

Personal Experience with Grammar and Style

I couldn't tell you how old I was when I had my first grammar lesson. The truth is I was probably way too young. I seem to have blocked out much of my initial English study, probably because I hated it so much. Nothing made me feel more dumb than learning about grammar. I don't know why but I could never remember anything I learned. I would learn a grammar term and forget what it meant instantaneously. Every set of practice exercises I did came back marked to the gods with an unfavorable letter grade at the top. Never once did I feel comfortable with grammar. In a lot of ways I still don't. I struggle with it often, especially when I have to show my work to others to read.

When I was in high school I remember I was writing a paper for a class and I wrote a sentence fragment. It was somewhere in the middle of a paragraph and it was meant to expand on the sentence before. I like to think it was an expression of my own style. Even now when I am writing I often feel the urge to use a fragment, but I never succumb to that urge. Well, almost never. After I had finished this assignment I asked a friend to read it over. After she finished she went over it with me and she absolutely hated that sentence. It felt like she had nothing else to say about my work except for the tiny, unimportant fragment I had thrown in. I always felt controlled and constrained by grammar. I am not a creative writer, so when I break the obvious rules I already feel a little dirty. I always felt like what I wanted was chained down by countless hard and fast rules that didn't even really make sense to me in the first place.

I also couldn't tell you how old I was when I first learned about style in writing. The truth is that I was probably too old. My issue with grammar lessons was they

allowed for little creativity or experimentation. I think a large piece of this was that I didn't learn writing terms like style, tone, diction, and syntax until I was too old. I was too deep into writing and incorporating those ideas would have required a complete rewiring of my writing brain. Up until my freshman year of college writing was an introduction with a thesis, a body of at least three paragraphs, and a conclusion that was just a restatement of the introduction. How boring does that sound? Look, I get it. I understand why high schoolers are taught to write this way. Every paper we wrote required a strong clearly defined argument and the easiest way to teach someone how to argue something is the five-paragraph model. But it's a little concerning that I went through four years, in the IB program no less, and no one ever told me I didn't have to do that.

In a way, writing about this makes me think that my education has failed me. I came out being able to form sentences and paragraphs, but not without struggling. I didn't learn writing could be unique and flavorful until my style was already plain and boring. I had to completely rework the way that I wrote. This also creates a problem of overwriting. When writers aren't allowed to express themselves they overcorrect. One of my best friends in high school was a beautiful writer but her words never had any substance. She wrote and never came to a conclusion or made a point. Because it sounded so elegant no one ever said anything. The best way to fix this issue is to teach grammar later and style earlier. I get that when learning about how to form words the obvious next step is learning about clauses and phrases and so on. But instead of forcing structured grammar lessons it may be better to let kids just write. Let them write and then go back into their writing and explain those lessons.

If I had learned what style was when I was in middle school I know that I would have come out a much better writer. I should also make the distinction that learning and practicing are different. I learned what the word style meant when I was in middle school, but everything I wrote had to be calculated and structured. If I had been able to express my style throughout the latter half of my education, I wouldn't have had to learn how to write four separate times. By learning what style is and how to apply it earlier, I would have had the opportunity to understand who I was as a writer at a younger age.