

Stravaganza: City of Stars is a delightful read. I would guess that, just like me, the young adults for whom Hoffman is writing will wait impatiently for the next opportunity to see what has

happened to the budding love of Arianna and Lucian and to the lives of their friends.

Mary Hoffman. 2003. New York: Bloomsbury. 453 pp. ISBN 1-58234-839-1. US\$16.95.

Classroom materials

Jeanne McGlinn

Materials for review should be sent to Jeanne McGlinn, University of North Carolina–Asheville, One University Heights, Asheville, NC 28804, USA. Comments about the column may be sent to jmcglinn@unca.edu.

Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction

Reviewed by Mary Alm, University of North Carolina–Asheville, North Carolina, USA.

Warning: I love this book. Any quibbles I have are not worth reporting, so what you are about to read is an argument about why you should buy and read this helpful guide to teaching grammar.

Ed Schuster has done his homework. *Breaking the Rules* is well grounded both theoretically and practically. Schuster cites the work of linguists; composition theorists; education scholars; editors; and writers—dozens and dozens of writers—of fiction, literary nonfiction, and even textbooks. He has also taught extensively—in public schools, two-year colleges, and universities—everyone from children to practicing teachers. You place yourself in experienced hands when you turn to Schuster for help understanding what to do about English grammar instruction.

When I was in graduate school in composition and rhetoric, I had a professor who continually exhorted us to “Think about it.” She typically

said that after pointing out an example of illogic—such as “How can students improve as writers if they are never given the chance to revise? Think about it.” Well, Schuster is cut from the same cloth. He doesn’t just raise questions, he tests all his theories through research, either his own or that of others. For example, he tells us that the 1941 edition of *Harbrace Handbook of English* lists 280 usage errors; in the 1998 edition, 77% of those “errors” are no longer on the list (pp. 66–67). What does that say about usage as preference rather than hide-bound rule? Think about it.

While 80% of all punctuation is periods and commas, what about the other 20%? How about semicolons, colons, dashes, and parentheses? (Never asked yourself? That’s another delight of Schuster—he has a curious mind, and—yes—I mean both inquisitive and odd.) When he counts up these punctuation marks in 10 Writers on Writing columns from *The New York Times*, he finds colons in first place (55 instances), dashes in second place (46), then parentheses (37), and finally semicolons (26). His conclusion? “To develop modern punctuation skills in our students,” he says, “we must teach colons, dashes, and parentheses. All appear to be used notably more frequently than semicolons” (p. 160). Yet, which do

we focus on in our classes? If you're as traditional as I, we're still trying to help our students master semicolon use. After statistics like these, I suggest we "think about it" some more.

Tradition is, of course, at the crux of the matter. Schuster calls the sort of grammar instruction I've just alluded to TSG—Traditional School Grammar—and he is clear from the get-go what he thinks of it. "[T]raditional grammar traditionally taught," he tells us in his introduction, "is an utter failure" (p. xviii). The rest of his book pretty much bears out that claim. But we should not read the rest of the book to be discouraged but rather to be enlightened and assisted in making some necessary changes in the way we teach.

In his first chapter, he provides primers on contemporary knowledge about language acquisition and the history of grammar teaching. If you know little about these topics, you will be well educated by these 18 pages. The next four chapters treat grammar, usage, writing, and punctuation. In the grammar chapter, Schuster demonstrates that the definitions we have inherited about parts of speech do not define them in any way that might be useful to a learner. (His appendix contains a helpful set of lessons for teaching the parts of speech, offering an approach based on contemporary linguistic understanding instead of TSG.)

The next chapter on usage is perhaps my favorite. The chapter begins by distinguishing descriptive and prescriptive rules and moves on to examine the possible authorities to which one might appeal when enforcing the rules. Schuster accepts standard English as final arbiter, but he exercises care when doing so. As he says, it may be "foolish to ignore" the many people who defend this standard, but it is also wise to recognize that "[t]here are often *degrees* of correctness, and they run in a continuum, from what have been called *status-marking errors* on the one extreme to 'error' recognized as erroneous *only* by those who get their authority from celestial spheres on the other" (p. 55). Schuster declares, "We must begin

by respecting the students' own dialect" and then shows us how to help students learn standard English without forcing them to be "disloyal to or destructive of their native culture" (p. 63). The chapter ends with a glossary of 27 commonly confused words accompanied by clever mnemonic aids to pass on to our students.

Schuster's chapter on "Liberating the Student Writer" attacks the myth of "a golden age when students wrote much better than our students do today" (p. 91). The first classroom activity recommended in this chapter is designed to demonstrate that today's students can (and do) write quite well (pp. 98–100). After a list of common-sense general "suggestions for helping students become better writers" (p. 104)—for example, assign writing frequently and provide feedback—Schuster moves on to review specific "rules" of writing and recommend those we should continue to uphold (darn few!) and those we should relax (most).

His final chapter on punctuation is structured the same way as those that came before. First, we get a historical glimpse at the topic, then we get down to the nuts and bolts of helping students master punctuation. It is in this chapter in particular that we enjoy the benefits of Schuster's favored "test of correctness," namely "the favorite writer test" (p. xii). He recommends that we always test what we "know" about grammar, usage, writing, and punctuation against the practice of contemporary nonfiction writers. Did you know that "English is the only language that assigns double duty to the apostrophe" (p. 185)? Well, it is, and that's one of the reasons students have trouble learning to use what Schuster renames the "apoptrophe" for possession (p. 183).

In this brief overview, I've tried to give you a taste for *Breaking the Rules*. I found the book so engaging that, instead of skimming the many exercises, I read through them word by word. I wanted to educate myself *and* prepare myself to "liberate" the writers who come under my instruction.

Edgar H. Schuster. 2003. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. 229 pp. ISBN 0-325-00478-1. US\$25.00.

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