

15

Questions and Answers

Q: *Is the main purpose of using these pyrotechnics to make the writing livelier?*

A: It's one of them. But the ultimate goal is to make the writing work better. Writing is a matter of putting words in a particular order to create the effect you want. The pyrotechnics described in this book give the writer a new set of tools to help create the desired effect.

Q: *It sounds like you are saying that when it comes to teaching kids about language, teachers should teach experimentation and play instead of conventions.*

A: No. Imagine this continuum for teaching students about words/language:

Conventions ————— **Exploration**
 (Rules, definitions) (Play, experimentation)

Where should teachers direct our energies?

I say: both.

I don't suggest that we should abandon teaching traditional language content (grammar, spelling, usage, vocabulary, etc.). But I do urge teachers to make language play a bigger part of the writing curriculum. The best way to ensure that kids learn about language is to encourage them to roll up their sleeves, appropriate it, make it their own. We need to promote play over mastery—at least at first—and recognize that for many young learners play is the surest means toward mastery.

Q: *Whenever you teach a craft lesson is there a danger of oversimplifying writing, turning writing into a recipe?*

A: Yes. Creating an effective piece of writing is more than adding the right literary spices: a dash of alliteration, a half-cup of metaphors, a tablespoon of not-too-ripe onomatopoeia. As the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz* put it: These things must be handled delicately. We must make sure that none of us lose sight of the real goal—to create stronger, more effective writing that fulfills the desired purpose. The language play should never be done for its own sake, but rather should serve the story as a whole.

Q: *Whenever I introduce a new writing strategy my students tend to overdo it. What if that happens with these pyrotechnics?*

A: Expect that they *will* overdo it. For example, once you allow them to use sentence fragments in a story, you'll find fragments all over their writing for a few weeks. That's a typical stage in learning—we all tend to overuse a skill or strategy immediately after we learn it. Eventually students will learn to integrate it appropriately and strategically, and it will become just one more tool in their repertoire as writers.

Q: *You are advocating inventing words and breaking the rules of sentences. But isn't there some value in linguistic conformity?*

A: Yes. As a matter of fact, Tom Romano told me a revealing story that touches on this very issue. He and his wife took their three-year-old daughter to a plaza in Italy with a lovely fountain. When Mariana saw it, the child got very excited.

“Jumping water!” she exclaimed.

Later Tom related this story at an inservice workshop. The teachers murmured appreciatively.

“That is precocious for a three-year-old,” one teacher allowed. “But if your daughter is still saying ‘jumping water’ when she’s eleven, well, they’ll sign her up for remedial help.”

It’s a fair point. At some point Mariana should know that the correct word is *fountain*. Part of a teacher’s job is to make sure that all the students learn a common vocabulary for the world around them. It can certainly be argued that linguistic conformity is a legitimate goal and integral to a smoothly functioning society.

But there can be a cost to this, too. When this idea is taken to extremes we end up with lockstep uniformity. In our rush to establish a common vocabulary and make sure students are “at grade level,” I fear that we are devaluing the richness and diversity of their language, eliminating what might be fresh and interesting if it is even slightly out of the box or irregular.

Q: *Wouldn't it be better for teachers to spend precious time and energies encouraging students to work instead of play?*

A: I'll answer that question in two ways. On a philosophical level, I believe that those two terms may be more similar than you might think. Imagine a jazz trio as the musicians riff off each other, improvising, trying to concoct a new variation on a familiar melody. Or picture Michael Jordan flying through the air, his tongue hanging out, trying to decide at the last moment if he should pass to a teammate or flip the ball up to the basket. Are these people working or are they playing? It seems to me that, at the highest level, play and work become almost indistinguishable.

On a practical level, I believe it comes down to engagement. When kids play, they are engaged. And when they are genuinely engaged, they learn. I am a constructivist. Kids learn by actively doing—not by having things done to them.

Q: *Your book puts a lot of emphasis on puns and double meanings. Why?*

A: For one thing, it's a very accessible kind of language play. Puns rain down on students every day: on TV, in ads, on bumper stickers and license plates, and in songs. Since they are so ubiquitous, puns are natural portals for helping students to experiment with language. One of the unexpected pleasures in writing this book was being able to renew contact with James Heffernan, who was one of my English professors when I was at Dartmouth.

“The pleasures provoked by wordplay are similar to those provoked by figurative language,” Heffernan said. “Both involve a double play, and it's always fun to see two things being done at once, different meanings crossing at one verbal intersection. Wordplay subverts the assumption that every word has a fixed and determinate reference shared by all speakers of that language. But many words, of course, have more than one meaning, and Lewis Carroll (among many others) had a fine time with this plurivocity.”

Q: *Do metaphors and similes fall into the category of pyrotechnics? When I talk to my students about similes during our poetry unit, their eyes seem to glaze over. Help!*

A: Metaphors and similes certainly are pyrotechnics, but in many classrooms these terms have been overexposed. That's unfortunate. They should be front and center in any writer's toolbox because they are fundamental ways to create something new and memorable. Maybe we need to revisit the way we talk about these terms. And let's make sure students understand that metaphors and similes are not confined to poetry but can be used in every other kind of writing, as well.

Q: *Do you have any thoughts on how to help my students pick up on the power of metaphor?*

A: We need to share with our students examples of metaphors from literature, of course. We should also scour our classroom for student samples. Let them see their peers using them. And we should also share them from our own lives. It's my belief that the best metaphors are intensely personal.

When my son Robert was in third grade he scraped together thirty-five dollars for Christmas presents. That was a huge sum of money for him, but precious little for all the Christmas presents he needed to buy for our large family. My sister Kathy volunteered to take Robert shopping.

"The money I've saved is my robot," Robert observed to Kathy when they arrived at the mall. "Every time I buy a present, one part of the robot's body gets destroyed."

First Robert purchased a present for me: a blank notebook. As he handed over five dollars to the clerk, he cracked to Kathy, "Well, there goes an arm."

After buying a CD for his brother Adam, Robert sighed and muttered, "There goes a leg."

Later, when he bought drawing pencils for JoAnn, he told Kathy, "There goes the body." Soon all the money was gone.

That night at dinner, Kathy wanted a few minutes to eat and asked Robert if he might babysit her infant son for a half hour.

"I'll pay you," she told Robert.

This made his face brighten up.

"Hmm," he mused with a sly smile. "I see a robot, reconstructed."

Robert is nineteen now, but even today when he is a bit short of money I'll hear him remark: "I really need to rebuild my robot."

Q: *The administrators in my district seem to care about one thing only: test scores. Our faculty meetings are spent disaggregating test data, not my idea of a fun time. How can I reconcile teaching pyrotechnics with the grinding reality of tests?*

A: It may be that these pyrotechnics go against the current current. Curriculum mandates and standardized tests are a double whammy that have changed writing classrooms and, I'm afraid, not for the better. When I visit classrooms around the United States and abroad, it seems like real choice is disappearing. I am dismayed to see so much formulaic writing. This has impacted the energy level in the classroom. Lots of young writers—especially boys—seem turned off.

Sure, we want our students to be competent writers when they leave our classrooms. But this competence must come with voice. The language must have energy, juice. The pyrotechnics in this book can provide that spark. Personally, I would trade ten error-free essays that put me to sleep for one written with genuine voice and bold, striking language. Even if it contains a fragment. Or other error.

My niece, Rebecca, has a sign in her kitchen that reads, "Love is like bread—it has to be made fresh every day."

Writing is like that. Teaching, as well. You cannot fall back on any paint-by-number scheme. You have a responsibility to renew the language every time you write—and every time you teach.

