

Basics for Beginning Writers

by Melisa Michaels

As a writer, these sentences look odd to me.

This essay will be of interest to many writer's and literary type's.

I use to think things like this were a waist of time if you just want to write fiction.

Now I know that writers half to know there basics.

If you cannot find at least two errors in each of the above lines, this article is for you. Those lines should read:

As a **writer**, I find that these sentences look odd.

This article will be of interest to many **writers** and literary **types**.

I **used** to think things like this were a **waste** of time if you just want to write fiction.

Now I know that writers **have** to know **their** basics.

We aren't concerned here with flowing prose, glowing phrases, or any stylistic questions; before you worry about those things you need to know how to spell the words you want, how to choose from among similar words with different meanings, how to punctuate, and how to put the parts of a sentence together in such a way that the result makes sense.

Without this basic knowledge, not only will you have difficulty communicating, but you may produce unintentionally hilarious results. There are reasons for all the seemingly arbitrary rules of grammar and punctuation. Some of them can be dismissed once you know what they are; others cannot. To communicate what you really mean, you must know which rules can be safely broken; and to know that, you must know the rules.

The easiest way to learn them is (this is the good part) by reading the sort of fiction you want to write. But you have to (this is the hard part) *pay attention* to what you read. For best results you need to read a wide range of works by a number of authors, carefully noticing their spelling, punctuation, and grammar. And you need some way of determining which one is right when you find two or more of them in opposition on a given usage.

A copy of Strunk's *The Elements of Style*, read carefully and its lessons taken to heart, will help you avoid the most common errors. Between that and a few dozen of your favorite novels you'll have the beginning of a good education in accepted usage. Later you may choose to disagree with Strunk on certain points: but until you understand what he instructs and why, any deviation from his rules stands a good chance of getting you in trouble.

There are, of course, other works on usage and style that you might choose instead of Strunk. I suggest this one because it is not only available free on the web, but very small and inexpensive in paperback form, relatively easy to find, and as uncontroversial as an authoritative work on a sometimes ambiguous topic can be.

As you may already know, even the experts don't agree on some usages. This may sound as though it provides a ready excuse for any, er, let us say *original* usages you

may introduce in your prose, but it does not. You will realize when you've learned the rules yourself that the astute reader can tell the difference between rules broken by choice and those broken in ignorance. The former sort may be innovative, imaginative, even brilliant, or only a careful rendition of some common oral tradition. The latter sort will seldom be anything but illiterate or amusing (or both).

Even to successfully render the careless speech of the streets into printed words that will "sound" to the eye the way the oral version would sound to the ear, the author must know precisely what rules are used and what rules are broken.

This is not to say that all this knowledge must be available on a conscious level, that you must memorize parts of speech and rules of usage and punctuation as children used to do in grade school. That might or might not be valuable. What is invaluable, possibly indispensable, is that you should *pay attention* to these matters, know what you're doing, and deviate from the accepted norm *only by intention*.

If the only way you can be certain of that is by learning remedial English by rote, then do so. If you already have a sufficient understanding of the parts of speech (whether or not you know them by name) that you can grasp the purpose of the rules laid down in Strunk, then you probably have no need of remedial English.

In any case and no matter what you wish to achieve with your use of words, language is your only real tool as a writer. You would not expect to successfully construct a wooden house without first learning how to use hammers, nails, saws, screws, and other woodworking tools (and quite probably practicing with them on smaller projects before embarking on the house). You should not expect to successfully construct a work of fiction without first learning the *written* language that will be your tool.

Of course, we all speak at least one language, and it is perhaps not amazing that so many people imagine that qualifies them to write in their native tongue. After all, they've been speaking it since babyhood. They are surely intimate with it by now.

What this does not take into account is the many differences between a spoken and a written language. You have no need, for example, to understand spelling and the rules of punctuation in order to accomplish oral communication. When you say, "the bare bear threw the ball through the wall," the person to whom you say it will very probably be surprised, but she should have no trouble understanding your meaning.

If you were to write, "the bear bare through the ball threw the wall," however, your reader would have to do strong mental contortions to get any sense out of it at all. Perhaps you can see from this alone that intimacy with a spoken language is not sufficient for the writer.

Punctuation presents some of the same problems. In speech you know when to hesitate for a comma and when to come to a full stop for a period. You've no need to know when spoken words should contain an apostrophe and when not. The person to whom you're speaking will determine your meaning from context.

If, however, you, don't. Know where' to put; punc'tuation, in your" writing: you'll run into some serious difficulties right quickly; and while many's the writer who can't spell worth a darn, we almost all of us know that "spelling" is not spelled "speling" and that "writer" is not spelled "writter." I am dismayed to have to tell you that a great many hopeful writers do not. Very likely they are able to pronounce these words correctly and so do not, in their everyday activities, reveal their illiteracy: but they are probably not competent to write marketable prose. They have not acquired even a cursory familiarity with their tools.

Written language is the tool of the trade. With skilled use of it you can work wonders, build universes, create gods if you like, and entertain thousands. Without sufficient understanding to enable skill, you will more likely amuse by accident than by design.

Melisa Michaels is the author of the science fiction novels *Skirmish*, *First Battle*, *Last War*, *Pirate Prince*, *Floater Factor*, and *Far Harbor*, the fantasy novel *Cold Iron*, and the mystery novel *Through the Eyes of the Dead*.

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