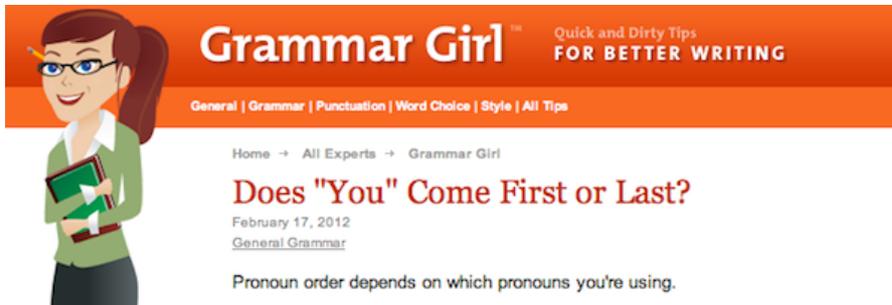# Nieman Journalism Lab

*Pushing to the future of journalism — A project of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard*

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# How 'Grammar Girl' turned a single hobby podcast into a growing media network

*Once Mignon Fogarty developed a formula for an engaging five-minute podcast, extensions into other formats and other subjects came naturally.*

By Simon Owens

Mignon Fogarty thought she'd arrived at the podcasting scene too late. It was 2006, and as a science and technical writer, she was trying to promote a science podcast she hosted, without much success. At first, it simply consisted of Fogarty reading her own science articles out loud and recording them — but then she began interviewing scientists and researchers. "That was really time-consuming and technologically difficult to record interviews," she told me. She promoted it on online forums and even went to colleges and posted fliers, but despite it winning some awards and even being featured in iTunes, the podcast didn't gain much traction.

She was in a coffee shop called The Kind Grind while vacationing on the beach in Santa Cruz when she thought up the Grammar Girl podcast. By now, she'd grown frustrated with her lack of success with the science podcast and was looking for something easier to do. "Because I was working as a technical writer and helping science and technology people write, I would see the same mistakes over and over again," she said. "And so I got the idea of creating this simple, five-minute podcast with a quick tip every week that would help the kind of people I was working with with their writing."

Fogarty jotted her initial ideas on a napkin, and after she got home she recorded three podcasts and posted them. Unlike with her science podcast, she resigned herself to treating this one mostly as a hobby, and so she made little effort to promote it. Nonetheless, within four weeks it had reached the top 100 most-downloaded podcasts on iTunes, and within a couple months it was at number two. Even today, she's not sure what sparked the popularity, but she has a hunch. "I think Grammar Girl just filled a niche," she told me. "There were a lot of science podcasts, but there wasn't another grammar podcast. And what makes Grammar Girl different from a lot of other material out there is that a lot of grammar writing is snarky, and my goal was to really help people, to be friendly and approachable and be slightly entertaining. So I wasn't putting people down in a way that a lot of writing about grammar does."

Fogarty's writing is approachable and easy to digest. A recent podcast starts off: "Grammar Girl here. This week I'm going to talk about why spelling matters." It was a response to a recent piece in Wired arguing that "with new technologies, the way that we write and read (and search and data-mine) is changing, and so must spelling." Though it's obvious that Fogarty disagrees with the article's thesis, she's quick to concede whenever she thinks the Wired author has made a fair point. Fogarty comes off not as a lecturer, but as a referee between two grammar philosophies, acknowledging the ambiguity and nuances that plague English grammar — a language rife with inconsistencies and lacking concrete rules.

Eventually, journalists began to take notice of the podcast. "Writers were excited to see a grammar podcast succeeding," she said. "It helps to get media coverage, and media coverage is created by writers, and writers were intrigued by a successful grammar podcast. So it started getting coverage in the print media first, and the big break was when The Wall Street Journal chose Grammar Girl as their web pick of the day. And that led directly to getting a book deal. Within that first week after that came out, I got called by multiple big New York publishers and agents. Clearly that was the tipping point."

Though Fogarty credits the meteoric rise in success to persistence and love of the material, luck, as with any successful venture, played its part. In between signing a book deal and the actual publication of the book, a producer for Oprah was putting together a segment of the show about grammar. "It turns out that the producer's sister was a fan of my podcast," Fogarty recalled. "So the producer was talking about this segment with her sister and the sister said, 'If you're going to do grammar, you have to get Grammar Girl.' And it turns out another person in their office listened to my podcast and liked it too. And so the producer in one day was told by two people that they had to get Grammar Girl, and so they called me." Prior to the Oprah appearance, Fogarty's publisher rushed out an audiobook version of Grammar Girl, which reached iTunes' best-selling books list after the episode aired.

At this point, Grammar Girl was evolving into a multimedia affair and branching off into other topics besides grammar. In 2007, Fogarty launched the Quick and Dirty Tips podcast network, which was a series of Grammar Girl-style podcasts, like Money Girl and Mighty Mommy. The first podcasters were all Fogarty's friends. When she signed her book deal, she partnered with her publisher, Macmillan, on the Quick and Dirty Tips website "It started with helping with the website, and they were going to do my books and other books for the Quick and Dirty Tips network. And then a couple years after the initial deal, they took a bigger stake and do even more of the work. They do the day-to-day operations, including choosing and hiring the hosts, getting the podcasts produced, editing the transcripts, and keeping the website running. Now we have 15 or more podcasters."

There are now multiple streams of revenue for the network, led by advertising on email newsletters, the website, and the podcasts themselves. There are also the associated books; the free content on the network acts as a major promotional vehicle for the longer print works. Macmillan has published Quick and Dirty books on subjects ranging from nutrition to dog training to algebra.

As the network has expanded, Fogarty has stepped away from the editor-in-chief role, acting as a strategic adviser and focusing on maintaining her Grammar Girl podcast and her brand. She has 190,000 followers on Twitter, 61,000 fans on Facebook, and 4,000 followers on Google+, and she said she spends between 15 and 20 hours a week on her social networks. "I post links to my own work, but I also do a lot of curation," she said. "I post links to other things that I think people who like Grammar Girl would also find interesting…I answer a lot of questions [about grammar], as many as I can, and I think people appreciate that — the fact that I'm there and I'm constantly giving good information. It helps people remember me when they're thinking about buying a book. When they're in a book store and they have four choices and they see mine, I think that helps them remember me fondly and say, 'Hey, maybe I'll buy her book.'"

Of course one of the largest promotional vehicles for her content is Google. The Quick and Dirty Tips network is an SEO utopia, given that it's modeled around short, fact-based

questions — the kind you could imagine someone googling for in search of a quick answer on "affect" vs. "effect" or "lain" vs. "laid."

But though the formula behind the Quick and Dirty network is rather simple, Fogarty cites her passion for the subject matter as the driving force behind the site's success. "I don't think it's something you can do successfully if you don't truly enjoy it," she said. Despite its name, launching a media network like Quick and Dirty Tips is anything but quick and dirty.

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