STUDENTS: DO EXPERTS FOLLOW THE RULES YOU'RE TAUGHT?

Judith E. Landrum

In some respects, learning to write is like learning to ride a bike. Training wheels enable novice bike riders to stay balanced and on track; without them, some novice riders fall off frequently and feel overwhelmed at the number of psychomotor skills they must use simultaneously to navigate themselves around the block. Eventually, however, removing the training wheels enables a child to ride more swiftly and more smoothly. Like training wheels, many secondary teachers give students specific rules/conventions for writing, such as every paragraph needs to begin with a topic sentence or but/and/or should not be used to begin a sentence, to enable students to keep from being cognitively overwhelmed as they navigate writing an essay. Generalized strategies for writing such as using topic sentences or writing in third person are training wheels, but students may infer that if they don't follow the rules their writing is wrong or bad. Many students do not realize that at some point in their writing careers, their writing will improve if they remove the training wheels or rules they used as novice writers.

Unlike training wheels for a bicycle, which at some point are permanently removed, rules and conventions of writing style are dependent on the context in which they appear. The style for an essay for school is markedly different from an article published in a pop-culture magazine or even a scholarly journal. In a school essay, the audience (the teacher) may pay as much if not more attention to how a student writes (correctness, development, and

so forth) as to what a student writes (the message). In addition, the audience almost always knows as much or more about the topic than the writer, unlike any other rhetorical situation. Furthermore, the audience does not read to be entertained, informed, or persuaded; the audience reads to evaluate (Williams, 1981). Likewise, the writer does not write to entertain, inform or persuade; the writer writes to either to get a good grade or to get it finished (what my children frequently do). Finally, the writer knows that the audience, whether s/he wants to or not, usually reads the entire text, regardless of how bad it may be.

Ironically, even though the context for the school essay is rarely duplicated in other settings, my intuition is that students use the school essay paradigm for most rhetorical situations in which they write. So, to test my hypothesis and to challenge my students' writing paradigm, I designed a writing assignment based on the infamous Braddock study. In 1974, Braddock published an article titled "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose." Paraphrased, the questions guiding his research were (1) Do all or most paragraphs contain a topic sentence? and (2) Do topic sentences usually appear at the beginning of a paragraph? (Braddock, 1974). At a time when writing instruction was being revised, Braddock challenged an assumption which English teachers and writing textbooks appeared to hold as Truth: well-written paragraphs begin with a topic sentence. But his subtext was asking a bigger question. Does good writing or the writing published in respected journals and magazines consist of the rigidly structured elements we English teachers tell our students to include in the school essay? That is the same question I asked my Writer's Style class.

The students' assignment was to pick an element of writing style that they thought, read, or assumed was good writing. For this specific assignment, style consisted of writing conventions/rules, according to the students' definition: begin every paragraph with a topic sentence, never begin a sentence with a conjunction, never end a sentence with a preposition, and so forth. Although I included some examples of style when

explaining the assignment, style parameters were not defined for my students, partially because I wanted to see how each individual defined style. The guiding questions I gave them were (1) What writing rule/convention have you always wondered about? and (2) Do experts [published writers] follow that rule? Although an alternative for students was to analyze stylistic differences between similar texts, only the first assignment is discussed in this article.

My purpose for this assignment was for students (1) to begin challenging some of the rules that govern their writing paradigm by seeing whether or not they appear in a published context; (2) to increase their awareness of style, genre, and context through closely analyzing an element of writing style; and (3) to apply their research to their world. The purpose of this article is two-fold: first, to describe a research assignment that requires students to challenge a writing style rule; and second, to describe some of the students' findings.

Although this assignment was based on intuition rather than theory, its premise is rooted in theoretical and empirical research that challenges the standard academic genre. For example, Davis and Shadle promote using alternate research methods, like this assignment, rather than the more traditional academic college research paper (418). They suggest that alternative research fosters originality because students explore an unknown idea which allows them to discover meaning, rather than merely record it. Flynn also proposes broadening accepted research and genre parameters in her classic essay "Composing as a Woman," in which she validates a feminist writing style even within an academic context (431-2). Berlin hypothesizes that all writing is political, and therefore, all student writing should somehow challenge the status quo, whether it be the topic or the style rules or the ideology (488-89). Certainly research which questions an academic paradigm fits Berlin's social constructivist perspective on writing. Skorczewski illustrates Berlin's thesis in her acceptance of students' use of clichés (222). She recommends that writing teachers should perceive students' use of clichés more in terms of

a students' personal voice rather than incorrect usage, thereby challenging the acceptable style within the academic culture (236).

While some theorists suggest weaving unique and non-traditional writing genres into composition classes, other theorists discuss differences between teaching textbook rules for grammar and punctuation and teaching grammar and punctuation rules in conjunction with rhetorical context. According to Dawkins, grammar and punctuation handbooks imply that all writing follows rules with a "right or wrong approach" even though "good writers. . . punctuate according to their intended meaning . . . (and) follow principles rather than rules" (534). So, Dawkins proposes that instead of teaching students grammar and punctuation rules, teachers should give them ample writing experiences and demonstrate ways that punctuation conveys meaning. In a comparison of comparable essays written by professional writers and college freshman, Sloan found that with the exception of spelling errors, both groups violated approximately the same type and the same number of usage errors prescribed by a frequently used writing handbook. Sloan concludes that "Handbooks (and Trimmer and McCrimmons' is typical) are not necessarily reliable guides to the practices of skilled contemporary writers. . . . Between the handbook prescriptions/proscriptions and actual practice may lie a considerable gulf" (305). To determine the error pattern that college teachers marked on students' writing, Connors and Lundsford analyzed freshman college essays, which included their professors' response. Among other things, they found that the types of student errors made and marked in the late 1980s differed from similar research in 1917 and 1939. Furthermore, the types of errors teachers marked were somewhat inconsistent (404-406). In an attempt to establish some consistency between the expectations of punctuation and grammar usage in academics and the expectations of punctuation and grammar usage in non-academic contexts, Hairston surveyed over 100 non-academic people, most of whom were professionals. The survey consisted

of 65 examples with various usage errors which participants categorized on a continuum of "bothersome errors." Although the participants' responses varied somewhat, "status markers" (i.e. "He brung his secretary with him" (796) were considered the most bothersome type of error. She concludes that even though people disagree on usage, "we cannot afford to let students leave our classrooms thinking that surface features of discourse do not matter" (799).

Skimming the last two or three editions of the *APA Style Manual* (American Psychological Association, 1994; 2001) and the *MLA Style Manual* (Achtert & Gibaldi, 1988; Gibaldi, 1995; 1999; 2003) also indicates that style usage, particularly in regard to documenting electronic databases, constantly evolves. Therefore, asking students to research, to analyze, and to challenge style by analyzing contemporary text is not only valid, but necessary.

Part One: The Assignment

My Students

ENG2215: Writer's Style is a sophomore-level class offered at a small, private undergraduate college, required for students majoring in English Education and English with a Concentration in Writing. The purpose of the course is to increase student awareness of stylistic techniques in writing, to enable students to use these stylistic techniques, and to improve students' quality of writing. Students are not trained in empirical research design (quantitative or qualitative) in this class. The class includes primarily traditional students (18-22 years) and a few non-traditional students (25 years or older). Approximately one third of the students enrolled in this class take it as an elective, and they major in areas such as elementary education, journalism, communications, and psychology.

After turning in the final draft of their final paper for the class being studied, students were invited to participate in the synthesis of this research, but they were not required to participate.

Several student texts were not included because they did not fit the focus of this article. If students chose to participate by allowing me to report the results of their research, they received a five-dollar gift certificate at a popular, local coffee shop. Most participant names are pseudonyms, but real names are used for students who made that request on their consent form.

The Parameters

The basic question guiding the research of all the studies of style was "Is _____ rule of writing style practiced by experts?," the same question used by Braddock when he challenged the rule that all well-written paragraphs begin with a topic sentence. Invariably, students chose a rule to investigate which they said was stressed by a high school English teacher. In each case, students said they assumed the rule was inflexible and True for all writing contexts.

All the students used a variation of the same methodology to find and to analyze their data. Most students chose three to seven issues of one or two magazines which they considered good writing, such as *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The Smithsonian*. They typically analyzed the cover story of several magazine issues or a regular feature in each issue such as the "Points of Interest" feature in *The Smithsonian*. However, students did not use regular features which were always written by the same person.

Unlike Braddock's research, which received the support of a teaching assistant and a university, this assignment was one of three papers students produced in a two-credit, seven-week course. Due to the purpose of the course and the time demands (as well as their reminders to me that "This is not our only class") their methodology was simplistic and highly reductionist. As a result, the sample size and overall methodology are too limited to consider these pilot research projects as valid and reliable studies, but this article refers to them as such because it helps eliminate awkward sentence construction. Although drawing definitive conclusions from these snippets of research is dangerous,

reviewing the results is fascinating on two levels: students' assumptions of good writing as espoused by high school English teachers, and the actual practices of expert writers which students analyzed.

Part Two: The Students' Findings

Each style study is described briefly and individually; it includes the rule the student challenged, a stylebook or theory which supports the rule (when available), and the student's findings. An explanation of the data collected and methodology is omitted because there is no consistent method followed among the studies and because the data collected are not extensive enough to meet measures of validity and reliability.

Use of Topic Sentences

Like Braddock, David based his study on the rule that all body paragraphs should begin with a topic sentence. Although David gleaned his rule from high school English teachers, other writing texts suggest beginning body paragraphs with a topic sentence or at least using a topic sentence (Kirszner and Mandell 98-100).

David found that topic sentences are used in expository prose slightly less than two thirds of the time (61 percent) and that, of these, topic sentences appear at the beginning of a paragraph slightly less than one third of the time (28 percent). He also found that subject, audience, purpose and context greatly impact the usage of topic sentences in the cover stories analyzed. Articles in which the topic is more obscure or complex used more topic sentences than articles which had information that was simpler to comprehend. This practice differs from the non-context driven, begin- all-paragraphs-with-a-topic-sentence blanket rule, which David states that he inferred from his high school English teachers. David concludes that writing teachers and writing textbooks overestimate the use and importance of topic sentences in expository prose. In addition, he concludes that English textbooks and English teachers (himself included) should address rhetorical context when discussing the use of topic sentences.

Sentence Openers

The purpose of Anne's study was to challenge the validity of certain types of sentence openers. She wrote, "In my high school English classroom, Mr. Lee set about teaching students how to write better by re-writing their paragraphs using what he termed 'sentence openers.'" Sentence openers fall into six categories: subject, preposition, *ly* word, *ing* word, clause, and VSS (very short sentence—five words or fewer). Anne went on to say that papers were severely penalized if they did not include all six sentence openers. Mr. Lee, a beloved high school English teacher, is the only source Anne and I could find for this rule.

Anne found that the first few paragraphs of the articles analyzed usually begin with a variety of sentence openers, but subsequent paragraphs have fewer of the six sentence openers, other than beginning the sentence with a subject. Of the six or more sentences which appear in the paragraphs analyzed, typically four or five of them begin with a subject. Sentences beginning with a prepositional phrase also appear quite frequently: three times in every four paragraphs. Sentences beginning with a clause or very short sentences (VSS—five words or fewer) appear once in more than half of the paragraphs. Finally, sentences beginning with an *ly* word or an *ing* word rarely appear in a given paragraph.

Anne concludes that writing with sentence openers is a valuable tool to teach novice writers because it forced her, as a student writer, to be aware of and incorporate sentence variety into her writing style. She said that she does not think she will disregard Mr. Lee's sentence opener rules as a future English teacher. Nonetheless, she went on to write that the list should be reduced to the top four sentence openers: subject, prepositional phrase, clauses and very short sentences. Using six different sentence openers per paragraph does not reflect the stylistic practices of the expert writers that she researched. However, using a variety of sentence openers (most of which begin with a subject) does reflect the current writing style of expert writers.

Use of Simple, Compound, Complex, and Compound/Complex Sentences

As a future English teacher, Cole analyzed texts to determine the percentage of simple, compound, complex, or compound/complex sentences. Often, adolescent writers are told to combine or embed sentences as they revise because overusing simple sentences can create a harsh, staccato rhythm (Christensen; Glaser, 189; Mellon; O'Hare; Pearlman and Pearlman 23-4). On the other hand, the text for this class, *Understanding Style*, suggests that over fifty percent of sentences should use only independent clauses, which implies a high rate of simple sentences (Glaser 182).

In his study, Cole found that expert writers use the basic sentence types — 37.5% simple, 43.4% complex, 9.8% compound, and 9.3% compound/complex, and that they blend sentence types within individual paragraphs. Due to the high percentage of simple sentences, Cole concludes that expert writers come close to Glaser's suggestion that over fifty percent of sentences should use only independent clauses. Cole said that the abundance of simple sentence in published writing surprised him. Regardless, he concludes that these findings do not invalidate the suggestion that students be taught sentence combining and sentence embedding; rather it demonstrates the importance of maintaining balance and analyzing context when making sentence revisions within a text. Cole, who plans to be a teacher, did not address the impact of context upon sentence types in his final paper.

Pronoun and Antecedent Agreement

The purpose of Lauren's study was to analyze the usage of pronouns that follow a singular antecedent. Traditionally, grammar teachers and texts state that singular antecedents, such as *each*, *everyone*, *anyone* and *everybody*, require singular pronouns, such as *his* or *her*, even though this can create awkward syntax or gender privilege (Pearlman and Pearlman 11). Given that using *his* or *her* and *she* or *he* is awkward syntax and that using *his* and *he*

exclusively is sexist language, Hairston (*Successful* 196) proposes using plural pronouns, but states that a plural antecedent with a singular pronoun is also acceptable.

Lauren found minimal usage of singular pronouns and singular antecedents (only once or twice per article), but plural pronouns and plural antecedents appear frequently. When singular pronouns and antecedents do surface in the texts analyzed, however, singular pronouns always follow singular antecedents. No exceptions. All the examples in Lauren's original text include masculine pronouns which follow non-gender specific antecedents; however, she did not analyze the use of masculine or feminine pronouns with antecedents which are not gender-specific.

Lauren concludes that the singular pronoun/antecedent agreement rule appears to be consistently followed by expert writers in different types of magazines and journals. She further concludes that although she agrees with Hairston that singular pronoun and antecedent disagreements are among the errors that "do not seem to matter much," expert writers do not make that error (*Successful* 196-97; Hairston "Not All Errors Equal") And, as an unpublished writer, she said she plans to adhere to the pronoun/antecedent agreement rule.

Using First Person Pronouns in Formal Writing
In high school, Heather was told never to write in first person, but in *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, Williams states "Despite the widespread belief that we should avoid using *I* or *we* in academic writing, particularly in scientific writing, many highly regarded writers use *I* and *we* regularly" (78). As a result, the purpose of Heather's study was to determine whether the use of first person is acceptable in formal writing. Rather than popular magazines, Heather analyzed language arts journals for her study: *Research in the Teaching of English*, *English Journal*, and *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*.

Heather found that first person is frequently used in five of the six articles analyzed in this study; the maximum use is an average

of 8.3 times per page. However, she notes that two factors may influence the data. First, in five of the six articles, the authors are reporting the results of their research. In the one article in which first person is never used, the authors are analyzing text rather than reporting findings. Second, the page rather than word count was the method used to determine usage, which may or may not impact the results.

Heather concludes that since first person pronouns appear frequently in five of the six articles, it is acceptable practice to use first person pronouns in formal writing. She told me that this surprised her, and she wasn't sure if she still should/could write in first person. My conclusion is that she's not ready to break out of the pattern she was taught. After reading her research and final report, I would add two other possible conclusions. One, first person pronouns are acceptable practice in reporting primary empirical research, but may not be acceptable in other types of research. Two, formal writing is in a paradigm shift and beginning to accept first person. Regardless, each of the conclusions indicates that first person pronouns are acceptable in some formal writing contexts.

Using Metaphors in Prose

The purpose of Erin's study was to determine if expert writers use metaphors in informative prose. The value of metaphors in informative prose dates back to Aristotle, who said in *Rhetorica* that metaphors are valuable to make the abstract more concrete and to make the concrete more abstract [profound]. Although all the publications Erin analyzed often print short stories, only informative articles were analyzed.

Erin found that half of the articles analyzed include one metaphor or simile. Erin notes that metaphors appear in only three of the six articles she analyzed. However, given that only one metaphor appears in three of the six articles, it appears that expert writers do not use metaphors frequently in informative writing. Therefore, as a future professional writer, she told me

that if a metaphor presents itself to her in a given context, she would use one, but she would not try to create one for effect.

Beginning Sentences with Conjunctions

Three students, Rachel, Seth, and Sara, individually designed similar studies to determine if expert writers begin sentences with conjunctions. Each said their English teachers told them, "Never begin a sentence with a conjunction." With this rule in mind, each student took a slightly different twist to studying conjunction usage, so they are discussed individually.

Rachel

Rachel's purpose was to see if expert non-fiction writers begin sentences with the words *and* or *but* in relatively formal writing. She found that expert writers do occasionally begin sentences with the conjunctions *and* and *but*, but that usage is low: 4-12 percent. Nonetheless, each article begins at least one sentence with *but*, plus all except two articles begin at least one sentence with *and*. Rachel concludes that expert writers begin sentences with the conjunctions *and* and *but*; however, *but* is used twice as frequently as *and*. Given the low percentage of usage, it appears that expert writers use these conjunctions but sparingly. As a future writer and teacher, Rachel said that she concludes that beginning a sentence with a conjunction is acceptable, if it's not overused.

Seth

Similar to Rachel's purpose, Seth's purpose was to determine if expert writers use *and*, *but*, or *because* to begin a sentence. In each article analyzed, Seth tallied the number of times *and*, *but* or *because* begins a sentence. He found that *and* and *but* are occasionally used as a sentence opener, but *because* is never used as a sentence opener. The conjunction *and* appears an average of three times per article; the conjunction *but* appears an average of 3.2 times per article. Since paragraphs rather than sentences are totaled, the overall percentage of usage is impossible to compare. Although *but* frequently begins sentences in the texts Seth

analyzed, the frequency is not much greater than the use of *and*, whereas Rachel found *but* used almost twice as frequently as *and* as a sentence opener. Seth concludes that occasionally using *and* or *but* as a sentence opener is acceptable practice in formal writing. However, if using expert writers as a model, usage of *and* and *but* to begin a sentence should appear no more than once in every four paragraphs. So, as a future professional writer, Seth said he would use conjunctions to begin sentences, but not often.

Sara

Unlike Rachel's and Seth's, the purpose of Sara's study was to see if the usage of *and*, *but*, *because*, and *or* has changed since 1950. Sara found that the usage of each of these conjunctions varies. Her findings indicate that both in the 1950s and subsequent years, the conjunctions *because* and *or* are rarely or never used as sentence openers (*because* is used <.3 percent and *or* is used <.1 percent). On the other hand, she found that *and* and *but* are occasionally used as sentence openers in both time periods. Similar to Rachel's findings, Sara found that *but* appears more than twice as frequently as *and*. In addition, according to her data, the usage of both *and* and *but* has increased considerably since the 1950s.

Sara draws three conclusions from her study. First, expert writers rarely or never use the conjunctions *or* and *because* as sentence openers; therefore, student writers should also avoid them. Second, expert writers do use the conjunctions *and* and *but* as sentence openers, particularly the latter; therefore, student writers may occasionally use *and* and *but* as sentence openers. Third, expert writers appear to be using the conjunctions *and* and *but* as sentence openers more frequently now than they did fifty years ago.

Part Three: Discussion

First, these findings support my suspicion that writing teachers frequently bypass rhetorical context when discussing, assigning, and evaluating writing. Given my students' surprise that style rules are often ignored, it appears that writing style is not being

taught as a set of guidelines on a continuum of flexible use, which may vary according to the specific context and genre. Instead, writing style is being taught as a set of rules which must be followed without exception.

Second, students began to realize that some rules of writing style are merely the preference of an individual English teacher. Before doing research on a rule and hearing the results of their peers' studies, students assumed that all writing rules are equal. They did not know that some rules are more enmeshed in the infrastructure of writing practices and writing instruction practices. For example, some students saw beginning each paragraph with a topic sentence equally as important as using "six different sentence openers in each body paragraph."

Third, before researching for this assignment, students assumed that rules dictate writing parameters. For these college students, elements like audience, purpose, genre and context were merely the academic stuff I talked about in class, not the elements they considered when drafting or revising their texts. Realizing that expert writers break or follow these rules based on the rhetorical situation created a fault line in their perception of good writing. They began to grasp that the schema of writing is the rhetorical context, not a paradigm of rules.

Fourth, every time I give this assignment, students express discomfort at challenging their writing paradigm, rather than the ah-ha or liberated response I desire. During the process of revising this article, I felt challenged to revise this assignment in order to move students to a deeper level of understanding about writing style, conventions, and context. The majority of the students who take the class are either English education or writing majors, so the topic should evoke both interest and application. The next level I'd like to take them is a more in-depth analysis of context and the style expectations within each. After researching whether or not a rule is used in a given publication, a group of students will research if and how the rule changes when the writing context changes. These alterations should further enable my students to achieve the objective of this assignment: (1) to

enhance students' writing skills by requiring them to analyze the use of writing conventions; (2) to challenge the validity and reasons behind their writing paradigm; and (3) to consistently and appropriately adjust their writing style according to a given rhetorical situation, rather than their current one size fits all approach to writing.

Fifth, locating, researching, and evaluating the boundaries created by a style rule enabled students to think critically about the validity—or lack thereof—of the paradigm in which they write. The rules my students studied are ones which they remember their English teachers describing as iron-clad laws, not context-driven guidelines. In the process of analyzing their research, students realized that some of these writing laws do not govern experts and should be challenged. This assignment caused a paradigm shift in the minds of my students: this is the most critical finding.

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