

HOLD ON LOOSELY

It's the secret to good editing.

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

ONCE A QUARTER, AS *GRAVY'S* PRINT DEADLINE approaches, I send Melissa Hall a Slack message to the effect of, "What should I write my editor's note about?" For this issue, one of her suggestions was "the frustrating and exciting reality of having a job that you can never actually master." After resolving not to interpret this as a passive-aggressive performance review, I decided to lean into that prompt, coupled with this one, buried near the end of the list: "why editing matters."

I hoped to find inspiration in a paperback that had been lurking on my shelf for nearly a year: *Dreyer's English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style* by Benjamin Dreyer, the copy chief of Random House. Boy, did it deliver. I've referred to Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* over the years, and I respect its advice, but it wouldn't occur to me to read it cover to cover. That's just what I did with *Dreyer's English*, guffawing obnoxiously along the way. If you have little interest in the finer points of English prose usage and style, come for the humor. Some of Dreyer's jokes verge on catty. Others are dirty—no verging about them. Early on, there is a joke in flowchart form, the punchline of which is that you are only allowed

to use the phrase "should of" if your name is Flannery O'Connor.

Once you've had your fill of laughter, stay for the advice, even if you're not an editor. It's clear, useful, and deftly illustrated with examples from classic literature as well as from Dreyer's own decades of experience.

I'm doing my best to avoid Dreyer's list of "wan intensifiers and throat clearers," which includes plenty of duds I reach for too often: very, rather, really, just, so, pretty, and quite. I'm clicking over to the dictionary tab in my browser, making sure I deploy my chosen terms with accuracy. So far this week, I've looked up urbane, visceral, inveterate, parse, and droll. None made the cut for this piece.

I imagine someone reading this will interject with an assumed criticism along the lines of, "But language changes!" or "But rules are made to be broken!" To which I reply: Sit down. And also: Read the darn book. And most importantly: He thought of that. At no point does Dreyer suggest that language is, or should be, staid or static. Even as it changes, and even if you're not sure how you feel about some of those changes (an uncertainty he admits to on a few points), you can find elegant and consistent ways to proceed. What Dreyer

Svetazil/Adobe Stock

advocates for, and what his experience bears out, is a dance of convention, clarity, consistency, and voice. He takes pleasure in precision, and he knows that careful readers do, too. To that end, he doesn't seek to flatten or conventionalize an author's voice, but to help it emerge as the truest manifestation of itself. He doesn't subscribe to arbitrary rules, embracing only those that render language clearer, tighter, or stronger.

As funny as Dreyer is when he's delivering a sick burn, he's endearingly realistic about knowing when to let authors have their way. Correctness is a beautiful thing, but a wise editor doesn't wield it like a bludgeon. He or she suggests, then steps back.

Dreyer admits it took him years

to get here. Me, too.

The older I get, the more I'm reminded that control is almost always an illusion, and that its pursuit tends to devolve into frustration. Six years into parenthood and three years since the beginning of a paradigm-shifting pandemic, I've made progress on accepting these truths. I still have ample room for improvement.

Yet I still get a thrill from the finer points of comma placement and the correct application of en-dashes. I'm privileged and delighted to work with colleagues who feel the same way. None of us can control much. But if we're going to try to make sense of our world by writing about it, let's make that writing as clear, as precise, and as powerful as it can be. I'll do what I can to help. 🍷



I read *Dreyer's English* cover to cover, guffawing obnoxiously along the way.