
Breaking the Rules

By Maggie Lynch aka Maggie Jaimeson

As writers there are so many rules. Never use adverbs (all those “ly” words), except when you have to. No “ing” words either. They derive from the depths of hell where the evil PPPs (present participle phrases) reside. But it’s OK to occasionally put them on the end of a sentence, just not in the beginning. Oh, and while you’re at it, drop those parentheses (all those asides should be part of the text.) Italics for emphasis? “I laugh at your italics,” the editor said as he watched me turn into a quivering mass of mold not fit to stick to his shoes.

Then there are rules about the length of your sentences, how often to paragraph, building a story arc, creating a mood, developing the setting, watching tenses, verb subject agreement—

Argh!!! It’s a wonder anyone actually writes anything at all.

Though I have always loved to read, I remember shaking violently and my stomach ready to heave whenever my tenth grade English teacher asked me to diagram a sentence. Why does it matter where the subject and predicate is? Who ever made up a word like predicate anyway? It seems to get me in trouble far too often for it to be good. Grammar smammer. Punctuation was also my downfall. Who cares what the difference is between a comma, semi-colon, colon and an emdash? You can probably guess by now, I didn’t major in English in college.

Although I wasn’t the best English student I managed to make it through college and get three graduate degrees. I’ve published multiple non-fiction books and articles, and even a few short stories. I’m confident my novels will be published soon. I did eventually learn most of those things I had fought so hard to forget. How? By writing all the time until the language became a part of me. It really is true that the more you write, the better you get.

Athletes practice moves hours and hours every day. Writers practice grammar and story by writing hours and hours every day. There is no other way for it to happen. No amount of study or reading will make it better. Only practice. Only writing.

In spite of my success in non-fiction and having more degrees than I know how to use, I still quiver every time I sit down to start a book or a new chapter. With every sentence that manages to get put on paper my critical brain is saying: “That’s not the right word! You forgot to use third person. What tense do you think that is? Where did you learn English? In the back alley of hickville?” Soon, I’ve stopped writing and convinced myself I have no talent and I better give it up before I’m laughed off the planet.

The best advice I ever received from a multiple published author was: “Write your first draft without the critic. Be a rebel. Break every rule in the book.”

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It took some practice, but I found I **loved** breaking the rules. My first drafts are filled with every adverb, gerund, PPP and dumb over-the-top, clichéd descriptions possible. I relish the free use of emdashes in every paragraph. I let my characters talk in whatever tense or time frame they want. I drop in backstory in large chunks in the first chapter, and I back up my big truck and let go with info dumps whenever I desire. I end sentences with prepositions. I repeat words and phrases at will, and sometimes even entire settings. It's a blessed, chaotic mess.

It works! Yes, it is difficult to go back with my critical mind and clean it up; but it allows me to get the story down on paper. I'm the type of writer who begins a book without knowing much about my characters, their dilemmas, where they live, what they look like, or what will happen to get them to a satisfying ending. That is why I love writing fiction. It is a discovery for me. When I write from my non-critical brain it is how I learn all these things about my book. Breaking all the rules is what allows me to create.

I remember in my last novel I was up against a tight deadline I'd set for myself. I was two thirds of the way through my draft, over 250 pages, when I finally felt confident in writing the synopsis. I needed to send the first fifty pages and the synopsis out that weekend. The edited novel still had two more weeks before it was due. I knew my characters well and I had written their dilemma and began to resolve the conflicts. I had only a few loose ends to tie up and the happily-ever-after was right around the corner. I knew exactly what was going to happen.

I spent Friday and Saturday polishing those first fifty pages and wrote the synopsis with ease. Pleased with myself, I sent the package by email to the twelve members of my critique group.

Imagine my surprise when on page 280 or so a major character was raped. Where did that come from? That wasn't in the synopsis! I tried to delete it. I tried to write around it. I tried to tone it down and take it off stage. But she would have none of it. With chagrin I gave her a chapter or two, all the time worrying how I would explain this change in plan. Talk about breaking the rules!

When I went back to edit during the next two weeks I was pleasantly surprised at how much I liked the story. In fact, my character's insistence on giving her time with the rape ended up being a pivotal turning point for my hero and heroine as well and it set up the next book in the series. Maybe breaking the rules was a good idea, after all.

Yes, it was grueling work to correct all that bad writing; but it was easier to do when I wasn't worried about story. Now I could focus with my critical brain and not worry about being creative and finishing the story. Three drafts later I felt I'd given it my best and sent it out with pride.

Is it perfect? Far from it. Will an editor find some problems and ask for corrections? Certainly. But I finished it and I feel good about it. That's more than ninety-five percent of wanna-be writers can say. If I had tried to write the entire novel with my critical brain firmly in place all the time I would never have finished.

Articles

If you are having problems with moving forward because your writing doesn't follow the rules, I say go ahead and break them. Throw them on the ground and stomp on them. Then write your story. Get it all down. Don't stop until you're done.

Anyone can learn how to apply rules—even me. With practice, I break less rules on my first draft than in the past, but I still like the freedom of not worrying about it. But story? Now that's talent and creativity. That's where your voice shines through. Get your story out first. Complete the book. Then go back and apply the rules.