

October 1995

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Recommended Citation

Lane, Barry and Bodimeade, Miles (1995) "Grammarnoa," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol29/iss1/8>

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Grammarnois



COMMENTARY BY **BARRY LANE**; ILLUSTRATION BY **MILES BODIMEADE**

He was in his office late at night. He was writing. There were three loud raps on the door. He scratched out sentences. He hid paper under the file cabinet. He pulled the paper from his typewriter and stuffed it in his mouth.

The door exploded open and two men barged in. Both wore tweed sportcoats with wrinkled copies of Strunk & White in the breast pocket. They stood in a cloud of chalk dust, flailing their red Flairs.

"Grammar Police. Drop the pen!"

They flashed their IDs. Both full professors. Harvard '56, Columbia '64. They yanked the piece of yellow second copy from his mouth and ransacked the drawers.

"Run-ons," the older one said, scoring his pen over the wrinkled piece of paper.

"Comma splices," the other man said. "Gerunds everywhere."

They rolled the teacher away from the desk and faced him against the wall.

"But I take a process-oriented approach," the teacher said.

"Sure buddy, we've heard that before. Spell *necessary*."

"I'm not spelling anything till I see my lawyer."

"Punctuate this sentence."

They shoved a piece of paper into his lap. "The man who was happy eating Wheaties liked other cereals too."

"I'm not punctuating anything."

"How long have you been teaching at this university?"

"A year."

"Put it in a complete sentence."

"I have been teaching at this university a year."

"Put it in the plu perfect."

"I taught ..."

"Book him."

"But this is only a first draft."

"Sure buddy, and we're going on our first little ride downtown. Maybe you can have a little talk with the spelling squad, too. Spell *necessary*."

"It begins with ne-," he said.

"You hear that, Joe? We've got a real Phi Beta Kapa on our hands here."

They laughed as they slid bits of crinkled paper into their manila envelopes.

"You can't do this. There's nothing wrong with being ungrammatical as long as you do it in the privacy of your own room with a consenting piece of paper."

They thumbed through their Strunk & White's in unison.

"Listen to this, Meathead. 'There is no excuse for grammatical ambiguity!'"

"But what about content? What about subject? What about voice? What about me?"

They clamped two steel parentheses over his wrists.

"We'll deal with you, don't worry."

In the squad car on the way to the station, they asked him how he could expect to teach college Freshmen to write when he could barely punctuate a sentence himself. He was silent, his mind recalling all the spelling bees from which he was eliminated in the first round; his eyes peering through the gallons of red ink to every essay he had ever handed a teacher.

"I was a victim of an ungrammatical childhood," he told the judge. "My mother spoke in fragments. My father always hesitated in mid-clause. In their eyes, I

was parenthetical. I lived between the commas."

The Judge wore a commencement robe and mortar board. Hanging from the tassles were dashes, semi-colons, periods.

"Spell *necessary*," he said.

"Hopeless."

"No, *necessary*."

"Impossible."

"No, *necessary*."

He had looked up the word at least three thousand times in his lifetime and he still could not be sure if there were one c and two s's or one s and two c's. He closed his eyes and imagined the firing squad — ten high school English teachers with horn-rimmed glasses and eraser-pink ears. They loaded their red-pencil rifles with steel commas and colons. His hooded body slumped meekly in the chair.

"Long live meaning," he would cry at the last moment, or "Substance over form forever."

"N-e-c-"

In his mind there were two c's, but suddenly, at the very last moment, one of them floated away like a balloon into the stratosphere.

"-e-s-s-a-r-y. Necessary."

"Indeed, *necessary*," the Judge said.

He was paroled the next morning and was last seen chasing run-ons through a parking lot in New Jersey.

Reprinted from The Portfolio Sourcebook, by Barry Lane and Andrew Green. Vermont Portfolio Press, P.O. Box 264, Shoreham, Vermont 05770, 1-800-613-8055.

