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TW Column by Emily Toth

The "Ewwws" Have It



Recognize this sentence?

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

Yes, it's the beginning of Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour." You probably read it in school. Maybe you've even taught it. The story is short, and it moves fast. It's full of exquisite changes and ironies, including a shockeroo of an

ending.

But you've probably never noticed the sheer grammatical horror—the *horror*—in the first sentence. It's a dangling modifier. No one is described by the word "knowing." The sentence floats, unmoored.

O, well do I remember Miss Kleinmeyer, my twelfth-grade English teacher, who taught us that dangling modifiers were loathsome. They were an offense against propriety and Western civilization as we know it. She encouraged us to seek them out, to pummel and humiliate and obliterate them. The barbarians were at the gates!

Growing up in an era of placid troglodytes, I was taught grammar as if it were the bedrock of writing. I learned how to diagram sentences and to punctuate "restrictive" and "non-restrictive" relative clauses. I never mistook a participle for a gerund.

Now, a century later, the barbarians have won. They always do. I never teach about dangling modifiers, or any modifiers at all, because my students don't know that sort of thing. (They may know some other name for "modifier," but I don't ask. You don't want to know the names that young people use for sensitive parts.)

I know you're rolling your eyes and checking your phone, because this stuff is boring. I haven't taught composition in years, yet if I tell anyone I teach English, I always get back, "I'm going to have to watch my grammar!"

No, you don't, and neither does Kate Chopin, bless her heart. She published "The Story of an Hour" in 1894 and died in 1904, and her readers have always been much more interested in her women than in her modifiers.

But when I first started teaching, we weren't allowed to assign literature in first-year college writing courses. Our focus was on forms and grammatical features. When you teach writing, you do learn how to talk about writing—but it was a long time before I was allowed to teach and talk about what really matters.

Yes, that did gnaw at my soul.

For my first job teaching composition, we were all given *The Harbrace Handbook*, an evil volume with abbreviations for grammatical or stylistic errors. I was supposed to nose out the mistakes in student papers and mark them with notations like "4g" or "2b." The students were then supposed to consult *The Handbook* to learn what the mystical symbols meant, such as "comma splice" or "missing serial comma." The students were expected to correct their errors, and—I suppose—be healed and sanctified and get A's.

That was the deadliest "teaching" I've ever done. I wonder if those students ever wrote again without shuddering. I still have a frisson of naughtiness whenever I do something that *The Harbrace Handbook* considers sinful—such as using a dash.

I escaped that job and fled from *The Harbrace Handbook* forever. Because I published a lot in popular venues, I got jobs teaching much more creative forms of writing. I learned how exhilarating it is to break the rules and share ideas about writing that can make people laugh or cry or scream.

When I started teaching nonfiction writing, William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* taught me the vocabulary I did need for talking about the real errors—flaws in communication—such as jargon, clutter, and being boring.

Then my friend Susan Koppelman, expert editor of many collections of American women's short stories, added this: Any writing worth reading has to have gossip, humor, or new information. Preferably all.

Why accept the rules made by unimaginative drones? I now know to ignore rules against contractions or using "I"—or against starting sentences with "And" or "But."

And through teaching, through watching the faces of my students, I've learned how to enthrall readers. All you have to do is play on their vulgar little curiosities.

How, for instance, would you shape the following true items into an irresistible story?



1. *Chang and Eng, the original “Siamese twins,” were actually Chinese-Thai immigrants.*
2. *They were joined at the breastbone and shared one liver.*
3. *They were slave owners in North Carolina before the Civil War.*
4. *They married sisters.*
5. *One couple had eleven children. The other had ten.*
6. *When one twin died, there was a frantic attempt to separate them, but the survivor died of fright.*

“Now, class,” I say, with all the mock hauteur I can summon, “Which item entices you the most?”

Unless you’re a total fool, you want to know how they, um, “reproduced.” Number 5. Did they create new and exotic positions? Did they invent some kind of synchronized ballet? Did they listen to each other and get turned on—or disgusted?

Did they critique each other? Did they give grades?

And are you, dear reader, thinking, “Ewww”? Because that’s the sweet spot I’ve learned to aim for—the moment when readers snicker or make fake barfing noises.

With *The Harbrace Handbook*, there was no drama, no sense of audience. Students were writing to please the teacher. Most college writing is still directed toward the teacher as grader and judge—not as coach or eager audience.

I’ve taught myself to be the eager audience by having my students read their writing aloud. Maybe just their favorite paragraph or the paragraph that was giving them the most trouble. We look for weasel words or jargon to sleep by. We deliberately try to get each other to cringe or guffaw.

I teach students not to be academically decorous. Be silly. Be nerdy. Be crude. Ask rude questions (“How could Chinese guys justify owning slaves?”) But look for the heart-tugging detail. How would it feel when your lifelong, joined-at-the-chest twin died? Would you have a moment of joy (“Free at last from that butthead”) before grief and terror took over?

Did you just read that, laugh, and then feel guilty? If you did, then I’ve struck the vibrating human chord that writers everywhere look for.

Publishing Information

- *The Harbrace Handbook*—also known as *The Hodges Harbrace Handbook* by Cheryl Glenn and Loretta Gray—is now in its eighteenth edition (Wadsworth/Cengage, 2013).
- Susan Koppelman has edited many short-story anthologies, including *Between Mothers and Daughters: Stories Across a Generation* (Feminist Press, 2004), *Women's Friendships* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), and *The Other Woman: Stories of Two Women and a Man* (Feminist Press, 1993).
- *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser (HarperCollins, 1976).

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Emily Toth is a regular columnist for *Talking Writing*. Her eleven published books include biographies (Kate Chopin and Grace Metalious), academic advice books (Ms. Mentor), and one historical novel (*Daughters of New Orleans*). She writes the "Ms. Mentor" online advice column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and is writing a novel called *A Dirty Book in Louisiana*. She teaches at Louisiana State University.

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