Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing

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- Why has grammar been such a significant part of writing instruction?
- Does instruction in grammar improve student writing?
- How can grammar best be incorporated into a writing class?

This chapter examines some of the issues surrounding grammar and writing and summarizes what has been learned from the available research. It also suggests several best-practice strategies for effectively incorporating grammar into a writing class.

Writing is difficult. There are many reasons why it is difficult, but one of the more important is that it requires us to do something that doesn't come naturally—attend to linguistic form as we strive to convey meaningful content. The challenge this task presents is perhaps more understandable if we consider spontaneous speech. When we are having a conversation with a friend or colleague, our goal is to communicate a message. Few of us think about the structure of the language we produce or the turn taking it requires—we just talk. For their part, our friends and colleagues don't pay much attention to the structure of our speech because they are likewise focused on the message.

The process appears to work well. We typically finish a conversation feeling, more often than not, that the communication was successful. What's interesting, however, is that a transcript of any conversation suggests that the participants' sense of success may not be based on the communicated message but on fairly unconscious negotiations concerning the psychosocial relationships of the participants. The reason is that the underlying dynamic of our language is social, not the communication of information per se (see Dunbar, 1997).

Transcripts are illustrative in other respects. For example, to those who don't know the context of the conversation, they are often incomprehensible. The participants exchange little explicit information, usually only one or two points that are repeated several times, if the conversation is long enough. In addition, the participants frequently interrupt each other, and the topic may jump without transition to a reference point established in the past that has no explicit connection with the present. Filler—such as um, ah, I mean, you know, and ok—regularly interrupt the flow of words. Among younger speakers, the word like is ubiquitous, generally conveying no meaning and often used with a form of go to replace the word said.
proposing instead that children use their cognitive skill in pattern recognition to identify the grammatical patterns that govern their home language. Cognitive grammar also reverses Chomsky's perspective on the relation between language and mind: language does not provide insight into how the brain operates—understanding how the brain operates provides insight into language.

MODERN GRAMMARS AND WRITING

During the 1960s and 1970s, in what perhaps can be best described as an experiment of sorts, teachers at some public schools replaced traditional grammar with transformational-generative grammar in the hope that it would improve students' writing proficiency. These efforts were short-lived for several reasons, but among the more important was that modern grammars are challenging and require substantial formal education in them to understand fully. Few teacher-credential programs, then or now, provide such training. Furthermore, the move away from prescription to description that transformational-generative grammar entailed was derided by journalists who had no training in linguistics and yet who railed that schools were adopting an "anything goes" policy with regard to grammar and writing.

Today's handbooks contain no features or acknowledgment of modern grammars. A few include a comment related to dialects and how all dialects are legitimate, even grammatical, but such comments seem more aligned with multicultural politics than with the descriptive stance of modern grammars. Consequently, comparing a writing handbook published today with one published in the late 19th century shows that their discussions of grammar are nearly identical.

For Writing and Discussion

Survey students' history of grammar instruction to determine when it began and ended. Ask them to write a couple of paragraphs and then to report how much conscious attention they gave to grammar during writing. Then hold a workshop to analyze the grammatical structure of their paragraphs.

GRAMMAR AND WRITING: THE RESEARCH

The question of whether grammar instruction improves students' writing is an empirical one. That is, we should be able to measure the effect, if any, such instruction has on writing performance. The number of studies examining this question is considerable, although only a small number are unencumbered by design and method problems. Before summarizing these studies, we can use National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data to obtain a broad perspective on writing performance in our public schools.

National Assessment of Educational Progress

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provides regular reports on students' writing performance in grades 4, 8, and 12. Although changes in how results are reported make long-term comparisons difficult, some trends do emerge over the shorter term. The 1984 and 1999 Long-Term Trend Assessment (US Department of Education, 2002) reported a drop between 1984 and 1999 in the amount of homework students were assigned as well as in the amount of time students spent on homework each day (see Table 8.1). There is no evidence, however, that during this period grammar instruction diminished. Just the opposite. As Hudson (2001) reported, an upswing in grammar instruction was fueled by "more enthusiasm in some educational circles for the idea that ... grammar ... could have the ... benefit of improving writing" (p. 1).

The decrease in the amount of homework assigned and the amount completed may be related to the findings of The 1996 Trends in Writing report (US Department of Education, 1996) that between 1984 and 1996 the percentage of run-on sentences in students' writing increased, as did the percentage of sentence fragments and other sentence-level errors. NAEP's 1998 report (US Department of Education, 1999) on writing indicated that only about 25% of 12th graders were capable of producing a coherent, well-developed essay. The writing of the 75% who were not capable of producing such an essay was characterized by the sort of errors that grammar instruction is supposed to eliminate.

The latest NAEP report (US Department of Education, 2010a) showed that students at the lowest level (basic) of performance in grades 8 and 12 realized modest increases in scores between 1998 and 2007. Students at the proficient level also increased their scores between 1998 and 2007, but not between 2002 and 2007. At the advanced level, however, scores declined among 12th graders but were unchanged among 8th graders. More problematic is that between 1998 and 2007 the number of students who scored at the basic level increased significantly. In 1998, 48% of 8th graders wrote at the basic level; in 2007, the figure was 88%. Among 12th graders, the number of students at the basic level of performance rose from 78% to 82%.

Summarizing the Research Connection

A large body of research, going back many years, exists on the grammar/writing connection, and the results are uniform and consistent. In 1963, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer summarized the existing research at that time and reported the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Had homework assigned</th>
<th>Did no homework</th>
<th>Less than 1 hour</th>
<th>1 to 2 hours</th>
<th>More than 2 hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms that the teaching of formal [traditional] grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (pp. 37–38)

In spite of this assessment, the assumed connection between grammar and writing was so ancient and so strong that other researchers continued to investigate the question. White (1965), for example, studied three 7th-grade classes; one class studied traditional grammar, one transformational grammar, and the third used the time to read popular novels. White found no significant differences in the students’ writing skills at the end of the study. Whitehead (1966) compared two groups of high school students: one received grammar instruction; the other did not. At the end of the study, there were no measurable differences in writing performance. Gale (1968) studied 5th graders divided into four groups. Three of these groups received instruction in grammar, with each group studying a different type (traditional, phrase structure, and transformational-generative). The fourth group did not receive any grammar instruction. Although Gale reported that students who studied transformational-generative and phrase-structure grammars could write more complex sentences than the students in the other groups, there were no overall differences in writing quality across groups.

One of the more frequently cited studies on the question of grammar and writing was conducted by Bateman and Zidonis (1966). Starting with 9th-grade students, Bateman and Zidonis provided grammar instruction over a two-year period to half of the students; the other half received no grammar instruction. Like some previous researchers, Bateman and Zidonis found that, at the end of the study, students who studied grammar could write slightly more complex sentences than those who could not, but, again, there were no measurable differences in writing proficiency across the groups.

The strength of these findings, however, did not convince skeptics who believed that the lack of positive findings had to be the result of methodological flaws in the research. Some claimed, for example, that the studies failed to account for different teaching styles; the failure to find that grammar instruction improved writing was related to poor teaching. Elley, Barham, Lamb, and Wylie (1976) responded to this issue by designing a three-year study that controlled, to the extent possible, for the effect of different teaching styles. They divided students into three groups. The first group, consisting of three classes of students, studied the following: 1) literature; 2) organizational modes, such as narration, analysis, comparison/contrast, and argument; and 3) transformational-generative grammar. The second group, also made up of three classes, studied the same topics as the first group, with one exception—they did not study grammar. The final group, made up of two classes, studied traditional grammar and read a large amount of popular fiction.

At the end of each year of the study, students were evaluated on a range of factors to assess their growth in vocabulary, reading comprehension, sentence complexity, usage, spelling, and punctuation. The results were compared across groups each year. In addition, students wrote four essays at the end of the first year and three at the end of the second and third years. The essays were scored on the basis of content, style, organization, and mechanics. Finally, students completed questionnaires periodically to assess their attitudes toward the content of their English classes.

The results were again consistent. The writing of students who studied grammar, whether traditional or transformational, was not judged to be any better along any dimension than the writing of students who did not study grammar. In addition, the attitude questionnaires showed that, at the end of the second year, students who had studied transformational grammar not only disliked writing more than their counterparts did but also felt that English was quite difficult—understandable, perhaps, given the complexity of transformational grammar.

At the end of the third year, the researchers evaluated specific features of the students’ writing—such as spelling, punctuation, sentence structure and usage—using a variety of measures. A standardized test showed that the students who had studied grammar performed better on usage questions than did those students who had not studied grammar. However, no significant differences in any other area were found. The two groups who studied grammar also reported on their attitude surveys that they found English “repetitive” and that their English classes were boring and useless. The group that did not study grammar had a much more positive attitude toward English. More significant, perhaps, is that after three years of instruction, the writing of the students showed no differences in overall quality across groups.

Such unequivocal findings dampened the voices claiming some positive effect of grammar instruction on writing performance, but it did not silence them entirely. Kolb (1981), Holt (1982), and Davis (1984) argued that the studies showing no effect were flawed and that grammar did, in fact, lead to improved writing, but they were not able to provide any meaningful data to support their claim. An important factor in all these counter-arguments does, however, merit consideration: none of the studies that found no effect of grammar instruction on writing proficiency lasted more than three years. Longer exposure to grammar instruction, from this perspective, might show measurable effects. Unfortunately, this idea is offset by the fact that, as noted previously, the majority of children are taught grammar from elementary school into high school, with no measurable benefit.

In an effort to address the concerns of those who questioned the results of the empirical research, Hilllocks (1986) performed a meta-analysis on thousands of studies on composition, including all those related to grammar and writing that met certain design criteria. Studies with flawed or inadequate designs were eliminated, which made his conclusions more substantial and difficult to dismiss. On the question of grammar and writing, Hilllocks’ conclusion was blunt and warrants full inclusion here:

The study of traditional school grammar (i.e., the definition of parts of speech, the parsing of sentences, etc.) has no effect on raising the quality of student writing. Every other focus of instruction examined in this review is stronger. Taught in certain ways, grammar and mechanics instruction has a deleterious effect on student writing. In some studies a heavy emphasis on mechanics and usage (e.g., marking every error) resulted in significant losses in overall quality. School boards, administrators, and teachers who impose the systematic study of traditional school grammar on their students over lengthy periods of time in the name of teaching writing do them a gross disservice which should not be tolerated by anyone concerned with the effective teaching of good writing. We need to learn how to teach standard usage and mechanics after careful task analysis and with minimal grammar. (pp. 248–249)

Hilllocks’ work was compelling, at least among scholars in composition. A review of the following major journals in composition studies—College Composition and Communication,
Research in the Teaching of English, Written Communication, and College English—from 1986 to the present did not produce a single article addressing the question of grammar's effect on writing performance. The works that did emerge in this review were not empirical but theoretical. Parker and Campbell (1993), for example, argued that the theoretical framework of linguistics would find a significant theoretical vacuum in composition. Crowley (1989) and Noguchi (1991) reiterated on linguistic grounds the conclusion that direct grammar instruction does not improve writing performance. Examining the influence on composition through the Grammar for Writing Initiative, Wyse (2001) reviewed the major studies of grammar—instruction on the writing performance of 5-16-year-old students. Their results were consistent with the building-block approach fails with writing because it is inconsistent with the nature of grammar and how the mind processes language. The cognitive perspective proposes that language acquisition involves internalizing mental models of the basic sentence patterns and their acceptable permutations. Although these structural patterns cannot be neurologically separate from the lexicon, the connections in the neural network seem to be relatively remote. Sentence production in this account is not based on a bottom-up process in which individual words and grammatical units are merged, building-block style, to form sentences. Instead, production is largely top-down.

The process of language acquisition is extremely powerful. As I've noted elsewhere (J. Williams, 1999), "on a neurophysiological level... [mental models of language consist] of modifications to the cerebral structure" (p. 322). In other words, the brain literally changes in response to linguistic input, developing new cells and a network of neural pathways to connect these cells within the communicative system. As language develops, the neural network expands, grows more dense, and becomes richer.

The linguistic input children receive comes primarily from adults, who provide models of the language. Although children go through a period of development in which their language is characterized as "baby talk," this period is short-lived; they fairly quickly begin reproducing the grammatical patterns of the language around them. What is fascinating is that during the acquisition process parents commonly correct their children's pronunciation of individual words, and children respond to the parents' modeling. The result is a matching procedure that leads to a "best fit" that approximates the home dialect. Yet when parents correct grammar, children rarely respond, and parental efforts have little or no effect. In other words, the sort of matching procedure that works so well with pronunciation of individual words does not work with grammar. We don't know why, but we do know, obviously, that children manage to produce sentences that follow standard syntax.

The connection between the home/community environment and a child's emerging language is important and accounts for the fact that children reared in the South grow up speaking a Southern dialect, that children reared in Boston grow up speaking a New England dialect, and so on. Children acquire not only the accents but also the grammar of these dialects, simply by being immersed in the language community. Although the language that children acquire may or may not be congruent with Standard English, depending on the home dialect, it is almost never congruent with formal Standard English because so few people use the formal standard dialect when speaking. Formal standard English is principally the dialect of writing.

Nevertheless, regardless of which dialect children develop, their language is largely grammatical. There are several reasons for this. Perhaps the most important is that the

WHY ISN'T GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION TRANSPORTABLE TO WRITING?

Many people resist the conclusion that grammar instruction fails to improve writing because it seems to fly in the face of common sense. After all, before we teach children how to read, we first teach them the alphabet. Letters form words, words form sentences, and so on. Common sense, therefore, tells us that writing instruction should follow a similar bottom-up approach, with grammar being the building block for sentences and paragraphs, just as the alphabet is the building block for words and reading.
architecture of our brains limits how we process information (Cosimides & Tooby, 1994; Fingelkurts, Fingelkurts, & Neves, 2009; Karmiloff-Smith, 1992; Leslie, 1994; Pinker, 1994). Although cognition appears to involve parallel distributed processes, mental representations have a hierarchical and/or sequential structure owing to the linear flow of input sensory data (Perlovsky, 2009; Rumelhart & McClelland, 1986). A sense of agency, which is among the first emergent cognitive functions in infant development, operates in conjunction with hierarchical/sequential processing to emphasize agents in mental representations (Barrett & Johnson, 2003; Bering, 2002; Scholl & Tremoulet, 2000). This emphasis seems to be reflected in word order: the majority of the world’s 5,000 or so languages front the subject in clauses. The subject is then followed either by the verb or by the object. What this means in practical terms is that sentences cannot be significantly ungrammatical because we cannot process or produce ungrammatical utterances naturally. They do not follow the neural pathways of the brain’s architecture, and thus they are not meaningful.

It is therefore important to recognize that, by the time students enter school, grammar is already embedded in their brains. Grammar instruction is not transportable to writing, ultimately, because students already have the grammar. Their writing is grammatical when viewed from the linguistic perspective because it conforms to the basic word order of English and is meaningful.

BAD GRAMMAR OR BAD USAGE?

Even though student writing is essentially grammatical, no one would be so bold as to call it error-free. The challenge is to understand that most of the errors we find in student writing are problems of usage, not grammar.

Usage can best be understood as conventions associated with language that govern how we use it in different contexts. On this account, we can recognize that a formal context will expect usage that is different from what is expected in an informal context. Linguists often refer to these different forms of usage as register or style. With the concept of acceptability, register explains why the language we use when talking with friends and family is in nearly every instance unlike the language we use in, say, a job interview.

The most widely accepted dialect is Standard English, whereas the least accepted is nonstandard English. With good reason, then, national news anchors use Standard English rather than Black English, Southern English, Indian English, or some other dialect. Academic writing is at a higher level of formality and is governed by even stricter conventions; thus, academic writing represents formal Standard English. When we ask students to write an academic paper, we essentially are asking them to use a dialect of English that they have rarely encountered and therefore have not mastered.

Note that issues of usage generally do not have any connection with issues of grammar. Some of the more egregious problems we find in student writing are errors in word-choice (using the wrong word, such as impact for affect or immolate for emulate), punctuation (resulting in sentence fragments, run-on sentences, improper placement of the comma vis-a-vis quotation marks, separating verbs in a compound verb phrase), agreement (using a singular antecedent and a plural pronoun or a singular subject and plural verb), and tense (shifting from past to present—or vice versa—in a given sentence). Word choice has little to do with grammar—spelling nothing at all. The punctuation problems that cause sentence fragments and run-ons are typically the result of students’ inability to differentiate conver-
For native Standard English speakers of a certain age, B's response is unacceptable and ungrammatical. The explanation is based on the fact that the predicate in B's response is governed by the linking verb is. Linking verbs in English are followed by predicate adjectives, predicate nominatives, or prepositional phrases. Yet because I didn't study is a subordinate clause. This example illustrates two important points about grammaticality: first, most speakers today do not recognize the grammatical problem associated with following a linking verb with a subordinate clause, and second, language is always in a state of flux that can result in changes in what is deemed grammatical. Note, however, that such changes occur more readily in speech than in writing, especially with regard to grammatical structure. Writing is not subject to the same social influences that affect speech. Consequently, structures like The reason is because I didn't study may be deemed grammatical and acceptable in speech but not in formal writing. Formal texts tend to fossilize linguistic features. The more formal the text, the more rigid the fossilization.

With this information in mind, let's return to I ain't got no money and consider its structure:

Subject: I
Verb phrase: ain't got
Object: no money

This analysis shows that the sentence structure follows the standard SVO pattern, with ain't functioning as an auxiliary to the verb got, much in the way that don't functions in sentence 17:

17. I don't have any money.

Every native speaker of English understands the intended meaning of the sentence (the speaker/writer really is broke), and the sentence follows the standard SVO pattern of English. It therefore meets all the requirements of a grammatical sentence and, indeed, is grammatical. Nevertheless, we would not want students to produce such a sentence in a typical writing assignment. Such sentences are unacceptable because they violate the usage conventions that govern academic writing, not because they are ungrammatical. They are the equivalent of wearing cutoff jeans, a tank top, and sandals to an elegant wedding—simply unacceptable.

We can analyze in a similar fashion nearly all of the difficulties in student writing that usually are described as grammatical errors. For example, faulty punctuation, which can sometimes produce run-on sentences, fused sentences, and sentence fragments, may appear on the surface to be the result of students' failure to understand the grammatical structure of a sentence, but closer examination reveals something very different. Let's consider the following example:

18. Plato had a great influence on Western civilization and his student Aristotle may have had an even greater influence.

Anyone who heard this sentence would find nothing unusual about it. The sentence has meaning, and it follows English word order, so it is grammatical. However, a person reading the sentence who happens to know something about punctuation would immediately recognize that it violates the convention that calls for a comma plus a conjunction in compound sentences. Punctuation is largely a visual aid for readers and has little to do with grammar. Until the end of the 16th century, punctuation as we know it did not exist. Not until the end of the 17th century, when there was a widespread shift from oral to silent reading, did scholars and printers begin using something approaching modern punctuation conventions. But then, as now, punctuation was understood to be somewhat arbitrary, depending on the writer's style (see Freeborn, 2006).

A simple modern example illustrates this point. Currently, there are two different conventions governing the use of the comma in lists. One convention, advocated by the Modern Language Association in its MLA Handbook (2009) as well as by the American Psychological Association in its APA Publication Manual (2009), specifies that a comma should separate each item in a list, including the last item, as illustrated below:

19. Hobbes wrote that the life of man in his natural state is dirty, nasty, brutish, and short.

The second convention, advocated by journalists in the Associated Press Guide (Christian, 2010), specifies that a comma should not be used for the last item in a list, which gives us:

20. Hobbes wrote that the life of man in his natural state is nasty, brutish and short.

In the anaerobic environs of the English class, the sentence fragment is deemed to be an even more egregious error than the run-on, but here again close examination reveals that what underlies the fragment is not an ignorance of grammar. The passage below comes from a paper written by a 5th grader who was asked to report on a field trip to a museum. The sentence fragments are in italics:

We arrived at the Field Museum almost an hour late. Because there was an accident on the highway. We went first to the dinosaur exhibit on the second floor. The exhibit was about the life of the dinosaurs. They lived a long time ago. Long before humans. The exhibit showed us what the earth was like during the time of the dinosaurs. Hot and humid. I liked the exhibit very much and want to go back again soon.

What we notice is that in each instance the problem is one of punctuation, not grammar. If we hear the passage read aloud, the lack of commas is not an issue. The same is true if we put in the proper punctuation. But there is nothing structurally wrong with the paragraph. Providing this student opportunities to see how other writers handled similar constructions, as well as some help understanding punctuation conventions through examining his own writing, would go a long way toward giving him better control over his sentences. Professional writers have such control, and we are not surprised or dismayed when we encounter fragments in their work. Yet we shine a harsh spotlight on students because we know that, in most cases, they do not yet have this control.

In addition, it is worth noting that speech allows for fragmented constructions. For example, if my wife asked me why I was late arriving home, I might correctly respond with, An accident on the highway. No one would label this response as ungrammatical because...
Although most of the utterances in a conversation are well formed from a linguistic perspective, we nevertheless find consistent patterns of error, but only a few of the errors are grammatical, in part because spontaneous speech contains few constructions that can be accurately classified as sentences (see Biber, 1988; Du Bois, Schuette-Coburn, Paolino, & Cummings, 1993). As Du Bois (2003) noted, spontaneous speech consists primarily of "intonation units" such as phrases, but what we generally think of as complete sentences do not occur regularly. Chafe (1998) found that subjects are commonly introduced as an intonation referent and that the predicate appears as a separate unit, often with a pronominal serving to link the verb to the referent. Thompson and Hopper (2001) reported that the transitivity found in writing is rare in spontaneous speech.

The challenge of attending to form is easily demonstrated: during a conversation, or even during a class lecture, try to recall verbatim the last sentence someone uttered. Unless a person is concentrating on recalling the structure, this task is quite difficult. When a person is thus concentrating, he or she usually cannot recall the message. Stated simply, we are not very good at multitasking with regard to language. We can attend to message fairly easily; we can attend to form with some difficulty; but attending to both simultaneously is a challenge.

The point here is that while engaged in a conversation we tend to ignore matters of form and structure. Why is it, then, that these matters become so apparent as soon as we read a transcript? The explanation is that texts are static and visual, whereas speech is transitory and aural. The static nature of a transcript allows us to slow down our processing speed and to reread passages; in addition, its visual nature demands that we attend to orthography.

**For Writing and Discussion**

One of the problems we see in student writing is the tendency to import conversational features into the text. Here are two effective ways to help students begin reducing the gap between their spoken and written English. First, ask them to compose individually a text orally onto a recording device. When they are finished, have them transcribe the oral composition. Hold a workshop in which they then work in teams to identify and revise conversational features. Second, have students read two or three paragraphs of academic writing. Setting the paragraphs aside, they should write a paraphrase of what they read. Hold a workshop in which, with your help, they compare vocabulary and sentence structure of their summaries and the original.

This analysis helps us understand why writing is hard—and not just for student writers but for all writers. Among students, efforts to attend to form are hampered by lack of familiarity with the genre-driven structural patterns that characterize academic texts. Hence writing tends to be error-prone along a limited number of parameters. A writer may read his or her text with a determination to focus on correcting errors of form—and not succeed completely.

Even so, many teachers approach papers like copyeditors. They operate, often unconsciously, on the principle that most students in our public schools and undergraduate programs lack sufficient knowledge to provide much in the way of content, even when the assignment calls for a personal-experience narrative. They also understand that evaluating content for anything other than an essay exam is highly problematic, especially if students are writing about different topics, which leads to assessment with dubious validity (see J. Williams, 2003). As a result, they tend to focus by default on the form of student writing, concentrating on such elements as sentence structure, paragraph development, and punctuation. Because when talking to their students teachers seldom attend to errors in speech, many reach the unfortunate and incorrect conclusion that the errors in students' papers must be the result of laziness, for the students' spoken language seems just fine, annoying fillers and slang notwithstanding.

**WHAT IS GRAMMAR?**

Even though grammar is a central concern in writing classes, few teachers receive much training in the subject. Moreover, our understanding of what constitutes grammar is clouded by the fact that there are various definitions of grammar and various types of grammar. Some people define grammar as the words we use for labeling language, such a noun, verb, and preposition—the "eight parts of speech." Others define it as how we use words in sentences, such as subject and object. However, linguists—those who make a scientific study of language—define grammar as syntax, or the order of words in the natural sentences we construct. A basic word order in English, for example, is noun subject (N) plus verb (V) plus noun object (SOV), as in:

1. Rita kissed Fred.

I will use the linguistic definition of grammar throughout the chapter.

Few students encounter this definition, but not because grammar instruction is ignored in our schools. Indeed, whenever politicians take notice of writing skills in our schools, they blame poor writing on the failure to teach children grammar. In nearly always propose a "back to basics" program that will force schools to teach even more grammar. When parents see the low test scores in language arts at their children's schools, they demand that more emphasis be placed on grammar. Ask students what they need to do to improve their writing, and more often than not the answer is "Work on my grammar."

But students do study grammar, and they study it for a long time. Instruction begins in 3rd grade and commonly doesn't end until completion of 10th or 11th grade. Most English textbooks for elementary, middle, and high school students focus on grammar. For example, Houghton-Mifflin English (2004), a popular text for middle school students, has little in it that isn't related to grammar in one way or another. Glencoe/Macgraw-Hill's Glencoe Grammar and Composition Handbook (2001) series spans elementary and secondary grades. The reality is that whenever students work on writing, grammar instruction tends to predominate. Nevertheless, as any university teacher of first-year composition will attest, students finish high school not only unable to do much more than recite the definitions of noun and verb but also unable to write an essay. The question is "Why?"

The answer to this question is not simple. We first need to understand that there are several different linguistic models of grammar. The major ones are summarized below. We also must examine what various studies have shown about the connection between grammar instruction and writing, as well as what linguists and psychologists have learned about language development.
TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR

When parents, students, and even most teachers think about grammar, they generally think about the eight parts of speech, the names that we assign to the different elements that make up language. This grammar—the grammar that most teachers know, the grammar of most handbooks, the grammar that gets taught in our schools—is known as "traditional" or "school" grammar. It is important to understand that when people talk about grammar and writing, they seldom, if ever, use the word "grammar" in the sense of its linguistic meaning. Instead, they are using the term to refer to punctuation, word choice, and similar issues that are actually unrelated to grammatical structure.

Traditional grammar and its place in education have ancient roots. Those roots extend all the way back to ancient Greece, where teachers known as grammatici taught grammar-school children how to read and write using literary models with the explicit aim of maintaining the purity of the language and instilling moral lessons. This pedagogy was adopted by the Romans and is at the core of how grammar is understood and taught in most of our schools.

Like the ancient Greeks, Romans differentiated literary Latin—used by the well-educated and influential members of society—from the Latin used by the common people. The aim of grammar instruction was to preserve the prestige dialect by giving students a set of tools—the parts of speech—that were believed to enable them to identify and then mimic the language of the elite. This goal was seldom realized, however, as illustrated by the accounts of wealthy Romans forced to adopt "the salty language of the poor" during political campaigns as so as to appeal to common people (plebeians) and win their votes (J. Williams, 2009, p. 282).

After the Roman Empire collapsed in 476 A.D., Latin quickly became a dead language no longer spoken by any native speakers as it evolved into so-called "vulgar" tongues: French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, and Italian. Among scholars, the need for a common language was great, and Latin, owing in part to the prestige of the Empire, served this need. From the Middle Ages through the early 19th century, it was the language of scholars, and the educated elite were expected to have reading proficiency. But without any native speakers to model the language, mastering grammar and pronunciation was a problem. Scholars and educators therefore relied on two Latin grammar books: Ars grammatica, written by Donatus in the 4th century, and Institutiones grammaticae, written by Priscian in the 6th century. There were no grammar books for the vulgar tongues, but because these languages were derivatives of Latin, the Donatus and Priscian texts worked reasonably well to provide rules of correctness based on literary models. The same cannot be said, however, with regard to English, which is a Germanic language.

The notion of linguistic purity was embedded in the English grammatical treatises on how to write that began to appear in the late Middle Ages. Owing to the widely held perception that Latin was a perfect language, its grammar was embraced as the quintessential tool for analyzing English and for correcting the speech and writing of those who spoke a "vulgar" form, or nonprestige dialect, of the language. Constructions natural in English but ungrammatical in Latin were labeled violations of the grammar. The real differences between the dialects of the different social classes led to the conclusion among educators that the purity of English is preserved by the well educated, who speak and write a prestige dialect. People without a good education, on the other hand, corrupt the language by deviating from the norm prescribed by the grammar.

TEACHING GRAMMAR IN THE CONTEXT OF WRITING

Although from a linguistic perspective changes in language are natural and ineluctable, the question of whether there is value in striving to maintain and disseminate a prestige dialect is open to debate and indeed has been a point of contention for decades. Nevertheless, our schools today, like those in the distant past, generally embrace the idea that grammar plays a major role in distinguishing between what people do with language and what they ought to do with it. Linguistic superiority, and thus social superiority, is associated with notions of correctness that are linked primarily to literary texts rather than to everyday speech.

Problems with Traditional Grammar

One of the more obvious problems associated with traditional grammar is the concept of "parts of speech." Although we may reference nouns, verbs, and so on in a general way, we cannot establish a fully consistent classification system because word classes resist a rigid scheme. Run, for example, can be a noun or a verb, depending on the structure of a sentence. Furthermore, an unavoidable result of using Latin-based traditional grammar to describe a non-Latin language like English is that much of what has been, and continues to be, taught to generations of students is just plain wrong. Consider the split infinitive:

2. I'm going to slowly open the door.

In this sentence, the infinitive verb form, to open, is "split" by the adverb slowly. Most English teachers in our nation's schools, as well as many handbooks, treat the split infinitive as a grammar error. From the perspective of Latin or one of the Latin-based languages, such as Spanish, this makes sense because the infinitive form in these languages is one word rather than two. In Spanish, for example, the infinitive form of to open is abrir—one word. It is impossible to split abrir in any way. We simply cannot have 'Voy a abrir la puerta' ("I'm going to slowly open the door"); we can only have something like Voy a abrir la puerta despacio.

A large majority—if not all—American students are taught that they cannot end a sentence with a preposition, and they sometimes are provided examples like the following that illustrate the ungrammaticality that results from such a construction:

3. *Juanita looked the number of the local pizza parlor that served her favorite beer up.

The problem here is twofold: first, the injunction itself has no basis in English grammar, and second, the word up in this and other such examples is not a preposition but a particle. English grammar allows particles, which are verbal elements, to move from their verbs to the noun object that immediately follows, but it does not allow movement elsewhere. Consequently, the sample sentence above is indeed ungrammatical, but not because it ends with a preposition.

English grammar actually allows prepositions at the end of certain sentence types:

4. Fritz bought the house in which the rock star had lived.
5. Fritz bought the house which the rock star had lived in.
Both sentences are grammatically correct. We can see why if we analyze them closely and recognize that they consist of two clauses, one of which has been relativized. They began, in other words, as two independent clauses:

6. Fritz bought the house. The rock star lived in the house.

The clauses were joined by replacing the second occurrence of "the house" with the relative pronoun "which." Because dependent clauses must be joined to their independent clause with a connector, the relative pronoun must be raised to the front of the dependent clause. The grammar allows the option of shifting the entire prepositional phrase "in which" to the front of the clause or just the relative pronoun. In most instances, the only difference between these options appears to be stylistic, not grammatical, which explains why we see the form of the first example in formal writing/speaking and the form of the second example in informal writing/speaking.

Some sentences, however, do not seem to allow the same degree of flexibility that we see in 4 and 5. Shifting the entire prepositional phrase results in a construction that may challenge our ability to judge its grammaticality, as in 7 below. In such constructions, ending the sentence with the preposition, as in 8, certainly sounds more natural.

7. An interesting puzzle is for what language is used.

8. An interesting puzzle is what language is used for.

Also worth considering is the issue of tense. Tense is a technical term that describes how the form of verbs change to signify when an action occurred. There are three possibilities: past, present, and future. The change in form among Spanish verbs is easy to identify. The untensed form of to speak, for example, is 

"h"ablar. The present-tense form is 

"ha"bla, the third-person past-tense form is 

"h"abló, and the future-tense form is "h"ablá. In English, we have 

"speak" and 

"spoke" for present and past, but there is no equivalent change that we can make to the verb to signify the future. Instead, we have two options. We may place the modal will in front of the present-tense form to signify the future, giving us will 

"speak," or we may use an adverbial of time in conjunction with the present tense, as in She 

"speaks" to the group tomorrow. The form of the verb does not change in either instance. In other words, English does not have a future tense. Thus, English, unlike Latin and Latin-based languages, has only two tenses, not three. Even so, virtually all major handbooks claim that English has at least three tenses. The Everyday Writer by Lunsford (2009), for example, states that in English the "three simple tenses are the present tense, the past tense, and the future tense" (p. 285). A Writer's Reference, by Hacker (2007), as well as The Norton Field Guide to Writing, by Bullock and Weinberg (2009), take a further step, confusing progressive and perfect verb forms with tenses. English uses progressive and perfect verb forms to signify when an action is ongoing and when it has been completed in the past, respectively. But these verb forms are not tenses because they do not involve any change in the verb itself—tense is indicated in the modal, not the verb.

MODERN GRAMMARS

In the limited space available in this chapter, it is impossible to do more than offer a brief summary of modern grammars, all of which are significantly more complex than traditional grammar. Even the term "modern grammars" itself is somewhat misleading owing to the fact that modern grammars date to the early 20th century, when Franz Boas (1911) published his Handbook of American Indian Tribal Languages. Lamenting the inability of traditional grammar to describe tribal languages accurately, Boas argued that the prescriptive approach of this grammar was inadequate. Boas and his student Leonard Bloomfield therefore proposed a grammar that was entirely descriptive (see Bloomfield, 1933).

Phrase Structure Grammar

Today their effort is known as phrase structure grammar. Whereas traditional grammar is predicated on the idea that Latin serves as a tool for unveiling the universal features of languages, phrase structure grammar advocated the perception that every language is unique, with its own structure. The task of identifying and describing structure required extensive data collection, analysis, interpretation, and rule formation. As I've noted elsewhere, it required "an empirical approach to language" that traditional grammar never really considered (J. Williams, 2005, p. 99). This approach led Bloomfield (1933) to shift the focus of grammatical analysis away from matters of "correctness" to what he termed "acceptability," which is based on the context in which a given linguistic event occurs and on the specific word order of the construction. In this model, a statement might be deemed grammatical but unacceptable; likewise a statement might be ungrammatical but nevertheless acceptable.

The following examples illustrate this point:

9. The determination of the cause of the crash that destroyed the car that Fritz had rented from the dealership where his own car was getting the brake job that he had foolishly delayed until he was faced with the unhappy and costly reality of metal against metal took weeks.

10. I am dining at 7 o'clock postmeridian and am solicitous of your companionship.

11. *Fritz feels badly about ruining the party.
12. Why am I leaving? *The reason is because I don't like your company.

Sentence 9 is perfectly grammatical but nevertheless is unlikely to be accepted in any context in which clarity and precision are valued. Anyone hoping to have a dinner date would probably fail if his or her invitation took the form of sentence 10, yet it, too, is perfectly grammatical. Sentence 11 is ungrammatical because adverbs (badly) cannot grammatically follow linking verbs (in this case, feels). Even so, this construction is almost universally accepted, especially among reasonably well-educated people (those with less education tend, ironically, to use the correct form of bad rather than badly). The statement in sentence 12 likewise is ungrammatical but widely accepted.

Transformational-Generative Grammar

Although phrase structure grammar was supplanted in 1957 by Noam Chomsky's transformational grammar (see Chomsky, 1957), its focus on description rather than prescription has been maintained by all modern grammars. Chomsky, however, did not believe that phrase structure grammar was sufficiently descriptive, nor did he believe that it was explanatory. He developed transformational-generative grammar in an effort to overcome these perceived limitations. Phrase structure grammar does not provide any insight into the relations between similar sentences, such as active and passive forms like the following:

13. Fritz kissed Rita. (active form)
14. Rita was kissed by Fritz. (passive form)

Phrase structure would, in fact, assign different grammatical descriptions to such sentences. Transformational grammar, on the other hand, proposes that sentence 14 is derived from sentence 13 through the "passive transformation." We understand the relation between the two sentences by examining the transformational history of the passive form.

A large number of similar transformations, which supposedly occur in the language processing areas of the brain, govern a wide variety of constructions, such as adverbial movement, subordinate and relative clause formation, and particle movement. Because the grammar is not prescriptive, it is not concerned with the common injunction that writing teachers issue against using passive constructions; it is concerned only with the rule-governed mechanisms involved in generating these constructions. Use of passive voice, therefore, is a stylistic issue, not a grammatical one.

At the core of transformational-generative grammar was Chomsky's (1965) argument that a properly formulated grammar gives insight into mental operations, which had a strong appeal to many scholars devoted to understanding cognition. As part of this argument, he proposed that language is rule-governed, that language development in children consists of inducing the rules on the basis of limited and highly distorted input, and that sentences have a history that can be investigated to understand mental operations.

The Minimalist Program

Many of the claims related to transformational- Generative grammar failed to hold up under scrutiny, and by the early 1970s, most people working in psychology had abandoned it as a viable tool. In response to many years of criticism, Chomsky (1995) revised the grammar and produced the minimalist program (MP). Like transformational-Generative grammar, the MP maintains that language production begins in the brain and that each utterance undergoes various generative processes before expression. The rule-governed view of language was maintained, but there was more emphasis on linguistic universals.

Understanding what Chomsky means by linguistic universals can be facilitated by considering that, although we define ourselves as unique individuals, biologically we are very much the same (see Pinker, 2002). Our brains are anatomically similar and have an essentially identical architecture. As a result, we process information and thought itself in limited ways (see Tremlin, 2006). This limitation is manifested clearly in syntax, or word order. Sentences in all languages are made up of three core components: subject (S), verb (V), and object (O). Thus, there are six possible combinations of these three components. Nevertheless, 93% of the world's languages fall into only two categories—either SVO (like English) or SOV (like Japanese). The other possible combinations are spoken by small groups of people. (OVS word order, the rarest of the possible combinations, governs Tamil, a language spoken in India, and Guarijio, an Uto-Aztecan language spoken in northwestern Mexico.) The overwhelming dominance of SVO and SOV word order suggests the existence of some universal factor related to cognitive processing and neural architecture.

The minimalist program proposes that language is innate and that the brain contains a language faculty responsible for language acquisition. This faculty contains a universal grammar that gives the newborn the potential to become a speaker of any human language. The child's exposure to adult language in the home sets specific principles and parameters associated with grammatical structure that in time limits this potential. As Chomsky (1995) stated, "language acquisition is interpreted as the process of fixing the parameters of the initial state [of the universal grammar] in one of the permissible ways" (p. 6).

Cognitive Grammar

The minimalist program is a powerful tool for analyzing and describing language, but it has many critics. Like transformational-Generative grammar, the MP proposes that utterances begin with language. That is, in a sentence such as Fritz kissed Rita, the utterance or written expression begins with the individual words that make up the sentence; these words are extracted from the mental lexicon and then undergo specific cognitive operations that result in the sentence. As in the case of transformational-Generative grammar, the MP proposes that grammar provides insight into how the brain operates.

Cognitive grammar takes a different approach (see Langacker, 2008; Taylor, 2002). First, it does not claim that utterances begin with language but rather that they are linked to life experiences that trigger concepts, relations, and images stored in the neural network. In Fritz kissed Rita, the sentence might begin with the observation (and the resulting image) of a male named Fritz engaged in the act of kissing a female named Rita. Underlying concepts and mental images are then connected with the words and syntactic patterns necessary to express them in language. The difference between cognitive approaches to language and transformational ones is therefore apparent: grammar does not determine the structure of the language we produce—situations determine the grammar we use.

Drawing on work in connectionism (see Rumelhart & McClelland, 1986), cognitive grammar dismisses the idea that language acquisition involves inducing grammar rules,
English allows for reduction of responses through ellipsis. I do not need to respond with, I am late arriving home because of an accident on the highway. In fact, if I were to offer that response rather than the elliptical one, my utterance would be judged stilted at best, unnatural at worst.

The writing of the 5th grader above—and the writing of students who produce sentence fragments—manifests conventions of speech that have been transferred to writing. There are several reasons why students use conventions of speech when they write, perhaps the most obvious being their lack of experience with the written word. To a significant degree, writing is an artificial representation of language, governed by conventions that are much more rigorous than anything we find in speech, and it takes people many years to master these conventions fully.

**For Writing and Discussion**

A key to modeling professional writing lies in knowing with some specificity what professionals do with regard to sentence structure—what often is labeled as style but what is actually inseparable from structure and usage choices. Ask students to select two essays by different writers dealing with the same topic. They should then select four paragraphs from each essay. Using those paragraphs, they should calculate: 1) the average sentence length, 2) the different types of sentence opener (subject, introductory modifier, coordinating conjunction, verb phrase, etc.), 3) the average number of adverbs and adjectives per sentence, and 4) the average number of subordinate clauses. Have students use these data to write a short essay comparing and contrasting the styles of the two writers.

*Follow-up activity:* While working on their next out-of-class paper, hold a workshop in which students perform the same stylistic analysis on it. Have them compare these data with the data they obtained from their analysis of one of the professional essays. Where their data don’t match the professionals, they should revise their papers accordingly.

**READING ANDWRITING**

Acquisition of writing conventions occurs primarily through reading, yet, with the exception of text messages, our students do very little reading. The National Endowment for the Arts (2007) reported, for example, that 21% of high school seniors and 39% of college freshmen read “little or nothing” for pleasure. Given the correlation between skill growth and practice, especially during adolescence (Krashen, 1981, 1985), we should not be surprised that reading proficiency has been declining for decades (Alwin, 1991; Glenn, 1994; Stedman & Kaestle, 1987; Wilson & Gove, 1999). The 2005 NAEP report (US Department of Education, 2005) indicated that reading scores for 12th graders had declined steadily since 1992, and the 2010 report (US Department of Education, 2010b) on reading found that nearly 30% of 12th-grade students were reading below grade level (also see Ravitch, 2004; Simmons & Kameenui, 1998; Sotsky, 1999; Sykes, 1995).

In a cross-sectional analysis of 800 elementary, middle, and high school books published between 1919 and 1991, Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolfe (1996) found that reading materials designed for 8th-grade readers were simpler than 5th-grade readers were before World War II. Their analysis also showed no significant differences in the reading levels of required English texts used in 9th through 12th grades. As they noted, “The average literature text required in 12th grade English classes is ... simpler than the average 7th or 8th grade reader published before World War II” (p. 499). In addition, the data showed no significant differences in text difficulty across academic tracks, including AP English. Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolf concluded that simplification of textbooks since the end of World War II, involving decreasing sentence length and complexity along with replacing domain-specific vocabulary with nondomain-specific words, accounted for a decrease in reading levels across all age groups and also effected a “cumulative knowledge deficit” in the population (p. 501).

**NEW MEDIA: TEXTING, BLOGGING, AND INSTANT MESSAGING**

Texting, messaging, blogging, and social networking—often subsumed under the concept of new media (also digital media)—have experienced a remarkable increase in popularity over a very short time. Two factors are central to new media: digitalization and interactivity. Texting and messaging have attracted a great deal of journalistic attention owing to the frequency with which young people, especially teenagers, engage in these activities and the common use of abbreviations and emoticons.

New media also has become a major subject of academic interest in various fields, especially psychology and sociology. The American Psychological Association, for example, established a task force in 1996 on new media psychology with the goal of investigating the new media technologies and their impact and promise for psychologists and applying psychology in their occupations (Luskin & Friedland, 1998, p. 1). In sociology, the recently established Journal of New Media & Society aims to examine global and local dimensions of the relationship between media and social change as well as the individual, social, cultural and political dimensions of new media.

The popularity of texting and its associated technology has led some composition scholars to advocate integrating new media into composition classes. Among the first to do so were Schroeder, Bizzell, and Fox (2002), whose *Alt Disc: Alternative Discourses and the Academy* predicted that the unique forms that characterize new media would find their way into formal writing and also advocated their acceptance. Other texts have followed, such as *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition* (Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, & Sirc, 2004); *The Two Virtu;als: New Media and Composition* (Reid, 2007); and *Rhetorics and Technologies: New Directions in Writing and Composi­tion* (Selber, 2010). Meanwhile, composition faculty at various schools have shifted the focus of instruction away from the academic essay to new media. According to the school’s campus newspaper, the University of Kentucky, for example, announced in 2010 that by 2011 its composition courses will focus on digital media “to help students acquire the social media skills necessary to function in today’s workplace” (Bailiff, 2010, p. 2). The writing program director, Roxanne Mountford, was quoted as stating that “there’s Facebook and YouTube videos now, it’s [communication] becoming easier and faster. There’s a broad integration of skills and I think it’s high time to teach this way. This is a 2020 future” (p. 3).
An underlying assumption in the new media movement among those in composition studies is that the abbreviations and emoticons that are part of digitally generated text messages will—and should—affect grammar and writing proficiency. A growing number of anecdotal reports claim that this is indeed the case (e.g., Brown-Owens, Eason, & Lader, 2003; Lee, 2002; O'Connor, 2005). None of these reports, however, is based on empirical data; in addition, the reports are often conflicting, with some claiming that the new media have a positive effect and with others claiming a negative effect.

Until well-designed empirical studies shed light on this question, it seems wise to reserve judgment. Yet it bears noting that the enthusiasm of those in composition studies for embracing alternative discourse structures does not appear to be shared by those in other disciplines. The submission guidelines for New Media & Society, for example, specify that all manuscripts must conform to the Harvard style, without deviation. The entries on Wikipedia, arguably the most successful model of new media collaborative interaction, all conform to Standard or formal Standard English grammar.

There are several obvious problems associated with the idea that the textual features characteristic of texting and instant messaging might affect students’ grammar. Historically, when changes in grammar have occurred, they evolved over periods longer than one or two decades, making it unlikely that the features we find in texting have had sufficient time to affect existing grammatical patterns. But two other factors are perhaps more important. First, as noted previously, formal texts tend to fossilize linguistic features, making them very resistant to change. Second, examination of new media texts shows that, abbreviations and emoticons notwithstanding, they are grammatical. On this account, the unique features of these texts resemble slang, especially when we consider that the majority of the people texting and instant messaging are, at least at this point, teenagers and young adults.

**NONSTANDARD DIALECTS**

Although some teachers are willing to grant that the problems of their Anglo students are due to usage rather than grammar, the majority refuse to do so when it comes to black and Chicano students. Many resist the suggestion that structures like the following are grammatical:

21. I is hungry.
22. I'm thirsty.
23. He like da woman has blonde hair.

Nevertheless, both Black English Vernacular (BEV) and Chicano English are grammatical—but their grammatical structures are different from Standard English.

Few children grow up immersed in a language environment that consists of formal Standard English. In fact, if we think of language acquisition as existing on a continuum, with formal standard on one end and nonstandard on the other, most children’s home language is probably located somewhere south of the midpoint. For children of color, the home language can be very far south, indeed. The result is a gap between the language of the home and the language of the school, a gap that students are expected to bridge fairly quickly. They face major difficulties because their home language/dialect is already established firmly in the neural network. It is not readily malleable, and it is quite resistant to direct instruc-

For Writing and Discussion

Do you speak Standard English? Is Standard English your home dialect? Do you have friends whose first language is English who do not speak Standard English? If not, does their dialect bother you in any way? Do you feel compelled to correct them?

Write a brief essay discussing your views on whether our schools should help students produce Standard as well as formal Standard English.

**TEACHING GRAMMAR AND USAGE**

If grammar instruction doesn’t help students become better writers, if it doesn’t even help them with simple issues such as case, does it have any value? Yes. Grammar can be one of the more interesting subjects a person can study—when it is taught the right way. The right way does not link it with writing but instead treats grammar as a way of studying the
intricacies of language. Also, there is value in knowing how to talk about language. Teachers and students benefit when they have a common vocabulary for analysis and when they share concepts of English structure. (Consider in this regard, how difficult it is to analyze poetry without knowing poetic terminology.)

The first step toward solving the problem is to recognize that direct instruction is certainly not effective in the early grades and not particularly effective in the later grades when it relies on textbooks and exercises. More effective are approaches that immerse students in language itself, approaches that give students opportunities to analyze not only their own language but also the language of everyone around them. Asking students to act as amateur linguists and to observe closely and record the language that people use serve as great learning opportunities. Students are fascinated when with minimal training in grammar and usage they discover that highly paid and well-educated people frequently produce language that is carelessly constructed.

Such approaches also need to be linked to other activities, reading in particular. Discussions of reading inevitably involve questions of meaning as students and teacher explore what a given author means in a text. And questions of "what" lead naturally to questions of "how," which is where issues of structure and usage come in. This strategy can be enhanced, at any grade level, when teachers read aloud to their students and make comments that focus student attention on a particular word or phrase. This indirect approach to grammar and usage reinforces concepts in ways that direct instruction cannot. Remarking, for example, that a certain word is an "interesting adjective" draws students to the word, and it also models the important idea that some words are more interesting than others while simultaneously reinforcing the concept of "adjective."

A vital part of such teaching involves understanding that grammar is related to the structure of language, not its production per se. Usage, on the other hand, does involve production. It requires an understanding of the conventions that govern register, word choice, and genre. The pervasive nature of usage problems can be addressed by helping students read more and motivating them to be more reflective when writing. Activities that separate composing from editing and that encourage students to examine the precise meaning of words will yield substantial results. No doubt the greatest challenge for the public school teacher is finding ways to individualize instruction, making it one-on-one. We know that this kind of instruction works best for writing; we know that pointing out and then showing students how to correct their usage blunders again and again, day after day, results in a substantial improvement. What we don't know is how to fit this kind of instruction into a teacher's schedule. Until we do, it is likely that grammar instruction will be viewed, incorrectly, as a shortcut panacea for the usage problems we find in our students' writing.

For Writing and Discussion

Give students a lesson on the semantic features of commonly confused subordinating conjunctions: while/because, while/whereas, since/because. Have them form small groups to examine newspaper and/or magazine articles to determine whether the writers used subordinating conjunctions consistently in keeping with their semantic content. They should share their findings with the whole class. Next, have them pair up
For Writing and Discussion

How would you describe your experience with grammar as a student in public school? For example, did you study traditional grammar? How many years did you study grammar? Was the instruction based on the idea that knowledge of grammar would improve your writing? Did it? If so, explain how. Did your teacher ever comment that some feature of your writing was "ungrammatical"? Did your teacher ever issue injunctions, such as never begin a sentence with a coordinating conjunction or never end a sentence with a preposition? Did you ever feel conflicted when you saw published writing that violated those injunctions? How would you describe your perception of the relation between grammar and writing prior to reading this chapter? Has this chapter changed your view? Why or why not? Consider some ways that you might use grammar and usage instruction to improve student writing. What approach would you advocate?

Write a lesson plan or essay describing how you might teach grammar using the principles described in this chapter.

Classroom Activity

In The Teacher's Grammar Book, I provided the following "make-believe" grammar (J. Williams, 1999), which is designed to illustrate how learning grammar rules and applying them to writing tasks require significantly different abilities. Complete the activity and then write about what you learned from it.

A Make-Believe Grammar

Directions: Study the following grammar rules.

Rule 1: All adjectives must follow the nouns they modify.

Example: The car old stopped at the light red.

Exception: Any adjective that modifies a noun signifying or related to a person will come before the noun, but the noun will take the suffix -o.

Example: The old man-a gave the flower to the young woman-a because he liked her pretty face-o.

Rule 2: The indefinite article is zot. (Indefinite articles are a and an.)

Example: At the circus, the clown tooled zot horn.

Exception: Indefinite articles that come before an adjective are zots.

Example: We saw zots old policeman riding zots brown horse.

Rule 3: The progressive verb form consists of be + verb + ing, but tense is marked as follows—x for past, and y for present.

Example: The man be-y washing his car.

Exception: All actions involving nonhumans form the progressive with be + verb + ing, but tense in all instances is marked with k.

Example: My dog be-k running in the yard.

For Further Exploration


Although the focus of this work is on broad social and pedagogical issues, the author notes that too often writing instruction for Hispanic students has been rooted in bottom-up, grammar-based approaches that do little to teach the skills students need to succeed.


The authors of this report performed a meta-analysis on 4,691 papers using inclusion/exclusion criteria to determine the strength of research design and methodology. From this initial pool, only 20 papers were deemed to be relevant to the question of whether sentence combining instruction had an effect on student writing performance. The authors concluded that such instruction is, indeed, effective.


This slim volume broke new ground in the area of sentence combining. The author
explains how to teach sentence combining without requiring students to know much at all about grammar.


An important review of the efficacy of sentence combining, a technique that builds syntactic maturity without reliance on grammar instruction.


This article examines the decline in SAT scores since 1967, focusing on the precipitous decline in verbal scores. A leading cause of this decline is deemed to be the failure of schools to teach reading and writing effectively.


Although many people assume that grammar instruction results in syntactic complexity, there is no evidence to support this assumption. In fact, the authors show that this construction because it is so unnatural.


Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.

This article analyzes some of the major trends in teaching composition from the 1950s through the 1960s. It addresses the role grammar played in composition instruction.

I sometimes ask my linguistics students to produce an ungrammatical sentence. At least 90% of the time, they do. I ask them to produce a sentence that is so unnatural. They then struggle to articulate the construction because it is so unnatural.


Worth B.: "Well, Maria went to the dance with Raul. Was she last night? And he goes like, 'I was, but it can take them ten seconds or more of visibly intense thought. They then struggle to articulate the construction because it is so unnatural.

Spelling with apostrophes and understanding possession.

British Journal of Educational Psychology, 67, 91–110.


College Composition and Communication, 29, 17–33.


