

# On Not Teaching Grammar

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s editor of *Syntax in the Schools*, which is now the newsletter of the NCTE Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, I have watched (and participated in) the Great Grammar Debate for over ten years. That experience has led me to conclude that both sides of the debate are wrong. By “both sides,” of course, I mean those who argue that grammar should not be taught, and those who argue that it should. The debate continues, and will continue, both because the problem has been improperly stated, and because the debate is carried on by a few people at two extremes of our profession. The problem will be resolved only when the majority of the profession, currently in the middle, becomes active and reformulates the question.

## THE PROBLEMS OF THE ANTI-GRAMMARIANS: A HORSE WITHOUT A CART?

Writing is a form of communication, and communication is a form of transportation. Written communication, for example, transports ideas from the writer’s brain to the readers’. In a sense, therefore, writing, a means of communication, is like a horse, a means of transportation. I find the analogy interesting because a horse, although a fine means of transportation, cannot carry a very big load. Indeed, nowadays horses are used more for recreation than for transportation. What I want to suggest is that those teachers who argue against teaching grammar are, in fact, limiting the writing of many students to recreational use only. How often do English teachers say, “They write fine when we’re doing narratives, but when we get to expository writing, *everything* falls apart”? “Everything” usually includes grammar. The business world, of course, expects employees’ writing to be able to pull a load—a cart, if you will. An understanding of grammar, I suggest, is a primary connection between the horse and the cart.

The teaching of grammar, however, came to be scorned by many in our profession as a result of some research in the

1970s and as a result of a claim that students can learn grammar simply by writing. Both the research and the claim are faulty. Although a minor study appears here and there claiming to prove that students’ grammar improves as a result of writing—without any instruction in grammar—these studies are dying echoes of the research done in the early 1970s by John Mellon and Frank O’Hare. It is not even necessary to demonstrate the lack of validity of these studies: Frank O’Hare himself made that obvious when he published *The Modern Writer’s Handbook* (1993), at least a third of which is very traditional grammar. If O’Hare doesn’t believe in the validity of his own study, why should anyone else? Unfortunately, it is impossible to keep up with everything in the profession, and many teachers are not aware that the anti-grammar research is simply not valid. The claims that are still being made suffer from innumerable problems, ranging from the definition of “teaching grammar” to the definition of “improved writing.” For example, examination usually reveals that although “grammar” was not formally taught in the classroom, the teacher taught it in conferences with students. And in the Mellon and O’Hare studies, “improvement” meant that the students wrote longer clauses, not necessarily more “correct.”

## Frequency of Writing and Improved Grammar

The anti-grammar movement was bolstered by a belief among some teachers that students’ grammar would improve simply as a result of their writing, both more and more often. The reasoning behind this belief, however, begs the question. Generally, its proponents pointed to the fact that students who wrote more also made fewer errors. But this simply indicates that the students who don’t trip over grammatical problems tend to write more; it says nothing about those students who write less and do have problems—and they are the ones who need help. Where is the research study which “proves” that more writing will automatically overcome grammatical problems?

A veteran in the great grammar debate proposes a solution.

To be valid, of course, the study would have to be accompanied by the raw data, i.e., the writing of the students. As many within our profession have shown, errors are often in the eye of the reader/researcher. Unless the students' writing is available for validation by others, no such study can be persuasive.

### Prescriptive Grammar

Perhaps the main force behind the anti-grammar movement was the semi-justified desire to abandon the cart of "thou shall nots" of prescriptive grammar. Because English teachers are so poorly prepared to teach grammar, most teachers equated grammar with prescriptivism. Many teachers, for example, are still unaware of the basic distinction between usage and syntax, both of which are often equated with "grammar." Although there are gray areas, the distinction is comparable to the differences between our clothes and our skeleton. The rules of usage are the result of social conventions: "Don't use *ain't*." "Don't begin a sentence with *but*." "Don't use double negatives (or comparatives)." Violating these rules is like going to a formal party dressed in dirty work clothes. Educated listeners (or readers) will react negatively. They will probably wonder about the speaker's/writer's mental ability and education. But they will rarely, if ever, misunderstand what was meant.

### Rules of Syntax

Rules of syntax, on the other hand, are descriptions of the structure of the language. Syntactic constructions, moreover, are fairly limited in number. Subject/verb/complement patterns; modifiers (adjectives and adverbs); prepositional phrases; main and subordinate clauses; verbals (gerunds, gerundives, and infinitives); appositives and noun absolutes—these constructions account for 99% of the connections with which the human mind must contend in deciphering the language. One cannot say "Jonah ate the whale" and be interpreted as meaning that Jonah ended up in the whale's belly. Similarly, a misplaced modifier can result in unintended ambiguity or misinterpretation.

For example, a student wrote: "Being of an impulsive nature, my mother often accompanies me when purchasing clothing." Some teachers will say that we "know" what this sentence means, i.e., that the student has the impulsive nature. But that is not what the

sentence means, and how can we be sure that the student didn't mean exactly what she wrote? Violating the rules of syntax can result in the writer's attaching knee bones to shoulder bones, hip bones to heel bones.

The anti-grammar campaign did not even consider this fundamental distinction, but my purpose here is not to wage war against the anti-grammarians. That battle is over. The front-page headline of the October 1995 issue of *Composition Chronicle* was "Grammar Making a Comeback in Composition Teaching." Grammar is back. NCTE now has an Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, and *English Journal* issued the call for this special focus issue. But please, let's not go back to where we were 25 years ago.

### THE PROBLEMS OF THE PRO-GRAMMARIANS: THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE

The basic problem of the pro-grammarians, among whom I have many friends whom I hope to keep, is that they like to teach grammar. But all too often, they tend to fill the cart with grammar. Upon opening any grammar text, students are met by page after page of definitions, rules, exceptions, and simplistic exercises. Way back in 1969, John Mellon, describing the grammar texts used by the students in his control group, stated:

The remarkable thing about all the practice sentences, however, is that they represented immature types which junior high school composition teachers rightly exhort their students to avoid, although the experimenter finds **without exception** that all widely used seventh grade texts are limited to these puerile sentence types. (38, emphasis added)

That this is still the case can be easily verified. Randomly select ten sentences from the examples and/or exercises in a grammar book. Then do the same from the writing of students who are using the book. The writing of the students will probably have more words per main clause, more subordinate clauses per main clause, and, most important, a bigger mix of constructions within each main clause. It is this combining of constructions (technically called "embedding") that confuses students, both in their attempts to analyze sentences, and in their writing. Teaching grammatical terms, by itself, will not help students overcome these problems.

But currently, the baggage of grammatical terminology is literally pushed into the everyday classroom. Every year, thousands of teachers instruct the same students, over and over again, that “subjects must agree with their verbs in number.” Students are not stupid. They know that. Even the worst writers, most of the time, make their subjects and verbs agree. And when problems do occur, the teacher’s instructions are useless. The fact is, most students cannot IDENTIFY the subjects and verbs in their own writing.

A few years ago, we conducted a small study (which any teacher can replicate). One hundred thirty-one college freshmen were asked to identify the subjects and verbs in the sentences:

I never look at the sky on a summer evening and catch a glimpse of a small aircraft without recalling in vivid detail the tragic crash two years ago.

The children were playing in the yards, and the entire street was at peace.

That 28% of the students considered “recalling” a finite verb did not surprise me. What did was that 24% did not identify “look” as a verb; 34% did not identify “catch”; 44% did not identify “were”; and 50% did not identify “was.” Telling these students that “A subject must agree with its verb in number” is as effective as telling them that “a podlezhashchee must agree with its glagol in chislo.” Numerous studies have shown that there is little, if any, transfer of formal grammar instruction to students’ writing. As teachers, we complain about this as if it is the students’ fault. But it is ours. Unless we help students to identify—in their own writing—the various grammatical constructions about which we talk, we might as well keep silent.

Most grammar books, and therefore most teachers, treat one construction at a time. How often are students invited to analyze complete sentences, particularly their own? Other than being told that subordinate clauses “subordinate” (which is itself an interesting question), when are students invited to “synthesize,” by, for example, rewriting a passage in an attempt to make subordinate clauses main and main subordinate? How often are students told about the natural development of subordinate clauses? Kellogg Hunt, Roy C. O’Donnell, and Walter

Loban all concluded that such clauses blossom between seventh and ninth grades, appositives as late as tenth. Yet I have seen exercises for fourth graders that attempt to force students to combine sentences by placing an appositive between a subject and verb. These exercises are comparable to teaching weight-lifting to a 90-lb child by asking her to benchpress 400 lbs. Unfortunately, mental development, unlike physical, is not easily seen. And because thousands of educators are unaware of the processes of natural syntactic development, they often do what might be irremediable harm to students.

Teaching “grammar” doesn’t work because instruction is focused on individual rules, on exceptions, and on individual simplistic sentences. In practice, if not in theory, grammar often fills the cart. And the cart is disconnected from the horse.

### **IF NOT GRAMMAR, THEN WHAT SHOULD WE TEACH?: PUTTING THE HORSE IN FRONT**

Grammar and grammatical terms should be used as a tool to teach students how sentences work, including such things as how the human brain might process sentences and how different constructions do different things for different groups of writers. This means that grammatical terminology should be kept to a minimum and that emphasis should be put not on individual sentences, as it is in almost every current grammar book, but rather on sentences in context, i.e., paragraphs or short essays.

Exploring syntax in context can be fascinating both for students and teachers. A student, for example, wrote:

But the most vivid impression left on me this summer by this theater came not from the stage; instead it came from the rooms underneath the theater. In this world underneath existed an atmosphere of mystery which made me feel as if I was exploring an old dungeon in a decaying castle.

Traditional grammar, with its lists of out-of-context sentences, never deals with questions such as “What is ‘underneath’ in the second sentence?” Traditional grammar labels it as an adverb and forgets it. But in context, questions arise. Telling students to forget about grammar for a moment, I ask them to answer the question, “Underneath what?” I get some strange answers, answers

that confirm what reading specialists tell me—that students’ problems with reading are often problems of “putting the words together.” Eventually, however, a student realizes that the answer to the question is in the preceding sentence! (Who would have thought of that?) Viewed in this way, “underneath” can be considered as a preposition with its object ellipsed, or as an adverb. My experience has been that students enjoy things like this because, instead of being filled with countless rules and exceptions, they are instead involved in exploring how English works. That exploration is furthered when we discuss a model of how the human brain processes language.

### Chunking Words

The brain processes sentences by chunking words together within short-term memory. (The model of language processing that I use with students is based on the work of George Miller, 1956.) This processing can be described using standard grammatical concepts: the words within a prepositional phrase are chunked. Adjectives chunk to nouns and pronouns; adverbs, to verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Subordinate clauses chunk to a word outside themselves but within the main clause. At the end of a main clause, the meaning of the chunked sentence is dumped to long-term memory, and short-term memory is cleared for another sentence. The rhythms created by this chunking are a fundamental aspect of what we usually call “style.” Students can be fascinated if grammar is used to show them how their brain works and why some of their sentences don’t.

We know, for example, that the brain’s ability to chunk naturally improves with age. The studies by Hunt, Loban, and O’Donnell indicated that the average number of words per main clause *naturally* increases with age. What is most important for students, however, is where they fit in. If we teach students how to identify main clauses, we can then have them analyze a passage of their own writing and match it against the statistics of Hunt, etc. We need, however, to be careful—words per main clause is a very rough indicator of syntactic maturity. Teachers need to know more than students, so that, if a student ends up with a low count, the teacher can point out advanced constructions (such as participles and apposi-

tives) which reduce the number of words per main clause.

Such analysis can captivate students, especially when it gets beyond words per main clause. Each semester my students analyze a passage of their writing, including subordinate clauses per main clause. They usually average close to one subordinate clause per main clause. But almost every semester at least one student approaches me with, “I can’t find any.” And there aren’t any. Each semester I am also asked if it is possible to have a subordinate clause within a subordinate clause. We use brackets around such clauses, and there are always a few students who have brackets three deep.

### Texture

Class discussion also includes the stylistic aspects of subordination. One of the things we discuss is “texture.” I begin by asking the students to forget grammar and simply tell me what “texture” means. It takes them awhile, but they eventually arrive at the idea that “texture” is fundamentally the result of differences in surface structure: glass is smooth because the elements in its surface are all at the same level; bricks are rough because parts of the surface stand out and other parts are recessed. We can, of course, perceive structure without realizing what causes it. The same is true of subordinate and main clauses. Main clauses hold ideas at the same level, whereas subordinate clauses push ideas into the background, thereby foregrounding others. Consider the following sentence:

<A> We started to work on his engine, and he got in too much of a hurry.

<A> is a variation of the following, which appeared in a student’s essay:

<B> When we started to work on his engine, he got in too much of a hurry.

In <A>, the starting and the getting are coordinate: equal, level, and smooth. In <B>, the “starting” is pushed into the background, subordinated, thereby foregrounding the “getting,” which is, after all, the more important idea. Subordinate clauses, in other words, create texture, and controlling that texture can be important for the writer. Mak-

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ing it too smooth (all main clauses) may suggest that the writer cannot distinguish more important ideas from less important; making it too rough (too many subordinate clauses within subordinate clauses) results in difficulty for the reader who must disentangle it.

Just as we can perceive the texture of glass, etc. without understanding what causes it, so, too, readers can perceive the texture of writing. History professors, employers, and others may not be able to identify subordinate clauses, but their brains still must process sentences. It makes sense that the brain registers that it is doing something different when it chunks subordinate clauses. (At the simplest level, the brain must process two S/V patterns before it dumps to long-term memory.) Many writers subconsciously “feel” this difference in style. If there are no subordinate clauses in a student’s writing, the writing may seem simplistic. If the number is close to the average for the class, then the writing tends to appear average. If the subordinate clause count is close to that of professional writers (and the clauses are well handled), then the teacher may take the writer to be a member of his or her own group.

If, at the other extreme, the subordination is too complex and too deep, the writing becomes difficult to process, i.e., confusing. (Do we really need a research study to prove that a student’s ability to use subordinate clauses will probably have an effect on grades?) This type of instruction shows students how the grammar helps the horse pull the load (the content of the writing). In general, I suggest to students that the grammar itself should be transparent. As writers, we do not want our readers thinking about our grammar; we want them thinking about what we have to say.

#### **Short-Term and Long-Term Memory**

Given our model of how the mind processes language, students understand why comma splices, run ons, and fragments are not good. At the end of a main clause, readers need to dump the material in the previous main clause to long-term memory, thereby freeing short-term memory for the next main-clause pattern. Comma splices and run ons don’t signal that dump. The reader, therefore, attempts to chunk words in the next main clause back to the previous one. Since they don’t fit, the reader’s short-

term memory becomes clogged, or, in computer terms, the reading process “crashes.” Clearing that clog requires refocussing, which uses some additional space in short-term memory to focus on the grammar of an individual sentence. In doing that, the reader is liable to dump from short-term memory such things as the thesis or the main idea of the paragraph. Although an occasional clogging isn’t a major problem, every crash is liable to result in the dumping of the content of the cart, i.e., the more frequent the errors, the more likely that the reader will have trouble understanding the content of the paper. (Fragments, of course, cause a similar problem: the reader hits a signal to dump to long-term memory, but does not have a complete main-clause pattern.)

My students don’t try to avoid comma splices, run ons, or fragments because I told them to, or because “Those are the rules.” They do so because they understand the effects of these errors on their readers. Similarly, I don’t try to get students to use more (or fewer) subordinate clauses, etc. As they analyze their own writing, students who see that they do not have any subordinate clauses also see that most of their classmates do. On the other hand, those students who have them three deep realize that most of their classmates don’t. We discuss the implications of both extremes, and we explore how to combine or de-combine. After that, it’s the students’ responsibility. Most students not only accept, they welcome that.

#### **WHAT ENGLISH TEACHERS CAN DO**

The problem with what I have been suggesting is that colleges have not prepared most English teachers to teach it. Finding comma splices is one thing. But what about inviting students to analyze the structure of any sentence they read or write? Most English teachers can’t do this themselves. How colleges prepare—or don’t prepare—future teachers to teach grammar is an important question which I cannot adequately deal with here. My experience suggests that in smaller colleges, the single required course is often assigned to a member of the English department, often a member who has no interest in, or qualifications for, teaching it. In larger universities, the course is often taught by graduate students in linguistics. They usually teach linguistics (structural, transformational, etc.).

As a result, their students can make a tree diagram, but often can't identify all the finite verbs in a sentence.

There are, however, two things that English teachers can do. First, they can demand better instruction on how to teach grammar. As a profession, we have recognized this problem for a long time. But nothing has been done about it, and nothing will until teachers begin to realize that what they were not taught is not their fault. What is their fault is the failure to demand better preparation.

Second, teachers can start trying to teach students how to recognize grammatical constructions in their own writing. I would suggest that such teaching is not as difficult as it first seems, especially if one takes the attitude that the teacher is a guide and not a god or goddess. "I don't know" are my favorite words in the classroom. As students take turns analyzing the sentences in a passage, they often turn to me for the "correct answer." But "I don't know."

When I started teaching this way, the words were often true. Students, however, didn't believe me. They said that I was just trying to make them think. Usually, a student came up with a very sensible answer, some of which I have literally adopted. If the class was really stumped, and I was, too, I would say that I would have to think about it until next class. Then I would ask colleagues and others.

Sometimes, in the early years, problems were simply forgotten: students were more fascinated by how much they actually could analyze and understand. Now, of course, we have Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) and the Internet (<http://www.pct.edu/ateg/ateg.htm>). Post a problem sentence on ATEG's listserv ([listserv@miamiu.muohio.edu](mailto:listserv@miamiu.muohio.edu)), and you'll probably get several answers (all different) within 24 hours. If you don't have access to the Internet, send the sentence to ATEG's quarterly newsletter, *Syntax in the Schools*. It will take months for the sentence to be published and responded to, but that is one of the functions of the newsletter. A better idea, of course, would be to form a local chapter of ATEG, thereby forming a local network of support. The problems with the teaching of grammar won't be solved until

the non-specialists within the English profession become involved in solving them.

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#### Note

To join ATEG (NCTE's Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar), please contact: Martha Kolln, Chair, 3628 Buffalo Run Rd., Bellefonte, PA 16823. *Syntax in the Schools* is a regularly published newsletter on English grammar; contact editor Ed Vavra for more details.

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