7~~Seven~~ Grammatical "Rules" that Children's Writers Don't Need to Worry about—and ~~Three~~ 3 They Should

Writing stories for children~~ and young readers~~ can be a lot of fun. And meaningful~~, too~~. After all, you're influencing the incoming generation. When writing children's stories, you want to be able to focus as much time as possible on the story itself—and forget the dreaded word~~,~~ grammar~~,~~ altogether. Unfortunately, grammar can't be thrown out the door, especially in children's literature. But there are some grammar "rules" that you don't actually have to worry about at all.

Seven "Rules" You Don't Need to Worry About

1: Using *whom* for objects

So when do you use whom, anyway? First, let's get acquainted with the parts of a sentence. For the sake of the conversation, a sentence has at least two parts: a subject and a verb. Sometimes, we throw in an object.

The girl punched.

In this sentence, the girl is the subject; she is the one doing the action, or verb, by punching.

The girl punched Sally.

In this sentence, the girl is still the subject, but there is also an object. Sally is receiving the action; she is being punched. Technically, whenever you want to use *who* in a sentence, but the person you are referring to is *receiving* the action, you should use *whom.* Complex, I know. And to make it worse, people don't really use *whom* in their everyday speech, so it won't often pop up randomly in your free-writes.

The good news? As a writer of children's stories, *you don't need to worry about this rule.* 'What?' you think. 'But my mom told me…' And your mom had good reason. In any kind of scholarly~~,~~ ~~or~~ academic, or formal business writing, use *whom.* But in children's writing,

Commented [HC1]: An example from *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*: "He ate 1 apple" (or something like that). I am going to continue to point out places where you can use examples from books. Refer to my last comment to learn why.

Commented [HC2]: Since we have examples above, we should add an example here that shows how to use whom. We can say something like "Who punched Sally?" and "Whom did the girl punch?"

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especially in dialogue, you want the story to relate to children. You want it to be authentic. And most children will not be using *whom* in their everyday speech. Heck, most adults won't be using it either. So stick to *who*, unless your gut tells you otherwise.

2: Varying the types of punctuation marks and sentence length

If you've ever taken a writing class, or even just a high school English course, you were probably told to vary your punctuation marks and sentence length. So now you sprinkle in semi-colons, colons, and dashes. You make sure to use both long sentences and short sentences. But then it gets complicated. What are the differences between a semi-colon and a dash? Can you begin a list after a comma? Do you always need two dashes?

Guess what. You can forget about varying your punctuation and sentence length, too. Actually, you *should* forget about them. Because in most children's writing, you want to keep it pretty simple. Get rid of almost all semi-colons and dashes and colons in books for readers younger than age eight. If you're writing for nine- and ten-year-olds—alright, you can throw in a semi-colon occasionally. As for sentence length, keep it short. Children will get overwhelmed if the sentences are too long. If you don't believe ~~me~~ that this is a good idea, just take a peek at Dr. Seuss's "Green Eggs and Ham."

3: Making sure every paragraph has at least three sentences

Alright, this rule is officially debunked. It is a myth. If your high school English teacher ever told you that every paragraph you write needs three sentences, forget about it. The fact is, your teacher was teaching you to shape a paper, not write a children's book. And even in essays, the three ~~-~~sentences rule isn't always a hard and fast rule. In a children's book, dare to be as creative and unique as you want. Maybe you only have one sentence on a page. Or one word. No paragraphs are necessary at all.

4: Not ending a sentence with a preposition

Alright. One of the hard ones for people to accept. Possibly from the time you could talk, you were told that you couldn't end a sentence with a preposition. So you have been arduously avoiding, "Where are you at?" and "Who did you send that to?" Probably, you have been awkwardly rephrasing and adding words, saying, "Where are you at right now?" and "To whom did you send that?" If you think it sounds a little archaic, you're right. It is.

Chicago Manual of Style says about the issue, "The traditional caveat of yesteryear against ending sentences or clauses with prepositions is an unnecessary and pedantic restriction" (5.180). So, you don't even need to worry about this in your academic papers, let alone in your children's stories. Write the way children speak, and they will enjoy the story a lot more.

5: Not using contractions

Admittedly, using contractions can be a problem in academic writing. But it is not a problem in children's stories at all. Again, it is important to come to the level of the children and speak in a way they can understand. This is especially important in dialogue. You'll rarely hear a child say, "~~-~~I did not know that I would not find them!" Try " I didn't know I wouldn't find them!" It will seem a lot more realistic to the child, and is just one more grammar rule you don't need to worry about.

6: Not splitting infinitives

Easily put, an infinitive is a verb that has *to* in front of it. Think *to run, to jump, to play.* Another archaic grammar rule claims that you cannot split an infinite, meaning that you can't put a word between the *to* and the verb. You can forget about this one~~, too, and not only~~ in both your children's stories and your formal writing. Just be careful not to stick long phrases in between. *Chicago* says, "It is now widely acknowledged that adverbs sometimes justifiably separate the *to*

Commented [HC4]: Let's cut this sentence out since this rule is rarely talked about (at least from my experience) and is probably easier for people to accept than some of the other ones.

Commented [HC5]: An example we can use: "We are going on a bear hunt doesn't flow nearly as well as 'We're going on a bear hunt.'"

Commented [HC6]: This phrase is used a lot throughout the article, but the title implies this, and it doesn't need to be stated. However, when a certain rule applies to both formal and informal writing, we should include it.

from the principle verb" (5.108). So if you want to say *to quickly run, to happily sing,* or *to snidely remark* in your children's story, go right ahead. But it would be a problem if you were to say "to publicly, in front of your school and teachers, just so you can get recognition for being kind, give that girl a hug would be better if you were her friend to begin with."

7: Not beginning a sentence with a conjunction

If you've ever been told you can't begin a sentence with *and, but,* or *or,* stop worrying about it. And especially don't worry about it in your children's story. *Chicago* says, ~~about writing in general:~~ "There is a widespread belief—one with no historical or grammatical foundation—that it is an error to begin a sentence with a conjunction…. In fact, a substantial percentage . . . of the sentences in first-rate writing begin with conjunctions." So publishers aren't going to get on your back for starting a sentence with *and.* So if it flows naturally that way, let it be. You can let this grammatical worry go.

So now you have a bunch of grammar rules you don't need to worry about anymore. But there are some rules that you should keep on your radar.

Three "Rules" You Should Worry about

1. Keeping spelling as accurate as possible

This is a big one. Since children are learning to read, it is important that words are spelled correctly. The biggest exception to this is when a writer spells a word in dialogue wrong to show that the child is pronouncing it wrong. For example, a child might say, "You're exaragating, Mom." While this can be fun if used well, use it with caution. Especially in books for early readers, it's probably a better idea to stick to regular spelling rules.

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Commented [HC7]: We should use an example here. I went ahead and created one, but we can definitely change it.

Commented [HC8]: You may find a good example of this in *Winnie-the-Pooh.*

2. Using correct commas and other punctuation

This rule must be followed strictly, even in children's literature. Commas should always be used accurately, as well as any other punctuation (though, as mentioned earlier, some punctuation marks should be avoided altogether). Here is one simple rule to remember with commas: If two parts of a sentence are separated by *and, but,* or *or,* look to see if the two sections are complete sentences.

The girl ran, and she jumped for the ball.

Here, the two halves on each side of the *and* are complete sentences, so you need a comma.

The girl ran and jumped for the ball.

Here, *jumped for the ball* is not a complete sentence, so you should not put a comma.

There are many other rules for using a comma correctly, and these are rules that you should pay attention to, but these two are the most important ones to remember. ~~-~~ However, ~~C~~children's story or not, correct punctuation goes a long way.

3. Using correct word choice

Word choice is everything in a children's story. Picture books especially have very low word counts, which means that every word ~~—well—~~ counts. While paying attention to word choice is very important, there are less ~~-~~defined boundaries that should be focused on more than some of the other rules, as each book is different and will have different words which are appropriate. However, here are a few general principles: ~~-~~

Commented [HC9]: What is this sentence trying to say?

When thinking about word choice, consider grade level. How old is your target audience? Will they be able to read and understand the words you are using? That doesn't mean that some words can't be longer or more difficult, but choose the difficulty of your words carefully.

Also consider tone. Is this a funny book? A serious one? Pick your words accordingly. As you choose your tone, don't be shy of using humor (even things only the adults will pick up on), because humor will help the child learn.

When considering word choice in a children's book, many other factors come into play as well. Maybe you want a word that rhymes. Or creates alliteration. Or helps children learn to enunciate. No matter the style of book you are writing, consider word choice very, very carefully.

And there you have it. While you've still got to be grammatically accurate, there are a lot~~s~~ of "rules" that you, as a writer of children's books, do not have to worry about. Letting the grammar worries go can help you focus on what is most important: the story itself. For children, a story is everything, so craft and refine and nitpick until it is just right. Then you can focus on the grammatical issues that actually ~~do~~ matter. **Alternate ending A:** If you have a question about a breaking a grammar "rule," ask yourself if it helps or hinders the reading and learning experience for the child. Most of the time, the answer to that question will answer yours.

Alternate ending B: And just remember that it doesn't hurt to break the seven so-called rules. If you're still worried, or if you find yourself saying, *"I will not break them~~e~~ here or there, I will not break them anywhere. I will not break them Sam-I-Am"*. You might just have to try the green eggs and ham.

Commented [HC10]: I love how practical the first ending is, and how fun the second ending is. Let's try to incorporate the first ending earlier in the final paragraph (maybe between the second and third sentences) and use the second ending. It won't feel out of the blue if we incorporate more quotes from other children's books throughout the article. Maybe we can take our examples from other well-known children's books. We can also sneak in comparisons and allusions to other children's books.

Some popular children's books I can think of: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Everyone Poops, Jumanji, Madeline, Corduroy, We're Going on a Bear Hunt, Where the Wild Things Are, Winnie-the Pooh, Little House on the Prairie, Curious George, The Little Prince, Pippi Longstocking,* and *Junnie B. Jones*. I could go on, but I hope this list is helpful.

Also, adding examples from well-known children's books will give your arguments more credibility.

References

The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th Edition. 2017. The University of Chicago Press.

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