



## Section One: Narratives about Genre

### Rules Are [not always] Rules: How I Learned that Grammar Rules Are Not Universal and What It Means for My Writing

*Anjanette Riley*

**T**here are no such thing as grammar rules.

And I don't mean only those rules that govern how a sentence is organized. I am not talking just subject, verb, object stuff. Universal punctuation, style, and spelling rules are also little more than a myth.

Even as I wrote that line, memories of red marks on countless English papers flashed in my mind's eye. I distinctly heard Mrs. Mitchell, my 6th grade English teacher, reminding me to never split infinitives. I saw the "rules board" in Mrs. Latham's classroom that displayed LARGE PRINT warnings about what I can only imagine she believed to be the unparalleled dangers of misusing a semicolon. Even a few long-since forgotten episodes of *Schoolhouse Rock!* managed to make their way to the front of my mind before I finished typing.

All of these experiences taught me that grammar rules were like the rules of skydiving. Follow them or perish.



Anjanette Riley can leap small buildings in a single bound, read Aristotle's *Poetics* in its original Greek, and bake the world's best chocolate lava cake. She just chooses not to.

## Narratives About Genre

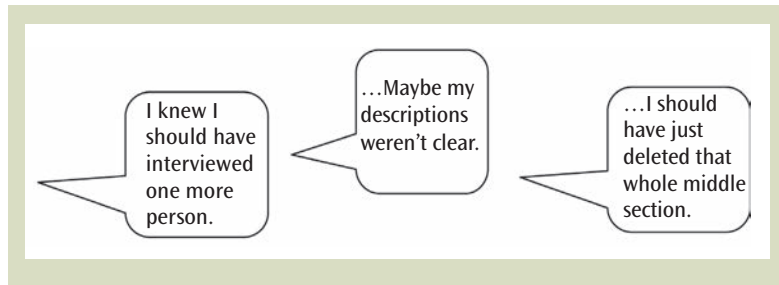
I believed this too. Three years ago I was working as copy-edit intern for the Arizona Secretary of State. I read countless government handbooks and reams and reams of statutes in just a few months. My job? Use the infamous red pen to mark and change all of the grammar “errors” before the texts went to print. A fellow intern one day asked me how I could be so confident with editing, an activity which left her just short of hyperventilating. My advice to her was that she simply memorize the rules—a sort of i-before-e-except-after-c approach to grammar. After all, rules are rules. They do not change.

I was confident, but I was wrong.

**You might ask, what was the lesson that taught me to so humbly admit the errors of my ways?**

Well, it happened something like this:

I had been working at the Arizona Capitol Times, a newspaper housed in Phoenix, Arizona that reports exclusively on the goings-on at the state capitol, for under a week when my editor called me into his office. I was scared. I wasn’t a journalism major, so I was already more than a little out of my element in the face-paced newsroom. As I walked shakily to the large corner office, I tried to guess what about my first story was not up to snuff.



I did a double-take (quite a visible one) when I was finally shown my story. Almost every mark, every circle, every comment was about my grammar use. *This has to be a joke!* was the only thing I could think. *Grammar is my thing. There is no way I got all this wrong.*

It wasn’t a joke, but I wasn’t wrong either. It turns out that the grammar, punctuation, and style rules I followed in that first paper were right, at least sometimes. They just weren’t right for a news article. I spent literally hours sitting in that corner office over the next couple weeks trying to learn this one very hard but important lesson: when it comes to grammar, there is no such thing as *always*. All grammar, punctuation, and style rules are, to some extent, determined by the genre.

Two of the rules I had to re-learn while writing at the newspaper can be found in this article:<sup>1</sup>

Rep. Kyrsten Sinema will join state lawmakers from across the United States in the coming months to help President Obama reshape the nation's health care policy and reform a system that politicians from both parties say is broken.

The Phoenix Democrat announced June 10 that she is one of 32 lawmakers selected—the only one from Arizona.

"I'm so grateful and honored for this amazing opportunity to truly reform our nation's health care," Sinema stated in a press release. "Our health care system is broken and families and businesses are being crushed by high health care costs. The American people, including right here in Arizona, deserve better."

Sinema and the other state lawmakers were asked to help Obama implement reform measures before the end of the year in an effort to reduce the cost of health care, protect patients' rights and ensure universal access to care.

The 32 lawmakers are expected to hold weekly conference calls with the White House until reform measures are implemented.

One thing that really makes news stories seem so, well, newsie is the style rule that says quotes should be given their own paragraphs. A history professor my freshmen year had "firmly advised" me not to begin sentences with a quotation, much less paragraphs. I followed this rule in my first story and made sure that each quote was comfortably embedded in a sentence. But, as it turns out, journalists do not suffer from the same fear of the dreaded dropped quote. The newspaper genre has a different quotation rule.

And as much as I struggled with quotations, there was one punctuation rule that my ignorance of was the cause of more than one frustrated "reminder" from my editor: how to use a comma. The difference seems small, but it is definitely there. Writers at my newspaper, like many others, are required to *not* include the comma before the "and" in a series. This rule, for me at least, was different from anything I had ever written before. Remembering to include that final comma when I described to my 3rd grade teacher that I ate a sandwich, chips, and a cookie for lunch had been thoroughly drilled into my brain. It took time, and more than one edit, for me to master switching from rule to rule without complications.

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<sup>1</sup>Riley, Anjanette. "Sinema Asked to Help Reform U.S. Health Care System." Arizona Capitol Times. 10 June 2009. Online.

## Narratives About Genre

I shouldn't have been surprised at what I learned from my editor. After all, even I knew that only someone that really doesn't understand the technology (like, say, grandparents) use complete sentences, unabbreviated words, and proper punctuation when texting. And, I can't even remember the last time I had an IM conversation where someone DIDN'T capitalize a word or phrase to make sure that YOU understood that they REALLY meant what they said?

But I still thought it was ungrammatical when I texted "CU later I have work" to my friends. What I didn't consciously realize was that text messaging has its own rules. "OMG i CAN'T believe how much fun friday was!!!" is a **perfectly correct** statement **when it is part of a text or IM conversation to my friends.**

*Every genre has its own grammar rules.*

### So, How Do I Learn the Different Grammar Rules?

I have learned that grammar and punctuation can be a tool. A way to help me say what I want to say. And, like any tool—a screwdriver, a crayon, Google, etc.—the more time I spend getting to know how the tool works, the more I can do with it.

In the two years since my Great Grammar Awakening, I have developed 4 strategies to approach grammar rules in new genres.

#### 1. Read:

Whenever I have to write in a new genre or a new situation, whether it is a research paper, a poem, or a cover letter for a job application, I find several examples of similar writings and read. While I read, I pull out my trusty highlighter and underline, circle, or highlight all the ways the author used grammar differently than I would.

The screenshot shows a text document with three paragraphs. The first paragraph is a run-on sentence. The second paragraph is an incomplete sentence. The third paragraph is a complete sentence. Comments from Anjanette Riley are provided for each paragraph.

"Time passes. The cheque is cashed, factories are built, and the phone rings in Whitehall. It's an international call, from Washington, DC. Did we know that a rich industrialist who makes plastic things also deals in large quantities of opium from Asia? Good heavens, now, we didn't know that, thanks every so much for letting us know, love to the wife and kids. Panic. Rich industrialist is now sitting on a large lump of our money and employing thousands of our citizens.'

Anjanette Riley 5/22/10 5:18 PM  
Comment: This is a run-on sentence.

Anjanette Riley 5/22/10 5:17 PM  
Comment: This is an incomplete sentence.

We looked at each other for a while, and then I smiled back, and shrugged, and started to say the word 'well', which is what I always do when I am stuck for words. And you'll find, if you try this at home, that to form the 'w' sound, you'll have to pucker your lips into a kind of pout – very similar in shape to the one you'd use for whistling, say. Or, perhaps, even kissing.

Anjanette Riley 5/22/10 5:19 PM  
Comment: The author is talking to the reader directly.

She kissed me.

Anjanette Riley 5/22/10 5:19 PM  
Comment: This is given its own paragraph.

She kissed me.

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### 2. Define:

When I am done, I try and figure out just what rules this genre might have that allowed the author to write like they did. I use post-it notes, scraps of paper, my notebook, or the margins to work out these rules.

The screenshot shows a document with several paragraphs of text. The first paragraph is: "Time passes. The cheque is cashed, factories are built, and the phone rings in Whitehall. It's an international call, from Washington, DC. Did we know that a rich industrialist who makes plastic things also deals in large quantities of opium from Asia? Good heavens, now, we didn't know that, thanks every so much for letting us know, love to the wife and kids. Panic. Rich industrialist is now sitting on a large lump of our money and employing thousands of our citizens." To the right of this paragraph are two comment boxes: "Anjanette Riley 10/13/09 4:45 PM Comment: Run on sentences are allowed." and "Anjanette Riley 10/13/09 4:46 PM Comment: Incomplete sentences are acceptable." The second paragraph is: "We looked at each other for a while, and then I smiled back, and shrugged, and started to say the word 'well', which is what I always do when I am stuck for words. And you'll find, if you try this at home, that to form the 'w' sound, you'll have to pucker your lips into a kind of pout – very similar in shape to the one you'd use for whistling, say. Or, perhaps, even kissing." To the right of this paragraph is a comment box: "Anjanette Riley 10/13/09 4:47 PM Comment: Can acknowledge the reader." The third paragraph is: "She kissed me." Below this is a line of text: "*She* kissed *me*". To the right of this line are two comment boxes: "Anjanette Riley 10/13/09 4:46 PM Comment: Can manipulate paragraph length to make more dramatic." and "Anjanette Riley 10/20/09 2:12 PM Comment: Can italicize words for dramatic effect."

More examples make it easier to find patterns. And the faster I find patterns, the easier it is to write in the genre without fear of having to be pulled into someone else's office.

### 3. Take Evasive Action:

When all else fails, I write around the rules. For example, I was stumped for years about whether a sentence in a short story should read "Angela passed by Jack, whom she had known since high school" or "Angela passed by Jack, who she had known since high school," so I manipulated the sentences to avoid the predicament all together. Writing "Angela passed Jack. The two had known each other since high school" ensured that I didn't break the rule, whatever it may be.

### 4. Ask:

My editor taught me that it is always an option to ask someone who works in a genre what the rules are.

### One More Thing

Another embarrassing encounter of the genre kind—the specifics of which I will conveniently ignore—helped me realize that it is dangerous to assume grammar rules will be the same now as they were when I last wrote in the genre. Genres and their grammar rules are constantly changing. Keeping track of these changes can be frustrating, but, sometimes, the new rules are quite a relief.

For example, it was once forbidden to begin a sentence in a research paper with “and,” “but,” or “because.”

But it was often difficult to restructure sentences to avoid those three words.

And it was never clear what crime they had committed to be so vigorously kept from the front of the sentence.

But no more.

Because those words have been freed in even the most formal writings.

And it is a good thing to.

Because I quite enjoy them.