



Background

True or False?

1. Most high school graduates know that a noun is a person, place, or thing.
2. Most high school graduates are able to identify nouns.
3. Identifying nouns is a valuable skill for writers.
4. The primary role of grammar is to provide rules that help people speak and write correctly.
5. The ability to break sentences down into phrases and words and to label them is an important skill for writers.
6. When readers make judgments about stylistic sophistication, grammar is a primary means for evaluation.
7. All native speakers of English know English grammar very well.
8. Most students cannot acquire Standard Written American English (SWAE) unless they are able to contrast the grammatical structure of their writing with society's expectations for SWAE.



PC?

We have, in this country, been working for a long time to eliminate prejudice. We often go to considerable lengths to ensure that our language and actions are politically correct—generally referred to as being PC. However, there is one type of bias that permeates most educational institutions, and this bias needs to be addressed: Students and, quite often, English teachers have a deep-seated prejudice against grammar. Like many biases, this prejudice is based on misunderstandings:

- For over 150 years, the word *grammar* has conjured up images of boring classes, arcane concepts, rules and lists to memorize, sentences to diagram, and drill-and-kill exercises. In many corners, the mere mention of the g-word elicits moans and groans from students and teachers alike. This anti-grammar prejudice perseveres even though there are much better ways to teach grammar—ways that allow it to transfer to and positively affect student writing.
- To most people, grammar means two things: error correction (speaking or writing properly) and sentence analysis (identifying, labeling, diagramming, etc.). However, grammar means *much* more than that. Grammar is the meaning-making heart and soul of language. This concept is more fully developed later in the chapter.

This biased dislike of grammar is not PC—not *pedagogically* correct. The first four chapters of the book aim to change all of that. Properly presented, grammar—sentence structure—becomes a center point around which to build writing skills. A sound working knowledge of grammar will help your students

- avoid stigmatizing errors,
- develop variety in sentence structure or sentence fluency,
- make better rhetorical choices according to the context of the writing situation, and
- acquire a more mature, sophisticated style.

These early chapters, then, aim to change three things:

1. *Your Attitude*: How you view the role of grammar in language exchanges in general, and in writing in specific.
2. *Your Aptitude*: How you feel about your capability to teach grammar. If you feel that the subject is just too complicated or boring, if you never got it (or hated it) when *you* studied grammar (if you ever did), you will feel much better prepared after reading this section.
3. *Your Approach*: How you incorporate grammar instruction into your **English language arts (ELA)** classroom.

Processional Caterpillars

A French entomologist is said to have conducted an experiment with processional caterpillars, pesky creatures found mainly in Europe. These caterpillars are so named because, wherever they go, they march in a line—bumper to bumper, so to speak—unthinkingly following the one in front. The scientist took a flowerpot, filled it with dirt, and placed food in the center. He then carefully placed the caterpillars around the rim of the flowerpot and watched as they, true to character, began to march around the rim, unquestioningly following the leader. They marched like this for seven days and seven nights, round and round the pot—sustenance a mere few inches away—until they began to fall off of the flowerpot, exhausted and dying.

When I read about this piece of research, I was struck by a startling similarity: Those processional caterpillars sounded just like traditional grammar teachers! For the past 150 years, generations of teachers have been blindly following in the footsteps of those before them, unquestioningly trying to teach grammar just like their predecessors did—to students who hate it—until they finally collapse, exhausted by the futility of their efforts.

Sustenance, in the form of truly enlightening information from the fields of linguistics and human cognition, is now within easy reach. Such information will allow English teachers to better impart the knowledge that their students need in order to improve their writing skills—and to do so in a manner that is much more interesting, fun, and effective.

A Classroom Example

In every freshman composition class that I teach, I ask my students on day one to give me the definition of a noun. They all respond in almost perfect unison: “It’s a person, place, or thing.” Occasionally someone will add, “Or an idea.” Do they know what they are talking about or are they merely parroting what they have heard?

To find out, I write three words on the board:

beautiful
beautify
beauty

I ask the students to raise their hands if they can, with a high degree of confidence, tell me which of these three words is a noun. The best response I have ever gotten is a 25% show of hands. I then ask students to raise their hands if they don’t have a clue. Hands from the remaining 75%+ invariably go shooting into the air. Something is seriously wrong here!

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I then write three more words on the board:

grape
apple
banana

I tell the class that all three of these words are nouns and ask them to tell me what single letter they could add to the end of all three words if they wanted to. The class quickly agrees: *-s*. And, I ask them, what happens to the words when that letter is added? They inform me with great confidence that the words become plural—more than one. I then ask the class what this piece of information allows us to say about nouns in general. They usually tell me that nouns are words to which we can add an *-s* in order to make it plural. I now introduce two more nouns and ask them to double-check their conclusion:

man
woman

We decide that nouns are words that can be made plural, *usually* by adding *-s*.

We then go back to the original three words:

beautiful
beautify
beauty

I ask the class if an *-s* can be added to *beautiful* → *beautifuls*. No way, they inform me. I cross it out.

Next, I ask if an *-s* can be added to *beautify* (ignoring the spelling change)? Yes—*beautifies*. Does that make it mean more than one? No. I cross it out.

Can an *-s* be added to *beauty*? Yes—*beauties*. Does that make it mean more than one? Yes. Bingo!

Suddenly, within the space of 2 to 3 minutes, I have transformed the entire class—both native and non-native speakers—into a roomful of noun-identifying geniuses.

I do not share this example because I believe that the ability to identify a noun from a list of decontextualized words is an important skill. It isn't. Instead, I present it as a microcosm of what's wrong with traditional grammar pedagogy (TGP). The students knew the definition of a noun—it had been hammered into their heads repeatedly for years. However, the definition was *not connected to what they already knew about English*, so most of them could not *apply* this knowledge to a language-related task. This demonstration—this sad tale—could be repeated over and over again, switching out the traditional grammar teaching point, but producing the same discouraging results.

Student Reactions

Processional caterpillar grammar teaching is ineffective: Most teachers hate it, most kids hate it, and it doesn't transfer. We will examine why TGP fails and how to replace it with a different approach—an approach that has been thoroughly classroom tested, an approach that is *much* more successful (not to mention *fun*).

Let me share with you a few of the many comments about grammar that my students have made on anonymous evaluation forms from freshman composition courses—both developmental and regular sections—across several semesters. The form simply asks the students to comment on what they liked about the course:

- “Made grammar and writing easy enough for me to understand it. I’m usually terrible at English.”
- “I finally for once understand grammar.”
- “I’ve learned a lot about grammar and language—things that have changed some of my views entirely.”
- “In high school I had a lot of trouble learning grammar. This is the first time I have fully understood and even enjoyed it.”
- “I learned more [about grammar] in four weeks than I learned in the past four years.”

Keep in mind that the students were not asked to make comments about any specific aspect of the class—they voluntarily wrote about the grammar component. I can assure you that, when I was teaching traditional grammar, I *never* got these kinds of remarks.

What Is Grammar?

As stated earlier, when most people hear the word *grammar*, they conjure up two images:

1. *Error Correction*: Grammar is determining whether the subject agrees with the verb; whether the pronoun is in the proper case; whether a sentence is a fragment, a run-on, or a comma splice; and so on. In other words, grammar is error correction.
2. *Sentence Analysis*: Grammar is breaking sentences into their constituents and labeling each one (subject, predicate, direct object, indirect object, participial phrase, etc.). Sentence diagramming is a tool that has been traditionally employed to demonstrate how things hang together.

Grammar is, indeed, all these things; however, it is so much more. Grammar is the meaning-making center of language; it is what allows us to string words together in meaningful utterances.

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Klammer, Schulz, and Volpe (2007, p. 45) provide a very vivid demonstration of the meaning-making power of grammar. Look at the following “Jabberwocky”-like sentence containing several nonsense words:

The *winfy prunkilmog*er from the *glidgement mominkled* and *brangified* all his *levensers vederously*.

In this example, the words that carry most of the meaning of the sentence, the **content words**, are nonsense words. However, the words that have relatively little *meaning* but that are required by the *grammar* of English, the **function words**, are left intact. The sentence is readable and, in a limited sense, understandable—one could ask and answer questions such as the following:

1. “What kind of *prunkilmog*er are we talking about?” “A *winfy* one.”
2. “What did the *prunkilmog*er do?” “It *mominkled* and *brangified* all his *levensers*.”

The authors then provide a second sentence that reverses the situation: The content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) are real, but the function words are nonsense:

Glop angry investors *larm blonk* government harassed *gerfritz* infuriated *sutbor pumrog* listeners thoroughly.

This version is absolutely nonsensical. When the *grammar* is removed from the sentence, it becomes little more than a list of unrelated words. These two versions of the same sentence are a dramatic demonstration of how grammar lies at the heart of meaning in English. Words have their individual meanings, but without grammar, we cannot tie them together into meaningful utterances.

An additional, vitally important function of grammar involves style: It is a *primary means* by which we judge whether a piece of writing is stylistically mature and sophisticated or simplistic and childish. The following two sentences illustrate this fact:

Version 1: It is difficult to buy a car. I want a sports car. I want a big engine. I want leather seats. I cannot afford one.

Version 2: Buying a car is difficult: I want a sports car with a big engine and leather seats, but I cannot afford one.

Notice that the vocabulary does not change between the two versions.¹ In fact, nothing but *grammatical devices* were used to transform version 1

¹Vocabulary certainly plays an important role when readers judge the sophistication of a passage; however, grammar is at least as important—and probably more so.

into version 2—devices with which your students are very familiar. And the effect is stunning: Version 1 sounds as if it were written by a third-grader at best; version 2 was clearly written by a competent adult writer. If you were an employer, which of these authors would you want working for you?

Hancock (2005) captures the essence of grammar much more clearly with his definition: “*Grammar* is the natural, inherent, meaning-making system of the language, a system that governs the way words come together to form meanings. . . . A popular idea of grammar—and one that we are discarding—is that grammar is the set of prescriptive rules that limit the language we have available” (p. 6).

Traditional grammar pedagogy concentrates on the prescriptive rules (the trees, as it were) while completely missing the very heart and soul of what grammar truly is (the forest). Without grammar, we would not be able to combine words and phrases into anything much more complicated than a grocery list.

Traditional Grammar

Before we begin, let’s define our terms:

- **Traditional grammar** is an approach to the analysis of the English language. Standard terms (subject, verb, direct object, clause, parts of speech, etc.) are part and parcel of traditional grammar, as are rules for so-called “standard” English (subject-verb agreement, pronoun forms, verb tense usage, etc.).
- **Traditional grammar pedagogy (TGP)** is how the concepts and rules of traditional grammar have been taught in the classroom.

As a method for analyzing sentence structures, traditional grammar has, for the most part, served us well: It has allowed us to capture and codify many of the rules that underlie native speaker proficiency. Although the system is not perfect (what system is?), the perspective it has provided for the past 200 years is, for the most part, sound. However, classroom presentations of traditional grammar have proven not to be very effective. My intent, therefore, is not to create some fancy new way to analyze writing. Rather, my aim is to show a fresh, brain-based way to present traditional grammar concepts in the classroom—a way that ties new concepts to existing knowledge, and a way that shows students how to leverage what they already know in order to master the intricacies of Standard Written American English (SWAE). So I will be using traditional terms and concepts for the most part, but the teaching approach will be decidedly different.

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The Grammar Wizard

Every semester I ask my students to tell me what they consider to be their weakest area in writing; the large majority name grammar as their primary problem area. But they're wrong. They do have grammar problems—problems that cause them to make errors that are simply unacceptable in academic or business/professional circles, but the grammar that they *know* and get right *far* outweighs the grammar that they get wrong. While it is true that nobody speaks written English, the grammar of spoken English is, with surprisingly few exceptions, the same as the grammar of written English. These students are in amazing control of spoken English grammar—and have been for years.

Native speakers and advanced non-natives come into the classroom with more grammar knowledge locked up in their brains than is contained in any book or collection of books ever published. This phenomenal body of knowledge, something I refer to metaphorically as one's **Grammar Wizard**, is functioning at a subconscious level inside the brains of all of your students. No matter what grade you teach, your students' Grammar Wizards have had years of training—primarily in an oral environment—before arriving in your classroom. These Wizards are capable of amazing language feats; they crackle with activity whenever your students are speaking or listening, reading or writing. However, we humans take Grammar Wizards for granted—we are blissfully unaware of their presence and of the magic that they perform.²

In future chapters, I will show you classroom activities that demonstrate to your students that they *do* have highly functional Grammar Wizards, and I will develop ways to help your students take advantage of some of the unconscious knowledge that is locked up in their brains. For now, however, let's just acknowledge its existence.

What Students Already Know and Don't Know

Look at the following sentences:

According to research, sentence variety really works. It creates a favorable impression by adding maturity and sophistication to your writing.

²Many computer scientists have a much greater appreciation of the Grammar Wizard. They have been trying for decades to program machines that can analyze and understand human language—with very limited success.

Most students could not tell you that the first sentence begins with an adverbial prepositional phrase or that the second one contains a gerund phrase as an object of the preposition *by*. But they *can* read and comprehend these statements without a problem (assuming they know the vocabulary), and, at least in the later grades, they *can* make similarly patterned sentences by changing the topic and the words that are being used. In other words, their Grammar Wizards are in control of the grammar structures that comprise the sentences. The students just don't know that they know.

In the TGP classroom, one of the main objectives is to get students to the point where they can label every word and/or phrase in a sentence and explain its function. The sample sentences might be analyzed as shown in Table 1.1. Very few students could perform such an analysis, no matter

Table 1.1 Traditional Grammatical Analysis

Word	Part of Speech	Function
According to	Preposition	
research	Noun	Object of the preposition
sentence	Noun	Adjectival modifying "variety"
variety	Noun	Subject of the sentence
really	Adverb	Adverb modifying "works"
works	Verb	Verb (intransitive)
It	Personal pronoun (3 rd person sing.)	Subject of the sentence
creates	Verb	Verb (transitive)
a	Indefinite article	Adjective modifying "impression"
favorable	Adjective	Adjective modifying "impression"
impression	Noun	Direct object
by	Preposition	Adverbial modifying "impression"
adding	Gerund	Object of preposition
maturity	Noun	Object of gerund
and	Coordinating conjunction	
sophistication	Noun	Object of gerund
to	Preposition	Adverbial modifying "adding"
your	Possessive pronoun	Adjective modifying "writing"
writing	Gerund	Object of "to"

how much traditional grammar they studied. In fact, many English teachers could not perform this analysis, nor could many very successful professional authors. And yet, as stated earlier, students readily *understand* and can *produce* such sentences. Obviously, traditional grammatical analyses do not mesh with native speaker intuitions (i.e., Grammar Wizards) very well: A writer does not *require* this type of knowledge in order to write competently.

To Teach or Not to Teach

If students already know so much grammar, why bother to teach it? Before answering that question, we have to examine a fundamental issue. Two basic rationales exist for teaching grammar:

1. *Grammar as an End*: We must expand students' understanding of the language they speak. Because language is such an essential part of our everyday lives, well-educated people should be consciously aware of its inner workings.
2. *Grammar as a Means to an End*: We must equip students with the tools and knowledge they need in order to express themselves clearly and effectively, especially in a writing environment. It is our duty as educators to give all students equal access to **Standard Written American English (SWAE)**. The simple fact is that most students cannot acquire SWAE without being able to perform some sort of grammatical analysis of what they have written vis-à-vis what SWAE requires.

Should we teach grammar? Absolutely. An understanding of grammar is an enormously useful tool in the composition classroom. Not only can students learn to spot and repair areas that do not conform to societal expectations but they can also learn to write in a style that leaves at least a neutral, if not a positive, impression on the reader.

Although I heartily endorse motive 1 in general, years of teaching writing have convinced me that motive 2 is the absolutely indispensable one. Therefore, those areas of sentence structure that do not readily make a specific contribution to the improvement of writing will not be covered in this text. The intent is not to teach students to be able to break sentences down and analyze each and every constituent. Rather, it is to equip students with the specific knowledge they need in order to improve their composition skills.

In his ground-breaking book on grammar as it pertains to the writing classroom, Noguchi (1991) summed up the situation very well: "Paradoxically, maximizing the benefits of grammar instruction to writing requires teaching less, not more, grammar. This means making grammar instruction both less expansive and more cost-efficient" (p. 16). I couldn't agree more.

Discussion Questions

1. Review your answers to the true–false questions at the beginning of this chapter. Do you want to change any of your answers?
2. How has your idea of grammar been altered since reading this chapter?
3. If someone asks you to define grammar, how would you respond?
4. How would you define one’s Grammar Wizard?
5. The traditional grammar definition of a noun (a person, place, or thing) does not work very well in practice. Why is the Grammar Wizard definition of a noun (a word that can usually be made plural) so much more effective?
6. What is the difference between traditional grammar and traditional grammar pedagogy?
7. This chapter builds a case for including grammar in the composition classroom. Do you agree or disagree? Defend your answer.
8. What is the difference between being able to *understand* or *produce* a sentence and being able to *analyze* it into its constituent parts? Is it possible to be able to do one without the other? Explain.
9. Explain why the following analogy is fitting:
Understanding a sentence is to naming its parts as driving a car is to labeling the parts of the engine.
10. In your own words, explain the difference between teaching grammar as an end and teaching grammar as a means to an end.