an entirely different grammatical feature that is correct, and in fact required, in these languages. Still, the use of multiple negation is often looked down upon, even more so than the incorrect use of "your" and "you're," for example.

With that said, the use of multiple negation can be found in many forms of writing and across a range of genres. First, consider the scholarly article (Figure 7) and newspaper article (Figure 8) excerpts below, which include examples of single negative constructions—"not" and "none"—which, as I've already pointed out, is the more common convention in genres that call for Standard English. Both genres are academic-style pieces in which multiple negation would not typically be "allowed." However, the next two examples (Figures 9 and 10) illustrate two different examples of genres that use multiple negation constructions.

Title: "A Framework Explaining How Consumers Plan and Book Travel Online"
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Limitations in the study are that survey respondents expressed their intention to search travel online but these do <u>not</u> necessarily reflect enduring behavioral patterns of subjects. The survey instrument was administered on the Internet. Subjects were referred to the website which included the survey and appropriate instructions. Every repondent saw the same questionnaire and had the same instructions to guide them. Although the survey was pretested it is difficult to determine if participants fully understood the questions asked. In addition, consumers without much Internet experience most likely did <u>not</u> complete the survey.

Figure 7. A scholarly article using a single negative construction.[11]

Title: "Historians up in arms about archives future"
Source: *Chicago Tribune*
Author: Rex W. Huppke

D'Emilio and others who have served on the library's board say that such dramatic changes to the bylaws would have required a membership meeting, and they say that <u>none</u> took place.

Figure 8. A newspaper article using a single negative construction.[12]

Title: "Satisfaction"
Author: Mick Jagger and Keith Richards

I <u>can't</u> get <u>no</u> satisfaction
I <u>can't</u> get <u>no</u> satisfaction
'Cause I try and I try and I try and I try
I <u>can't</u> get <u>no</u>, I <u>can't</u> get <u>no</u>

Figure 9. Song lyrics that use multiple negation.[13]

Title: *Twelfth Night*
Author: William Shakespeare

By innocence I swear, and by my youth
I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth,
And that <u>no</u> woman has, <u>nor never none</u>
Shall mistress be of it, save I alone.

Figure 10. A play using multiple negation.[14]

Although they both use multiple negation, each of the genres portrayed in Figures 9 and 10 above are accepted by the public for different reasons. The Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" is an anthem of sorts. The band has a very large fan base, and with that, their music is widely accepted. The catchy tune of the song, in my opinion, has created a haze over the "incorrect" double negative construction, "I **can't** get **no** satisfaction," so perhaps Rolling Stones fans have never given the song's "correctness" a second thought. I can also see how this style choice could be viewed as rebellious in the musical style of rock & roll. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, similarly, is in a legendary position. At the time in which this piece was written, English as a language was in a transition process. According to Baugh and Cable, "For a long time English permitted the use of double negative. We have now discarded it through a false application of mathematical logic to language; but in Elizabethan times it was felt merely as a stronger negative."[15] Thus, some scholars would argue that Shakespeare's "nor never none" aims to achieve a purpose, to show extremity, to make the audience pay attention. In my opinion though, I don't think Shakespeare's intention really even matters. He could have been choosing his words to achieve a specific stylistic purpose, or he could have been attempting to negotiate a feature of a language in the midst of change. Regardless, respect for Shakespeare's work is so great that no matter the reason, audiences saw and continue to see his plays as art. Like Shakespeare, writers must always keep in mind the conventions of the language, the genre, and their own personal style, while acknowledging that they may not enjoy the level of prestige that Shakespeare has gained.

Conclusion

With writing rules, there is never an always. Nothing is ever set in stone. The decision regarding whether or not to adhere to certain rules depends on the genre, sub-genre, writing situation, audience expectations, culture, language, and writing style. I have personally noticed differences in the use of contractions, quotations, and multiple negation since I have made the transition from high school to college writing situations. In the near future, I will no longer be writing for school assignments, and the style I take on with each writing situation will be up to me. New writing situations will be presented, and I will have to analyze the conventions for the genres I'm writing in, which may include investigating uses of contractions, quotations, and multiple negation, among other traditional "writing rules." If writers remember to keep the genre conventions and the audience in mind, they will be successful. As time goes on and Standard English changes, many of the "rules" that apply now may be altered or even forgotten all together. New "rules" will form, too. Just remember to adhere to the conventions of the genre, and do not apply any writing rule across the board!

Endnotes

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