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The Writers Network News  
No Rules; Just Write!  
Editor: Bobbie Christmas

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WRITER'S QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"In books it is the chief of all perfections to be plain and brief." —Samuel Butler

Samuel Butler (4 December 1835 – 18 June 1902) was the iconoclastic English author of the Utopian satirical novel EREWHON (1872) and the semi-autobiographical THE WAY OF ALL FLESH, published posthumously in 1903. Both have remained in print ever since.

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ONE: FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK: READ BEFORE YOU RELEASE!

Dear Fellow Writers:

I just finished editing a portion of a novel (and I am thankful it wasn't the whole thing) that had an excellent premise and great promise as a story. The problem, however, was that the manuscript was filled with typos and other errors that anyone who simply read it through would have caught. Yes, an editor is supposed to find and fix errors, and yes, if writers didn't make errors, we editors would have no work. Some mistakes, though, would be obvious to anyone who simply read the manuscript, which the writer should have done before sending the piece to an editor. Why make life harder on the editor who has to concentrate on repairing obvious typographical errors instead of concentrating on the overall story development? Never send a first draft to an editor. Please! Okay, I needed to vent. Now on to lighter subjects.

Only three days before publishing this issue of The Writers Network News, I returned from my cruise aboard Victory I, traveling on all five Great Lakes. Many of you asked me to report on the trip, since it was an unusual one, so here goes.

On my voyage I learned that while hundreds of thousands of people each year cruise the Mediterranean or Caribbean, only about six thousand people a year cruise the Great Lakes. I felt like a pioneer, or at least a person with a unique curiosity. Although I had stood on the shores of Lake Ontario and Lake Michigan in the past, I had not ventured out on the water of any of the gargantuan freshwater lakes of Canada and the United States.

For the most part the weather cooperated while the small cruise ship (capacity about 200) navigated the colossal ponds. To break up the cruise we had many educational and fun-filled shore excursions. For example we reveled in a fascinating voyage down the Chicago River while an expert on architecture pointed out many of the unique buildings and explained the architects' underlying inspirations while we traveled down the Chicago River. We visited the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland with its extensive array of memorabilia and interactive displays. We watched an exciting video about Elvis and one about Dick Clark that covered his many years of interviewing musicians on Bandstand. In Dearborn, Michigan, we experienced the Henry Ford Museum and traversed his Greenfield Village. While there my sister and I had English tea at Cotswold Cottage, a stone bungalow Ford had brought over from England rock by rock, rebuilt, and surrounded by colorful gardens, all because Clara, his wife, loved English cottages and gardens. The entire village was peopled with folks in period outfits. Some costumed people offered tours of the expansive grounds in Model T Fords, antique buses, and even a steam-powered locomotive train. We took horse-and-carriage rides on Mackinac Island and ate lunch at its famous Grand Hotel. I

observed our ship and others passing through locks from one lake to another. We watched First Nation drumming and dancing and experienced Canada's First Nation art as well. We spent a delightful morning on the Canadian—and in my opinion the more scenic side—of Niagara Falls. We ate (too) well and slept peacefully to the gentle rocking of the small ship. We attended fascinating lectures and visited interesting museums in many locations. The ship offered canapes and libations every afternoon and entertainment every night, although I didn't always take advantage of such things. Instead when we were not on an excursion I took a restful nap if the urge hit me.

Victory Cruise Lines has a terrific short video that sums up many of our adventures on the Great Lakes. If you're interested in the video, click on it at <https://www.victorycruiselines.com/great-lakes-cruise/>

I traveled with my older sister, and we laughed and enjoyed our way across all five Great Lakes. She even taught me a new card game called Spite and Malice. She beat me every time, so she was happy. I was content to learn something new, even if I haven't yet fully grasped all the nuances of the game strategy.

What does any of this trip have to do with writing and editing? Nothing. I needed a complete break after not taking a vacation in more than three years. I relaxed. I was able to read a book for fun, not for editing. I got away from the keyboard, email, and pressure of deadlines. It was a true vacation. I hope you also have a good vacation this summer. Now it's back to work for me.

Yours in writing,

Bobbie Christmas [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com) or [bzebra@aol.com](mailto:bzebra@aol.com)

Author of two editions of *WRITE IN STYLE*, owner of Zebra Communications, director of The Writers Network, coordinator of the Florida Writers Association Editors Helping Writers service, and senior editor of *Enjoy Cherokee Magazine*.

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## TWO: ASK THE BOOK DOCTOR

### Breaking Habits and Understanding Rejections

By Bobbie Christmas

Q: I have a question regarding one of your "criticisms." On several of the pages you edited you circled the word "And" and made a note not to start a sentence with a conjunction. Fair enough, but I have seen endless examples of writers doing just that.

The word "but" is also a conjunction, and I have also seen many writers beginning sentences with that word as well. Bradbury, Tolkien, Paul Coelho (*The Alchemist*), Richard Adams (*Watership Down*), Robert Parker, W. Somerset Maugham, Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, not to mention Dan Brown's thriller *The Da Vinci Code*. And the list goes on. I find it difficult to believe that all these well-respected and renowned writers have been writing incorrectly for the past hundred years.

Your notation left me baffled. I have seen sentences beginning with "And" and "But" for so long that I naturally assumed that it was fine to do so, and I'm in the habit of doing so myself. Could you explain what you mean?

A: If you are in the habit of starting sentences with conjunctions, you're not alone. As you said, many bestsellers use similar constructions. Let me explain why that habit is still a good one to break.

Formal writing follows the standard rules of grammar, which state that starting a sentence with a coordinating conjunction such as *and*, *but*, *for*, and *yet* creates a sentence fragment, and sentence fragments are unacceptable. Creative writing, however, often snubs grammar rules, but it still has guidelines. One guideline is to avoid unintentional repetition. In my decades of editing manuscripts, I've noticed that writers often fall into a habit of starting sentences with conjunctions, and a single manuscript can have dozens to sometimes even hundreds of such sentence fragments. Using the same sentence structure hundreds of times in a manuscript constitutes unintentional repetition and is therefore a sign of weak writing.

Sentence fragments can, when used sparingly, lend power to a statement. Look at the following example: Darcy stood on tiptoe, leaned over, and peered down the deep well. But dark holes can be dangerous.

Did you notice how the fragment makes the reader want to know why Darcy should not have leaned over the well? Using a sentence fragment in this case added impact. When a writer overuses sentence fragments, though, the effect is lost.

In creative writing, sentence fragments are a style issue, rather than a grammar issue, and overuse of any word, phrase, or structure detracts from an author's style. For that reason I point out sentence fragments and let writers choose to break rules only for impact or write with repetition and risk having their manuscripts rejected.

My evaluations have a disclaimer that explains that writers do not have to stick to every grammar rule, because the result might sound too academic, but strong writers find a happy medium that works with their genre and type of writing.

Q: I've been submitting my manuscript to several publishers and agents. Although I've had only rejections so far, some of them are "near misses." One publisher gave lots of praise for the submission but said it didn't accept unagented manuscripts. One agent said he "saw the talent," but said he'd had problems placing similar proposals. Do these niceties mean anything, or are these people just letting me down gently? How should I interpret these rejections? How can I avoid rejection and get an acceptance letter?

A: Most agents and publishers have little time to let people down gently. Most rejections are sent by preprinted letters, boilerplate emails, or in the past, rubber-stamped rejection notices on your cover letter. Agents and publishers have nothing to gain by taking extra time to write a nice note.

I know that facing rejection is difficult, but when one includes a personal comment of any kind, it is rare, and when that comment is complimentary, frame it and hang it on your wall! You have the rarest form of rejection letter, and it means you are getting close. Keep revising and submitting your work. Keep creating more. Ponder the point that similar proposals have been difficult to place. Think how you might revise your proposal or your entire book to make it more marketable. Look at bestseller lists to see what's selling.

I know rejections hurt, but if you hope to sell your work to a publisher, keep going, keep learning, keep improving, and take pride in the "good" rejections.

Bobbie Christmas, book editor, author of Write In Style: Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing, and owner of Zebra Communications, will answer your questions, too. Send them to [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com). Read Bobbie's Zebra Communications blog at <https://www.zebraeditor.com/blog/>.

For much more information on these subjects and hundreds of others of vital importance to writers, order PURGE YOUR PROSE OF PROBLEMS, a Book Doctor's Desk Reference Book at <http://tinyurl.com/4ptjnr>.

Bobbie Christmas's award-winning second edition of WRITE IN STYLE: How to Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing is available from Amazon at <https://tinyurl.com/y7ppcdkd> or buy it directly from me at <https://tinyurl.com/y7p9xkbb>.  
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### THREE: SUBJECTS OF INTEREST TO WRITERS

#### MEMBERS WRITE

One of our members writes, "I enjoyed the article on critique groups. We have a critique group that is open to the public. It is a poetry group and began with strict rules. Everyone gets a chance to participate [in the poetry group], but our prose group doesn't follow the same rules. The prose group leader is not assertive, and new people often feel they are being attacked. Some members who are quick to speak out and think they know so much jump in and tell the readers what is wrong with their stories. Thanks for all the help you have given writers like me over the years."

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#### TERMINOLOGY FOR WRITERS

##### Solecism (pronounced SOL-i-siz-ehm)

A solecism is an error. It can be a breach of etiquette or other impropriety, and for writers, the word refers to a grammatical mistake or a nonstandard usage. An example of a solecism is "I could care less," because the correct idiom is "I could not care less." Using "irregardless" instead of "regardless" or "irrespective" is another typical solecism. Do you have pet-peeve solecisms to share with others? Send them to me at [BZebra@aol.com](mailto:BZebra@aol.com).

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#### EASY ACCESS TO BOBBIE'S BLOGS

Read creative writing tips as well as some of my personal experiences. Access the Write In Style blog here: <https://www.zebraeditor.com/blog/>

On the other hand, for my relationship-related blog, see my blog titled "Neurotica: Crazy Stories of Love, Lust, and Letting Go." If you like to read about disastrous dates and ridiculous relationships, I've got a ton of them, and they all happened to me. Some are funny, some are a little sexy, some are sad, and all true. My latest addition is a little scary, because it happened when I was only six years old. Read it here: <https://neuroticastories.blogspot.com>.

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#### LARGEST U.S. NONPROFIT LITERARY ORGANIZATION

Yes, Poets & Writers is a bi-monthly magazine, but did you know Poets & Writers, Inc., the publishers of that magazine, is one of the largest nonprofit literary organizations in the United States? The organization is headquartered in New York City. In 1970, the director of New York's famed 92nd Street YM-YWHA Poetry Center, Galen Williams, leveraged seed money from the New York State Council on the Arts to launch a new organization for writers that would provide them with fees for giving readings and teaching workshops. The organization began in an apartment on the fringe of the Theater District. Since that time, Poets & Writers has grown into one of the largest nonprofit organizations in the country for writers of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction.

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Get news, writing-related cartoons, immediate updates, and other good stuff for writers. Like and follow Zebra Communications at <https://tinyurl.com/ydyn3pcu>.

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#### CMOS ONLINE Q & A

This month someone posed the following question to The Chicago Manual of Style Online:

Q. Does the Manual defend "on a case-by-case basis" over "case by case"?

To get the answer to this question and many more based on Chicago style, go to <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/latest.html>.

THE CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE sets the standard in book publishing for issues such as punctuation, capitalization, and much more. If you write fiction or nonfiction books, you will want to know about Chicago style or be sure to use a professional book editor intimately familiar with Chicago style.

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#### BARNES & NOBLE WRITERS FOR WRITERS AWARD

The Barnes & Noble Writers for Writers Award celebrates authors who have given generously to other writers or to the broader literary community. The award is named for Barnes & Noble in appreciation of its long-standing support.

Recipients of the 2019 Barnes & Noble Writers for Writers Award are Reginald Dwayne Betts (for mentoring individuals involved in the criminal and juvenile justice systems and for his efforts to reform these systems); Neil Gaiman (for advocating for freedom of expression worldwide and inspiring countless writers); and Roxana Robinson (for her long-standing, fierce, and outspoken advocacy on behalf of authors).

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RENT A WRITER'S ROOM

Hunter Stockton Thompson (July 18, 1937 – February 20, 2005), an American journalist and author, was the founder of the gonzo journalism movement. His wife has turned the couple's prior home into an Airbnb to raise money for a scholarship in her husband's name. Read the experience of one writer who stayed in Thompson's home.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/12/gonzo-hunter-s-thompson-cabin-airbnb-fear-colorado>

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Because this is a mystery magazine, the stories we buy must fall into that genre in some sense or another. We are interested in nearly every kind of mystery: stories of detection of the classic kind, police procedurals, private eye tales, suspense, courtroom dramas, stories of espionage, and so on. We ask only that the story be about a crime (or the threat or fear of one). We sometimes accept ghost stories or supernatural tales, but those also should involve a crime.

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"For fiction, send a query letter with outline and three sample chapters, resume, and SASE. For nonfiction send a query letter with complete description of subject, at least one chapter, resume, and SASE. Queries may be sent via regular mail or email. Please do not submit queries via UPS or Federal Express. Please do not send attachments with email queries Please incorporate the chapters into the body of the email." Accepts simultaneous submissions. Responds in less than one week generally to a full query and six weeks to a full ms.

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For full guidelines see <https://arsenalpulp.com/About-Arsenal-Pulp-Press/Submission-Guidelines>

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Deadline: 18th of each month.

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