SARAH'S WRITING TIP SHEETS

Adapted from some of my college course handouts
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1. **DRAFTING: Getting the words out**

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WRITING TIP SHEET #1: DRAFTING
Getting the words out
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"Too often I wait for the sentence to finish taking shape in my mind before setting it down. It is better to seize it by the end that first offers itself, head or foot, though not knowing the rest, then pull: the rest will follow along."
—Andre Gide

"If writers had to wait until their precious psyches were completely serene, there wouldn't be much writing done.
—William Styron

"...one should lower his standards until there is no felt threshold to go over in writing."
—William Stafford

"How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"
—E. M. Forster

Consider the writing strategy of psychologist Ivan Vaughan, the author of a 1986 memoir about life with Parkinson's disease. Like other Parkinson's sufferers, Vaughan experienced not only physical tremors and rigidity, but also a constant mental toggling between drug-enhanced speed and disease-induced slowness.

When Vaughan was under the influence of the Parkinson's drug L-DOPA, writes neurologist Oliver Sacks in a *New Yorker* article (August 23, 2004), his "imagination and his mental processes seemed to flow more freely and rapidly, and he had rich, unexpected associations of every sort…." As a writer, Vaughan liked to do all of his composing during these times of uninhibited mental activity.

As the effects of the drug wore off, though, Vaughan's mind slowed down. At that point, he would shift from a state of headlong inventiveness into one of "care and caution, a sober and critical stance." His powers of discrimination and judgement overtook his intellectually adventurous tendencies. At this point, writes Sacks, Vaughan would "find himself in a perfect state to prune the sometimes too exuberant prose he had written while he was 'on.'"

Vaughan's mental roller coaster, if extreme, sheds light on the shifts that all writers undergo. Most people have at least occasional moments of relatively quick thinking and uninhibited creativity, when ideas connect in fresh ways and insights flow into sentences and paragraphs. For some of us, this happens mainly when we are writing for our own satisfaction—as in a journal entry or a letter to a trusted friend.

And then there are times when the drive to create stalls out under the forbidding glare of an internal editor. We become more concerned with the effect our prose may have on an audience than with the process of using language to shape and express ideas.

When we have a draft already in hand, we can use the mental ruthlessness of the editor's stance to attack our own rough-hewn prose with critical vigor. But if the aim is to compose, we may stare unhappily at an empty page—our creative impulses throttled by faultfinding or censoring thoughts.

Free-writing
Writers require both of these mental states—that of the creator and that of the editor—each at

different times. We need the ability to draft promising new work, and also to prune, polish, and re-frame rough material. For most writers, the greatest challenge is to call up the creative capacity on demand, and to stay clear of internal critics and censors until we need them.

Fortunately, most of us, unlike Ivan Vaughan, don't need to rely on mind-altering drugs to conjure the creative spirit. There's a time-honored trick for this: it's called "free-writing." It's been described, sometimes under other names, by many an eloquent writer and teacher, from Peter Elbow to Natalie Goldberg to Anne Lamott to Brenda Ueland, to name a few. I recommend perusing their books and articles for a more in-depth discussion. What follows should suffice, though, to get you drafting energetically and productively.

Free-writing has a straightforward premise: Everybody has something to say and the ability to say it, but the mental wellspring may be blocked by apathy, self-criticism, resentment, anxiety about deadlines, fear of failure or censure, or other forms of resistance. The rules of free-writing enable a writer to build up enough momentum to blast past any blocks into uninhibited flow. In fact, some writers refer to the free-writing process as "blast-drafting" or "spilling."

You can free-write on paper or at a computer. If you choose the latter, try closing your eyes while you write, or darkening the screen so that you can't see the words landing there (assuming you can touch-type); this helps keep your focus on the free flow of thoughts rather than on results. Free-writing is all about loosening and limbering the thought process, not about a product or a performance.

Here are the essential rules:

-Give yourself a time limit. Write for one or ten or twenty minutes, and then stop.

-Keep your hand moving until the time is up. Do not pause to stare into space or to read what you've written. Write quickly but not in a hurry.

-Pay no attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation, neatness, or style. Nobody else needs to read what you produce here. The correctness and quality of what you write do not matter; the act of writing does.

-If you get off the topic or run out of ideas, keep writing anyway. If necessary, write nonsense or whatever comes into your head, or simply scribble: anything to keep the hand moving.

-If you feel bored or uncomfortable as you're writing, ask yourself what's bothering you—and write about that. Sometimes your creative energy is like water in a kinked hose, and before thoughts can flow on the topic at hand, you have to straighten the hose by attending to whatever is preoccupying you.

-When the time is up, look over what you've written, and mark passages that contain ideas or phrases that might be worth keeping or elaborating on in a subsequent free-writing session.

"Not-Writing"
UC Santa Cruz Environmental Studies Professor Daniel Press uses an effective personal brand of free-writing that he calls "Not-Writing." This is Daniel's way of circumventing the internal critic, whom he has dubbed "Uncle Sid." Uncle Sid is that

annoying (real or imaginary) relative who is constantly peering over your shoulder when you write, finding fault with what you're saying and how you're saying it before you have barely begun.

Here's how Daniel gets Uncle Sid off his back. When he has an article or book chapter or other document to write, he sidles past his computer from time to time over the course of a day, saying to himself: "I don't have time to *Write* that piece now, but I have some thoughts about what I will want to say when I *do* write it. I'll just jot those down here… *I'm Not Writing!* I'm just making a few notes."

If, like Daniel, you can fool your inner critic into believing that what you are doing is *not* that scary thing called Writing, you can get a lot of good ideas and information sketched out in painless fashion. A few days of Not Writing can even cure a case of procrastination and result in a decent first draft.

Extracting Ore
Keep in mind that in free-writing, you are not aiming to produce a finished product of the sort you would necessarily want to share with anyone. Rather, you are mining the raw material of what you know and don't know, what you think and wonder and suspect. Gradually, through accumulation and revision, you will refine and shape this material into a piece of writing.

Just like silver earrings and steel structures, ideas and the words to express them begin as scattered, unshaped deposits hidden under the visible surface of the world. Only through energetic extraction, purification, and heating are these crafted into objects that have shape and meaning.

This is as true for experienced professional writers as it is for students. In fact, it applies to creative activity in just about any field.

Generating Garbage

For example, a novelist friend of mine who studied landscape photography under the great Ansel Adams once discovered, alone in Adams' studio one day, that the photographer's garbage can was filled with negatives. When my friend began examining these, she realized that the discarded photos were actually quite mediocre—nothing like the stunning compositions for which Adams is famous.

My friend experienced a little creative epiphany: Ansel Adams was a great photographer, she realized, in part because *he allowed himself to make a lot of lousy photographs.* Making mistakes along the way is an inextricable part of the creative process. If you try too hard to hold back the mediocre images, the dumb ideas and awkward phrases, then you will also obstruct the brilliant insights and eloquent passages. This is why great photographers have big garbage cans and all writers need rough drafts.

When drafting, as André Gide suggests above, it is best just to express a thought quickly, in whatever form it arises in your mind, than to try to get it just right (and in the process, lose the heart of the idea). The better you get at lowering your expectations in the initial stages of a writing project, the better your ultimate chances of producing an excellent final draft.

WRITING TIP SHEET #2: EDITING GROUPS
Giving and receiving effective feedback
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"No matter how productively you managed to get words down on paper or how carefully you have revised, no matter how shrewdly you figured your audience and purpose and suited your words to them, there comes the time when you need feedback."
—*Peter Elbow*

Ponder, for a moment, the essential paradox of writing: It's a necessarily solitary task whose ultimate goal is (usually) communication with others.

There's no getting around the fact that the art of generating, developing, and expressing ideas requires spending time alone with your own thoughts. At some point, you have to go into a private mental space in order to do the nitty-gritty work of composing.

On the other hand, you can't test the finished product on your own. Most writers, no matter how accomplished, have blind spots that prevent them from perfecting their own work. This is why most successful writers, from students to much-published professionals, rely at some point on colleagues to help them refine their drafts.

Providing (and receiving) constructive comments on another's draft is a learned skill, and nobody does it perfectly from the start. Here are some pointers for easing and speeding the learning process.

Notes for Everybody:

• Together, you are making intellectual community. Learn each other's names. Get comfortable; make sure everyone can hear and see each other. Treat each other with interest, attentiveness, and respect.

• Make sure each writer's draft gets equal time. Appoint somebody to keep track, and to let everyone know when the time for a given draft is almost up.

• Take turns reading your drafts aloud while editors follow along on the copies you have provided.

• Editors should make written comments in the margins as they read along. Comments can be brief, and can take the form of questions. Be sure they're legible.

• After a writer has finished reading, leave a bit of time for editors to think over their responses and to clarify or expand on the notes they have made. When everyone is ready, editors should take turns giving oral feedback.

Notes for Editors:

• You are serving as a sample audience, not an evaluator or judge. Don't worry about having something brilliant to say in response to a draft. Just read and listen carefully, trust your gut reactions, and express them constructively.

• Keep in mind that simply reading and/or listening to someone else's work is a big help in itself.

• One of the simplest and most helpful responses is to tell the writer, in language as clear and concise as you can muster, what you understand to be their central idea or argument.

• It helps to couch comments in subjective terms ("I was confused by the introduction because…"), rather than posing them as absolute judgments ("Your introduction is too confusing…").Imagine being the recipient of these two comments, and notice how different they feel.

• Begin with more global comments—e.g. having to do with the paper's overall ideas, argument, and organization—before you turn to more picky or localized feedback.

• It's useful to offer at least one positive, reinforcing comment on each paper, to help writers see how they've succeeded with you as a reader.

• Don't hold back from pointing out what you see as problems. You're not doing your fellow writers any favors through false flattery, or by withholding feedback for fear of hurting someone's feelings. Honest, accurate criticism (tactfully delivered) actually shows *respect* for other writers' intelligence, by implying that you believe in their ability to improve on their own drafts.

• Give *specific* feedback, whether positive or critical. Comments like "You did a great job," "I wish I could write like you," and "I think it's fine the way it is" may stroke a writer's ego, but they don't help with the revising process. If the paper impressed you, identify one or more of the elements you liked, and point to specific examples in the text.

• Keep your feedback focused on the *writing* ("This third paragraph tells me exactly what question you are addressing"), rather than the *writer* ("You're at your clearest in this third paragraph.")

• Avoid becoming sidetracked by conversations about the *topic*, as opposed to the ways in which the writing *addresses* that topic. Keep asking yourself whether the comments you're making are likely to help the writer revise.

Notes for Writers:
• Avoid "on-ramps" or "runways." That is, resist the temptation to explain or apologize for your raft before you begin reading it aloud. You want readers' responses to your writing *as it is.*

• Do feel free to tell editors what kind of feedback would be most useful to you.

• When editors give you feedback, resist the urge to argue or explain. Even if they pose questions that sound as if they demand answers, you need not respond. The most productive response is just to note these down on your draft. You can ponder them later, when you are actively revising.

• After all peer editors have offered comments, feel free to use any remaining time to ask specific questions and solicit further feedback.

• If you find yourself feeling annoyed or defensive in response to editors' comments, remember that *you* are ultimately in charge of your own writing and revising. Listen sagely and receptively to everything your peer editors tell you, and consider it seriously. Then revise based on your own best judgment. You may not decide to act on every comment you receive, but you should never dismiss feedback until you've thought about it.

WRITING TIP SHEET #3: REVISING
Becoming your own best editor
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"Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what one is saying." —John Updike

The prolific novelist James Michener once wrote, "I have never thought of myself as a good writer. Anyone who wants reassurance of this should read one of my first drafts. But I'm one of the world's greatest rewriters."

Regardless of what you think of Michener's work, he has a valuable point. All good writers revise.

Next time you have a letter or a short paper to write, work on it until you believe it's as good as you can make it. Then set it aside for 24 hours.

When you revisit your draft, you will almost certainly see ways to improve it: repetition you can delete, logical glitches you can smooth out, additional points you can incorporate, new ways you can frame your argument. The nature of the writing process requires that you get some distance from your own work in order to revise effectively.

Here are some tips for successful revising:
- Show your draft to others & get feedback.
- Ask (yourself and/or others) where the piece has failed its audience, and tailor it more carefully to your readers.
- Work from big to small: make large-scale changes before polishing the prose.
- Ask what's missing and supply it.
- Ask what's muddled and clarify it.
- Ask what's superfluous and eliminate it.
- Don't hesitate to free-write new material to add in.

- Don't throw the baby out with the bath water: save deletions in a separate file just in case.
- Develop a checklist of personal stylistic bugaboos (wordiness? Unrelenting parades of long, complex sentences? repetition? comma errors?); look for these in final revising.

WRITING TIP SHEET #4: OUTLINES
Organization—in the proper time and place
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"If the subject's too big or weird to think through, draw a map. Make the parts of the subject into rivers and mountain ranges and deserts and towns. If it's still too big, add a whole 'nother province." —David James Duncan, The Brothers K

"I had an outline once, and it took me two years to pull out of it." —Robert Penn Warren

When I was in the third grade, my classmates and I were told to choose one of the United States and write a researched report about it. We were taught how to organize our papers using a strictly ordered outline, which we had to produce before we began writing. The outline scheme looked something like this:

TITLE: ***Florida, the Sunshine State***
I. First Major Subtopic: The Place
    A. Sub-subtopic: a unique state
       1. smaller idea: a coastal state
          a. individual point: beaches
             i. east coast beaches
             ii. west coast beaches
          b. individual point: keys
       2. smaller idea: a hot, wet place
          a. individual point: landscapes
          b. weather
          c. individual point: plants
             i. trees
             ii. shrubs, herbs
          d. individual point: animals
    B. Sub-subtopic: geologic history
       1. Initial formation of the land mass
       2. Shaping of the place we know today

II. Second Major Subtopic: The People…
     (…and so on, in rigidly hierarchical fashion).

Help or Hindrance
A detailed outline like this isn't necessarily a bad idea. When you have amassed all or most of the necessary ideas for a paper, preparing a blueprint can keep your thoughts organized and moving quickly during the drafting process. Hierarchically organized outline formulas like the one above work especially well for "reports" that involve mainly gathering, compiling, and then regurgitating information. With care, this kind of outline can also be adapted to more sophisticated writing projects that involve synthesis, analysis, and original thought.

But beware the premature outline. I have been amazed to learn from current university students that some elementary and middle schools are still teaching the outline format I learned 40 years ago— and that students come away thinking they're *always* supposed to prepare an outline *before* they begin writing. This can cause huge headaches, as can misguided use of the outlining software that comes with word-processing programs. One sure way to stifle the learning-and-writing process is to force ideas into a rigid structure before they're fully formed.

Alternatives to Outlining: Lists
As a way of organizing your thinking in the early stages of a project, before you know exactly what you want to say, try brainstorming freeform lists. Note down, for example, every major idea you can think of that may need to be addressed in your paper, or everything you need to find out or figure out before you can complete the writing. Generate a

slate of questions you want to pursue. List possible supporting examples, illustrating anecdotes, useful metaphors, important source material, and other forms of evidence.

Don't worry at first about the order of items in a given list, or even whether everything you list will end up in the finished paper. Just as with free-writing, it's more important at this stage to *generate* ideas than to organize or perfect them.

Once created, lists can be used to generate free-written drafts on various subtopics.

"Clusters," "Bubbles," and "Mind Maps"
Lists need not be linear. Some people prefer to sketch out their budding ideas in a different format—one that more closely mirrors the way their minds actually work.

In one approach—variously called "clustering," "bubbling," or "mind-mapping"—you write your main topic or question in the middle of a sheet of paper (perhaps inside a drawn circle or "bubble"), then jot down subsidiary ideas on spokes radiating out from that center. Each subordinate idea may end up surrounded by its own corona of ancillary points. The spokes, too, may sprout tributaries. And as new relationships emerge, connecting lines may develop between ideas in different regions of the map.

You can adapt this basic concept in whatever ways make sense for you. A perpetual work-in-progress, a mind-map can help you to develop as well as to visualize your thinking.

"X-Rays"
Some writers suggest using outlines in the later stages of composing, as a tool for checking a paper's logic and flow.

To "X-ray" a draft, summarize the main point of each paragraph in a brief sentence or phrase. Strung together like the vertebrae in a spinal column, these can help you spot missing logical links, catch awkward sequencing of ideas, and envision possible alternative organizational schemes.

An outline can constrict your thought process, or it can free you from confusion and overwhelm. Timing is the key. If (like Robert Penn Warren) you find yourself trying to "pull out of" your own outline, you probably imposed it on your paper too soon.

WRITING TIP SHEET #5: ARGUMENTS
Persuading audiences
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"What is the hardest task in the world? To think."
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Most of us grow up understanding "arguments" to be contentious verbal battles, usually between two people. ("You did *too* eat more than your share of the pie!" "Did *not*!") But in formal writing (and public communication in general), argument emphasizes the careful presentation of a point of view with the aim of convincing someone. While some written arguments might resemble that childhood pie fight, you can argue on paper without presupposing a dissenting reader, and without ever (figuratively) raising your voice.

Think back to a moment when something you heard or read changed your mind about an issue. How did the author of that argument reach you? Can you recall using verbal persuasion yourself to shift somebody else's opinion or behavior? How did you succeed?

As this thought experiment underscores, not all successful arguments are created equal. By definition, argument(as opposed to other forms of persuasion, such as bribery or torture) relies on *reason.* But while some written arguments succeed primarily because of their impeccable logic, others may prevail mainly through humor or verbal charm, or by engaging readers' empathy, or by appealing to their sense of fairness or righteous indignation, or by exploiting their appetites, resentments, or fears—or by some combination of several such devices.

When you sit down to write an argument, especially if you're eager to reach a wide and varied audience, keep a couple of things in mind:

1. Readers are most likely to consider your point of view seriously if they feel you are taking theirs into account. Realize that not everyone knows what you know or thinks the way you think. Provide any information your readers are likely need in order to follow your reasoning. Be sure to anticipate and respectfully address likely counter-arguments from readers who might initially disagree with you. Avoid dismissive or gratuitously negative comments about those who hold other views.

2. In constructing a written argument, you are also projecting a *persona*. Your choice of words, phrasing, content, and tone has the power to engage or alienate a reader—so think deliberately about how you want to come across on paper. Do you want to sound impartial or impassioned? Angry or awe-struck? Diffident, defensive, or ditzy? Earnest and honest or clever and quick? There's a bit of acting involved in composing arguments: read the work of novelist and essayist Edward Abbey for an example of a constructed on-paper persona that doesn't exactly match the author in person. To explore the full range of your potential as a rhetorician, try tapping the various aspects of your personality.

The fact is that almost everything you write, from love letters to business memos to job applications, contains some element of argument. As a writer, whatever else your purpose, you are using words to try to persuade an audience that what you have to say is worth considering.

WRITING TIP SHEET #6: STYLE
Creating prose that commands attention
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"Writing has laws of perspective, of light and shade, just as painting does, or music. If you are born knowing them, fine. If not, learn them. Then re-arrange the rules to suit yourself."
—*Truman Capote*

"If there was poetry in my book about the sea, it is not because I deliberately put it there, but because nobody could write truthfully about the sea and leave out the poetry."
—*Rachel Carson*

Students occasionally ask me how they can develop a more effective writing style. Here are some of my suggestions:

Above all, care about your subject. Choose a topic that heats your blood and quickens your pulse. If you begin with this, the qualities of good style can fall into place; if you don't, no amount of stylistic polishing will save your work. When you are stuck with an assigned topic, find a way to make it matter to you. As Rachel Carson's quote above implies, if you write with care and enthusiasm about something that you find inherently powerful, that power will find its way into your prose.

Use concrete, specific, sensory language. Writing teachers exhort students to "show, not tell," for good reason. You can enliven even the most abstruse academic essays by anchoring abstract ideas in concrete detail. If you want readers to *understand* what you're saying, use images and analogies that help them *see*, *smell*, *hear*, *touch*, and *taste* it.

Tell stories. People learn through storytelling. Most good writing—even academic writing—makes use of narrative.

Write with authority, accuracy, authenticity. To produce writing with muscle, it's not sufficient to choose and combine words adeptly; you need to know whereof you speak. Do the necessary homework, whether it involves field or

book research or conducting interviews—and/or inspecting your own memories, questions, desires, and convictions.

Opt for active verbs. If your prose seems flat and lifeless, try circling all forms of the verb "to be." Then replace most of them with more precise, pertinent, lively verbs.

Avoid "waffle words." If you can't make a point with conviction, don't compensate with terms like "perhaps," "somewhat," "really," and "arguably." These burden and dilute your prose. Bring in needed examples or other supporting material, if necessary. Or ask yourself why you feel uncomfortable with your own assertion. This may lead you to deepen your thinking.

Use adverbs and adjectives sparingly. Choose your nouns and verbs with precision. Let them do the heavy lifting.

Delete unnecessary words. Make each piece of writing as clean, spare, and tight as you can. In revising, aim to express each idea once, the clearest way possible. Part with pet phrases that linger in your drafts without informing or enlightening your audience.

Favor clarity over pyrotechnics; avoid unnecessary jargon. Don't mistake grandiloquence for eloquence. The music in a piece of prose comes not from laying on the verbiage, but from choosing only the most effective words, the most pleasing rhythms, and the ideas worth conveying.

Elevate organization to an art form. Think about the needs of your audience. What do they need to know first? There's no one correct way to organize a piece of writing, but you need to do so deliberately.

Read your work aloud. Many fine writers (Barry Lopez is one) claim never to send a piece out for publication until they have spoken it aloud, or until they have had somebody else read it to them. If the prose doesn't sound musical or feel right on the tongue, it probably won't read well.

Find alternatives to sexist language. Most contemporary academic journals won't publish prose that uses generic masculine pronouns and other archaic forms left over from an unconsciously patriarchal era. You can almost always find a way around awkward gender-neutral phrases, such as

"Every researcher has his or her network of 'friendly' reviewers." Try pluralizing the subject and the pronouns that follow: "All researchers have their networks…."

Vary sentence length and form. Don't get stuck in a rhythmic rut. Awaken your audience with an occasional one- or two-word sentence or a one-sentence paragraph; use longer, more complex phrasing when the ideas demand it. Once in a rare while, you can even spice up a passage with a sentence fragment followed by a period. (Like this one.)

Read all kinds of good writing, with a dictionary at hand. This is the best way I know to develop a rich and powerful vocabulary.

WRITING TIP SHEET #7:
GRAMMAR & PUNCTUATION
Rules to know and, sometimes, to break
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"Oh, the sentence! The shuddering, sinuous, piquant, incandescent, delicate, delirious, sulking, strident possibilities of it all!"
—Karen Elizabeth Gordon

Legend has it that once, when a critic chided Winston Churchill for ending a sentence with a preposition, the Prime Minister replied, "That is the sort of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put."

Or, as an old joke frames it: On orientation day, a college freshman newly arrived in Harvard Yard from the rural South approaches a confident-looking young man dressed in chinos and a polo shirt. "Excuse me, sir," asks the Southerner politely, in thickly-accented tones, "could you please tell me where the administration building is at?"

"*Sir*," retorts the preppy student, haughtily and dismissively, "This is *Harvard*. At Harvard, we do *not* end a sentence with a *preposition*."

"Oh! *Excuse* me, then, sir," the chastised newcomer replies. "Could you please tell me where the administration building is *at——asshole*?"

The point of both stories is, of course, that people sometimes invoke grammatical correctness more as a matter of snooty sticklerism than of clarity or elegance. Sometimes, the music, meaning, and liveliness of written as well as spoken language can actually benefit from the breaking of a few rules.

But at other times, grammar and punctuation truly matter: not only to the style of your prose, but also to its substance. Take a look at the following widely circulated pair of fanciful "Dear John" letters (available on a variety of web sites), identical except for altered punctuation:

1.
Dear John:
I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy - will you let me be yours?

Gloria

2.
Dear John:
I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we're apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?

Yours,
Gloria

As a hypothetical (if absurd) example of a potentially *fatal* punctuation error, consider the cartoon drawing of a busy intersection where there has been a thoroughly devastating collision, with upended wrecked cars smoking amid the rubble. The cause becomes evident when you notice that at some point preceding the collision, somebody added a single comma to the nearby traffic warning sign: "NO, *U* Turn."

Effective use of grammar and punctuation increases both the precision and the complexity of your

sentences; it can enhance their subtlety as well as their clarity. The trick is to learn the rules and understand why they exist—so that you can use *and* break them judiciously.

There are plenty of excellent reader- and writer-friendly grammar handbooks on the market. Use them, and your writing friends, to answer sentence-level writing questions as they come up.

And punctuate your love letters with care.