

What Not to Do According to a Series of High School English Teachers

By Alicia Katz

Teachers tell me no. Throughout my high school career, teachers have all but thrown my papers back in my face with statements like “too many prepositions,” “wrong punctuation placement” and “doesn’t make sense.” Most of these, I admit, are valid criticisms. I will be the first person to tell you that my writing is far from perfect and I do not believe in the coddling of children as a way of teaching. Having said all of that, I find myself frustrated because after years of instruction I continue making mistakes and not feeling as though I am improving. For years I have been told what not to do when writing. Now I’ll share these same “rules” with you while simultaneously breaking them.

1) Do not use the first person and address the audience.

I am sure you have heard this one before. When you wish to be persuasive or make a strong point, it is not about you, but rather the subject. Now, this rule is beneficial to writers at the beginning of their careers. It keeps phrases like “I think” in the mind rather than on the paper. I have also been told to incorporate the first person into my writing and that personal anecdotes can increase the appeal when writing. So, really, you can tell me which is right.

2) Do not use an excessive amount of adjectives and adverbs.

Describing ideas using anything besides nouns and verbs is tantamount to lying in the eyes of some teachers. Every adverb and adjective written must be proved in order to be considered true. So, I am left with articles, nouns, verbs, and prepositions to carry me through my writing, unless I wish to prove my use of a certain adjective or adverb, which more often than not leads me on a useless tangent that clutters my writing. It seems silly to neglect some of the most beautiful words in our language based on their subjectivity.

3) Do not end a sentence with a preposition.

Does anyone really know the purpose of this one? I mean, I’m sure there is one, but to me it seems that leaving a preposition at the end of a sentence is informal. I’ve finished many sentences with a dangling preposition before. See? Not the end of the world? Still, even when reading someone else’s work or listening to someone else speak, I become mildly irritated when he/she ends a sentence using a preposition.

These are only three of the many rules that I have been told, over and over and over again. I know these rules. I know the preferences of specific teachers. Despite all of this, I make the same mistakes over and over and over again. The problem then lies in the method. I am told what not to do, but not once am I told what to do.