CONTENT DEVELOPMENT & BLOGGING

The 7 Grammar Rules You Can (and Should) Break

Clay Delk   September 19, 2012

Writing isn't an exact science. But for something that's so fluid and flexible, there are countless grammar rules dictating what you can and cannot do to write correctly. I don't buy it, and neither should you.

The beauty of writing is that nothing is set in stone. There's no one, true way to write anything. Every rule is fair game. But there's one big caveat: You have to know a rule before you can break it.

When you knowingly break the rules, it's style. Breaking rules you don't know is ignorance.

Some rules shouldn't be broken. I can't think of a good time to write with inconsistent tenses, dangling participles, poor subject-noun agreement or misspellings. But other rules are more flexible. In fact, most of them aren't really official rules at all. They're holdovers from grade school or high school English classes. They're stopgaps, generalizations or overreactions. Instead of teaching us the nuances of a commonly misused word, it's easier to outlaw that word altogether.

In this post, I'll help you understand where some of these grammar rules

First, some ground rules:

1. Consider the context. Where is this being published or read? Professional publications and websites may require a more formal tone than an email or a blog.
2. Think about the audience. If you're writing a letter to investors or to a potential employer, you should probably err to the side of formality. Writing for your friends on Facebook? Not so much.

3. Stay true to your voice. If your brand or market is more personal and friendly, you have a lot more flexibility than someone writing for a highly regulated industry or corporate entity.

Now, on to the rules you should know (and break).

Use "One" instead of "You"

Which of these sentences sounds better?

1. If one would like, one may return items within one week of one's purchase.

2. You can return items within one week of purchase.

In formal writing, it may be necessary to use "one" instead of "you." But you're probably not doing "formal writing." You're most likely writing web content, sales copy, letters or emails. Sure, some of these may be formal, but they're not literary essays or research papers.

In school, this rule most often helps students avoid writing in the second person (ex. "When you read this book, you can see what the author is trying to say."). Unfortunately, replacing that with "one" doesn't solve the core problem. It simply replaces the result (a paper filled with "you's") with a different result (a paper filled with "one's").

This becomes even more problematic now, when many of us do need to write in the second person. If I'm giving you instructions or suggestions (as I'm doing right now), I should use the second person. I'll tell you, "Use the second person." Not, "If one is writing instructions, one may use the second person."

And if I'm writing about how much *you* will enjoy a new product, I don't want to talk about "one." I want to talk about "you."

Avoid Using "I"

This is another remnant from our grade school days. My guess is that banning the first person in formal essays was an attempt to reduce "I think" or "I believe" statements in favor of fact-based arguments. But again, you're not writing essays. Most likely, you're an independent business owner telling your customers what you think. By all means, let them know it's you.
In fact, I'd recommend using this personal tone over the common practice of referring to your company in the third person. Instead of saying "The Amazing Online Store is committed to great customer service." Say "We believe everyone deserves great customer service." If you're constantly referring to yourself in the third person, it's harder to trust what you say.

Don't use Contractions

Er, I mean, "Do Not Use Contractions." Except that you can. This is a legitimate rule for formal and professional writing. Contractions are more casual and do assume a certain level of informality. But that's exactly what sales and marketing writing should sound like.

In most cases, your written voice in marketing materials should sound very similar to the way you talk. And very few people talk without using contractions. The more your writing sounds like you're actually speaking to the reader, the more likely they are to feel comfortable with what you say.

As an added bonus, if you use contractions regularly, readers will be more likely to notice when you don't. So when you really want to make sure they absolutely do not forget what you're about to say, write it out.

Never End a Sentence with a Preposition

First, this rule is still in debate among many grammar experts and writing instructors. I personally don't give it much credence. In fact, following this rule without question can lead to some pretty awkward writing. Let's look at a couple of phrases that may come up in an ecommerce setting.
"What are you looking for?"
"This is the product I'm interested in."

Following the rule, that exchange should sound like this:

"For what are you looking?"
"This is the product in which I'm interested."

Who talks like that?

The always enlightening and entertaining Grammar Girl has a great discussion on this rule. Her best tip here is: "When you could leave off the preposition and it wouldn't change the meaning, you should leave it off."

Or, this even more flexible advice from Motivated Grammar: "Listen to your sentence and decide for yourself whether the final preposition sounds appropriate for the formality level you're aiming at."

You Can't Start a Sentence with a Conjunction

Or can you? This is another example of a rule that many teachers implement to solve a different problem. Conjunctions (and, but, or) are typically used to join two parts of a sentence. When students begin a sentence with a conjunction, they're more likely to end up writing an incomplete sentence or fragment (like, "And goes to the store."). Barring students from starting a sentence with a conjunction at all helps them eliminate this common mistake.

But starting a **complete** sentence with a conjunction can help draw attention to the statement and imply an important transition.

Don't Use Slang

This is definitely a rule to use or ignore at your discretion. You probably don't want to promote your "awesome medical devices," but that neon unicorn t-shirt? "Totally rad."

It's completely acceptable to use slang, casual terminology and everyday language in your writing, but don't overdo it. Think about the way your

Remember, You Can't Break Them Until You Know Them. But Now That You Do…

As I said at the beginning, writing isn't an exact science. Some of these grammar rules can and should apply to your writing. Others may be less important, or downright wrong, for your industry. And now that you know them, you can break them!

Until next time, happy selling!

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