Appendix A

YES, YOU MAY
But Not Everyone Agrees

In education, we often have a tendency to restrict, reduce, or simplify in order to make the overwhelming task of teaching more manageable. Introducing young people to the chaotic world of formal language usage—reading and writing—often makes such restrictions and reductions seem unavoidable.

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The discipline of English is plagued with “rules” and prohibitions that make no grammatical or logical sense but nonetheless persist, causing millions of students to be prosecuted for crimes that don’t even exist. I list below some writing strategies that good writers regularly engage in despite many English teachers’ admonitions that “you can’t do that.”

I wish I could say that, keeping in mind the qualifications I make below, you could do these forbidden things any time you wanted to, and you could encourage your students to do the same. Unfortunately, superstitions and bad information die hard, and you may well run into a boss or a professor—yes, conceivably even an English professor—who believes in the prohibitions that make this handout necessary. (A respected business administration professor once told me that he marked things wrong on his students’ papers because his fourth grade teacher had marked them on his.) And while none of these things is “wrong,” you may sometimes find ways to revise when you question your use of them—“Does the sentence sound bad because I ended it with a preposition?” As is true for writing in general, you need to know your audience and be ready, for example, to stop using contractions if that’s what your audience wants. When in doubt, ask your audience.

1. You may use “I.” Writing with “I” is often more direct, lively, concise, and honest than stating something any other way. Fiction
writers, poets, and essayists have been exploring the value of the first person singular for centuries, yet often teachers ban it from their classrooms. There are times when “I” is inappropriate—when your name won’t appear on a document or other names will, and in certain kinds of scientific and technical writing. But in recent years, “I” has been showing up more often even in academic articles and scientific reports. Before you reject using “I,” be sure you have a good reason.

2. You may use “you.” Sometimes—as is the case with this book—the writer has a clear sense of the audience and speaks directly to them, and “you” seems like the only natural way to go. If you’re giving directions or instructions, you’re almost forced to employ at least an understood “you.” But you can overdo it; I usually change to “we” if I can, so I’m perceived as part of the audience, not looking down on it.

3. You may start a sentence with anything you want. Some teachers still say “Don’t start with ‘and’ or ‘but,’” even though thirty-five years ago, Francis Christensen showed that a significant percentage of the sentences of well-known, respected writers do. Because they fear fragments, some teachers prohibit sentences that start with “because.” But that doesn’t make much sense either. Students have been told “never start with a numeral,” but Toni Morrison began Beloved, “124 was spiteful,” and won a Nobel prize. I’m not sure you can legitimately start a sentence with “me,” but Dylan did it: “Me, I busted out, don’t even ask me how.”

4. You may use contractions. Believe it or not, I once quit a job over this tiny issue. When I went in for my yearly discussion with the dean, he gave me back my most recent memo with three or four contractions circled in red. He proceeded to tell me that contractions weren’t appropriate for business writing and would never appear in business text books, the Journal, the Times, and several similarly august publications. After an unpleasant twenty minutes, I left and went to the library, where I found contractions in each of the six publications he had mentioned, circled the contractions on photocopies, and put the copies in his box. You may use contractions almost everywhere, but you’ll still run into lots of people—and perhaps some very stuffy journals—who think you can’t.
5. **You may end a sentence with a preposition.** In response to the “rule” banning such prepositions, Winston Churchill is supposed to have said something like “that is the kind of arrogant pedantry up with which I shall not put,” showing how awkward sentences can sound when the writer moves the preposition(s) from the end to the middle of the sentence. Some credit E.B. White with the greatest rule-breaking sentence I know: “Why did you bring that book that I was going to be read to out of up for?” Unnecessary prepositions at the ends of sentences do sometimes sound awkward: “Where did you park the car at?” But many modern grammarians consider some prepositions—like “up with” in the phrase “put up with” to be part of the verb and therefore necessary to it.

6. **You may write one-sentence paragraphs.**

   If you write lots of them, especially in a row, your writing and your thought will seem to be superficial, skimming along the surface of ideas. But a one sentence paragraph following a series of longer paragraphs can be dramatic, with an effect similar to that of an exclamation point. Used sparingly, short paragraphs can be very effective.

7. **You may split infinitives.** You may not know what an infinitive is and therefore wouldn’t know how to split one, so this may not be worth thinking about. To boldly go into this territory may incur the wrath of traditionalists, who consider a split infinitive to be a sign of sloppiness or bad taste. This prohibition may have developed because you can’t split an infinitive in Latin, and English grammarians liked to borrow rules from Latin, to make English seem more proper.