Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction


For all those school administrators, English teachers, and their department chairs who have been interminably perplexed and frustrated over test results that indicate little or no improvement in student proficiency with grammar, Edgar H. Schuster offers a palliative: Traditional grammar instruction is ineffectual, and it always has been, so discard it. In Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction, Schuster liberates disinterested students and frustrated educators when he makes his case for eschewing traditional (and apparently futile) grammar instruction, but unfortunately, his innovative methodologies call his own credibility into question.

In his introductory chapter, Schuster makes a case that language skills acquisition, whether oral or written, is instinctual. He advocates breaking “a host of rules that have accrued through the centuries since the first grammars of English were written and are now so essential a part of school grammars (or English-teacher folklore) that to omit them is to foredoom any textbook or handbook to the dustbin” (xii). Schuster labels these rules “mythrules . . . that rule no one—other than perhaps a handful of pop-grammarians and hardened purists who look for their authority somewhere in the sky rather than on earth” (xii). He believes we can smell out these mythrules by applying his “favorite-writer test” (xii), that is, note a grammar or usage rule and determine if your favorite writer observes it. It turns out many of these favorite writers trample with alacrity on many of these conventions.

He further supports his claim citing research that he and other accomplished English instructors conducted. For instance, Schuster cites English teacher Finlay McQuade’s research in his Editorial Skills class at Sewickley Academy in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, wherein McQuade discovered that the class “made no difference in student achievement” on the Cooperative English Tests (published at the time by the Educational Testing Service), and “The class average on the pre-test was actually higher than the class average on the post-test” (xviii).

Schuster, who has been an English teacher at the secondary and college levels for over forty years, does not break any new ground when he sets out to prove that traditional grammar “rules” are essentially a malleable and amorphous body of generalizations that notable writers have either adhered to or jettisoned according to their whims. Jim Quinn, among others, embarked on the same crusade when in 1980 he wrote American Tongue and Cheek (1980), and even the film industry hopped on the antitraditionalist bandwagon when the characters Jamaal Wallace and William Forrester, in the 2000 movie Finding Forrester, discuss the fallacious rule that prohibits beginning sentences with conjunctions. Nevertheless, Schuster’s copious research and data compilation comprise compelling evidence that lends credence and fresh insight into the antitraditionalist argument. And if iconoclasm is his goal, he reinforces it when he cites the back-to-basics movement that American public schools underwent following the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s 1983 publication of A Nation at Risk and writes, “If schools were at risk in 1983, it could be said that the emphasis on basics put them there” (17). To accentuate his point, Schuster adds, “Traditional school grammar, taught traditionally, does not help students understand grammar” (21).

After citing psychologist Steven Pinker, who writes that “language is as instinctive for human beings as spinning a web is for a spider” (4), Schuster traces the advent and rise of traditional school grammar from its Greek and Latin roots through the eighteenth century with Robert Lowth’s A Short Introduction to English Grammar (1762) and Lindley Murray’s Abridgement of the Grammar (1797), to current paragon John Warriner and his ubiquitous grammar texts. Schuster points out that the nature, content, and emphasis of these books varied according to the author’s tastes and background. Schuster then devotes chapters 2 and 3 to “Definitions That Do Not Define” and “Rules That Do Not Rule” before explaining how to liberate the student writer, addressing “punctuation today,” and providing an appendix that he terms “An Updated Treatment of the Parts of Speech.” It all serves to reinforce his thesis that “. . . traditional school grammar has left a heritage of definitions that do not define and rules that do not rule. These inadequate definitions and mythrules hamper students rather than help them in their development as speakers and writers” (191).
Books

Although he presents convincing arguments against traditional grammar, Schuster’s self-styled “innovative” methods appear to be, at least on paper, so confusing, cumbersome, and complex that it would make one yearn for a more traditionalistic approach. After delineating the fundamental differences between descriptive and prescriptive grammar rules (48), Schuster pits the lexicographer as the authority against the authority of custom and usage. Throughout the book, Schuster repeatedly defers to the authority of custom and usage. With an impressive array of data, he shows how George Orwell, E.B. White, and Barbara Kingsolver had or have an affinity for “be verbs” (107), how ten notable writers (Joan Didion, John Updike, and Anna Quindlen, among others) largely eschew the traditional dictum about variety in sentence openings (120), and how another roster of literary luminaries favor the dash and the colon over the parenthesis and the semicolon (161). His data may be compelling, and his populist philosophy may be laudable, but his solutions are bound to lead students further into the grammatical quagmire.

Schuster devotes eleven pages on how to teach students the difference between the active and passive voices. A simpler explanation—that the active voice, where the subject is performing the primary action and not having it performed on him, leads to more concise, lively writing, but the passive voice is acceptable at times—would eliminate Schuster’s stultifying morass of lessons that evoke the following quote from Shakespeare’s Macbeth: “...I am ... stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more/Returning were as tedious as go o’er...” (III, iv, 135-137).

Ironically Schuster bemoans the “tyranny of the topic sentence/thesis statement” (136), while skillfully using the former and reemphasizing the latter throughout his own book (21, 191). He writes, “The reality is that there is no such thing as the paragraph” (144) and offers cohesion only cursory attention when he writes, “Everything I have said about the paragraph is not to be interpreted as meaning that I stand against development and coherence” (145). He contradicts himself with the obvious subtitle “Paragraphing Does Matter” (146), but if English teachers are looking for a groundbreaking way to teach paragraphing via the Schuster method, they must first teach students the difference between paragraphs that are obese or anorectic, an innovation that is sure to require an extra vocabulary lesson or two.

Just as potentially confusing to students is Schuster’s method of teaching “patterns” at the expense of clauses (157), the “contrary or contrast” comma (157), the “parenthetical comma pair” (158) in lieu of appositive phrases and adjective clauses and, most alarmingly, the “throwback” comma (159), which he advocates using despite its necessary inclusion of misplaced modifiers. This is an execrable sacrifice of clarity.

Sounding as if he is describing the alimentary canal, Schuster writes, “When the semicolon came into use, the sequence ran from comma, through semicolon, to colon, and period...” (161). Schuster wants writers to “Let Sleeping Semicolons Sleep” because, “Many modern writers and editors eschew the mark” (172). His neo-nomenclature also includes the semicolon as either a “heavy comma” or a “light period” (174). If students are currently bored to tears with grammar instruction, having to learn these additional terms could spark some mutinous life into them.

As if Schuster has become infatuated with naming elements of grammar, he introduces readers to his own neologism, the “apostrophe,” to identify the apostrophe when used to indicate the possessive case (183) and, predictably, Schuster’s stance is to jettison it because it does not show literal ownership, it’s fallen out of favor, and “English is the only language that assigns double duty to the apostrophe” (185).

While decrying the simple apostrophe to indicate ownership, Schuster favors teaching another cluster of adding and arcane terms such as: the subjective genitive, the objective genitive, the genitive of origin, the genitive of measure, and the descriptive genitive. “Ultimately,” Schuster writes, “we might decide to declare a pox on all apostrophes, and use apostrophes only for contractions.” (189) Given the alternative, it’s a safe bet that both teachers and students will choose the apostrophe.

Finally, Schuster’s appendix, or Updated Treatment of the Parts of Speech, is another foray into a labyrinth of definitions, clarifications, and other minutiae that should require greater effort to learn than it would to unlearn the traditional methods.

“I hope I have provided enough evidence in this book to persuade you that much of our school grammar tradition is counterproductive,” Schuster writes (191).

In that regard, he has accomplished his goal, but his innovative methods should come with a caveat emptor for any educator who expects them to induce student enthusiasm and/or produce positive results.

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