most conversations about grammar would probably benefit from that word being barred from discussion altogether, which would force people to define exactly what they mean and what they think should be added, deleted, or changed in English classes. By avoiding the word entirely, people might find that they are arguing about different issues altogether, or that they actually agree with one another after all. If we must use that word, we should probably follow Martha Kolln’s advice in her 1996 English Journal article and avoid using what she calls “the unmodified grammar” (26); that is, the word used by itself without some clue as to whether we mean formal grammar, school grammar, linguistic descriptions of grammar, spelling, punctuation, usage, grammar worksheets, grammar in context (Constance Weaver’s phrase), error avoidance, or memorization of the parts of speech. However, in this article, we deliberately use the word grammar in its unmodified form because that is the way most people who complain about student writing still employ that word.

We must add, however, that there are undoubtedly other things people mean by “grammar” that are not explicit in the above list and perhaps not even recognized consciously by users of the word. As James Zebrowski suggests, the grammar debate is really about conflicting social forces people would rather not discuss: race and ethnicity, power and privilege, oppression and marginalization (318–19). Rhetoricians Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee are even more direct in their view that “usage rules are the conventions of written English that allow Americans to discriminate against one another” (283). The ongoing grammar issue is a patina for a more complex, serious debate we all need to have about power and opportunity in this culture. In light of these important problems, why do so many hand-wringing arguments about grammar circle back to the same tired question of how to make grammar interesting to students? We want to move important issues in the teaching of writing off the dime about grammar. The question in our title is meant to change the conversation and explode simplistic answers regarding writing pedagogy.

We know there are many effective writing teachers who understand that grammar is a tool for making meaning and not an end in itself. However, even those teachers are under increasing pressure to teach handbook rules in traditional fashion to address the “quick fix” requirements of pundits and politicians and increasingly more urgent standardized exams.

In the following section we don’t pull any punches in our attempts to challenge some problematic issues of grammar instruction. Our purpose is to transform inconsequential discussion of nouns, adverbs, and past participles to more significant discussion about writing, access, and improving the world.

Why Revitalize Grammar?

The call for this issue of English Journal was entitled “Revitalizing Grammar,” a title we believe reflects a
problematic approach. If “grammar” simply describes sets of conventions that result from actual language use, why would anyone want to—or need to—revitalize grammar? Wouldn’t we be better off revitalizing writing and reading or—even better—revitalizing writers and readers? After all, we believe our role as English teachers is not to popularize one particular form of study, but rather to educate young citizens in the complex skills of literacy—that is, effective use of language across contexts and purposes, as outlined in the NCTE Standards. Indeed many of us enjoy the study of grammar, but that in and of itself is simply not enough to justify it as a necessary part of English, particularly in the absence of any evidence that direct grammar instruction does anything to improve our students’ literacy skills. To make matters worse, if we teach standardized, handbook grammar as if it is the only “correct” form of grammar, we are teaching in cooperation with a discriminatory power system, one that arbitrarily advocates some language-use conventions as inherently better than others. And this is simple social indoctrination.

Grammar has a revered place in the world. If you ask any adult who is not an English teacher what should be taught in English class, high on the list will be grammar. Most parents believe the keys to career success come from knowing proper grammar. Some English teachers also consider grammar instruction, especially handbook rules, an important part of English education. Why does grammar enjoy such popularity among professionals and nonprofessionals alike? We believe there are many reasons, but they boil down to these two:

- The identification of one set of rules as the correct way to write allows all of us to pretend that there is one pathway to success that anyone in our democracy has equal access to.

- Approaching complex skills of writing as one set of grammar conventions gives teachers an easy, one-size-fits-all way to respond to student writing. This approach preserves authority in the classroom and gives teachers a quick, easy, and generally unquestioned method for ranking and grading their students’ writing.

Although many English teachers provide engaged responses to student drafts, others may feel perfectly justified in simply “correcting” student papers. We intend this essay as an indelicate corrective to those teachers’ feelings of self-righteousness when they do so. There are appropriate ways to teach our students effective language use, but to get to those ways we must challenge some questionable views that support direct grammar instruction.

**Challenging Views**

Some might say: Students who make grammar errors are lazy.

We say: Teachers who mark grammar errors are lazy.

As Donald Daiker points out, Paul Diederich’s thirty-year-old research has suggested that students’ writing improved more from praise than it did from correction (105). Daiker further points out that errors are “more readily recognized” and named by instructors than are the sophisticated syntactical or word patterns used occasionally by writers. In other words, it is easy to circle a spelling error or misplaced comma. Almost anyone can “correct” a draft. Not everyone can respond to it in a comprehensive, sophisticated manner. Daiker also points out that we are much less used to analyzing and articulating what it is exactly that “works” in an essay. Effective writing is not effective due to an absence of error. Effective writing works because it achieves its purposes with the particular audience for whom it was intended to work.

Some might say: Students need to know grammar rules before they can break them.

We say: Grammar rules should be the last thing on student-writers’ minds.

In defense of direct grammar instruction, we have often heard something like, “Babies have to learn to crawl before they can walk.” We believe this misses the point. Babies are not out to learn to walk or to crawl. They are out to get something they want—a bottle on a table, for example. They do what they need to do to get the bottle, and as time goes by they learn better and better ways of getting the bottle. But their goal was always the bottle, not the walk. And good parents applaud the attempt. They don’t lecture their babies on bad crawling form or make them perform leg exercises before they start across the room. Communicating effectively is the road to success. Knowing the rules is largely irrelevant to communication. Writers learn to communicate by communicating, not by memorizing rules.
Rather than writing with the goal of “following the rules,” students should genuinely experience what it means to write for others. Student writers should come to understand how their writing is interpreted by those to whom they wish to speak. In addition, and although this can get very complicated, students should also be let in on what Joseph Williams calls “the phenomenology of error.” Williams demonstrates that “error” is not a stable, observable departure from fixed rules, but rather a phenomenon of who is reading whose texts for what purposes. Typically, we teachers read student texts expecting to find errors. And so we do. We read handbooks and professional articles not expecting to find error, so we literally do not notice in these handbooks exactly the same “errors” we so easily pounce on when we read students’ papers. Error, then, is not a simple “right or wrong” usage we can point to once and for all. Rather, error and its perception is a confusing crossroads of expectation, genre, and the perceived roles of reader and writer. This crossroads might be frustrating for both students and teachers, but confronting it—and all its unfairness—is infinitely more dramatic and interesting than whether effect or affect is right or wrong in a particular sentence.

Some might say: Teachers tell student writers what they’re doing wrong so that the students will write better in the future.
We say: Teachers tell student writers what they are doing wrong because they don’t know what else to tell them.

Too many student writers are armed with misinformed or not-quite-true commands about style and grammar, which are inevitably stated in the negative: “Never start a sentence with ‘because.’” “Never end a sentence with a preposition.” “Don’t use ‘I.’” In fact, student peer editors seem so desperate to point out the negative in their classmates’ drafts that they literally invent errors. For example, we had one student chastise another for “misspelling” the phrase a lot, which the responder thought should be spelled alot. Other students will mark any short sentence as a fragment or any long sentence as a run-on. The problem here is not that writers don’t know grammar; it’s that some responders are obsessed with it! When grammar problems aren’t in the writing, sometimes respondents will make them up just to have something to say.

Some might say: If students are taught to write according to the rules, their writing may come across as more educated.
We say: If students are taught to write according to the rules, their writing may come across as stilted and pompous.

Prioritizing “the rules” of grammar is not the path to success in the world. For some students, “grammar rules” will rarely matter. Students are not all judged equally and their access to upward mobility is not equal. Some students have advantages because of their socioeconomic status (not to mention race, gender, and other factors). We need only look at some of our most prominent politicians to see how butchered language does not hinder their access to power; in fact, some say it’s a positive feature that makes old-money millionaires appear “folksy.” For others, new grammar rules will always be created to prevent them from achieving success in their writing. To combat these barriers to upward mobility, students do not need to know “the rules” for writing successfully. What they need is the ability to communicate effectively with people in all kinds of contexts for all kinds of purposes. This requires flexible writing skills and years of experience writing about real things for real people. Pretending that grammar rules provide a smooth, toll-free road to economic success is a harmful myth, one that smart students no longer really believe anyway.

Some might say: If students are taught to write according to the rules, their writing will be clearer.
We say: If students are taught to write according to the rules, their writing will be clearer.

There have been a number of studies that investigate the “grammar errors” to which readers react most strongly. In a recent one, Larry Beason summarizes previous error studies and points out that readers often say that they detest error in writing almost anyone can “correct” a draft. Not everyone can respond to it in a comprehensive, sophisticated manner.
because it interferes with “clarity.” However, the reasons readers give for their negative reactions do not always match up with the kinds of errors that would exemplify those reasons. As Beason shows, the business people he studied seemed more upset about the writer’s character regarding such things as perceived hastiness, carelessness, or disrespect—all moral judgments—than they did about whether the error interfered with meaning.

Beason’s study was published in the academic journal *College Composition and Communication*, but we notice similar attitudes lurking in a recent “Dear Abby” column (April 9, 2002): “…I am amazed at the number of people who use ‘got’ when they should say ‘have;’” writes a woman from Levittown, Pennsylvania. Abby writes back with her own list of pet peeves, among them some fairly common confusions: *lie/lay; between you and I/between you and me; and irregardless*—the latter word, Abby notes with irritation, having “nosed its way into the dictionary” as a synonym for *regardless*. Not one of these examples interferes with clarity or communication, unless, of course, readers have put themselves into such a state over the offense that they cannot concentrate on what the writer or speaker is trying to communicate. We submit that the problems here are largely those of the readers/listeners, who seem to delight in judging the education of the users or in rehearsing a rule dutifully memorized many decades ago. What is most disturbing about the column is the supercilious moralizing about, and ridiculing of, people who do not speak or write like Abby and her ilk.

It may well be that readers sincerely believe their pet peeves have to do with “clarity,” a righteous, socially-acceptable reason for hating “grammar errors.” A closer look at their reasons, however, might help us be more honest with ourselves and our students. Surely there is more involved here than an innocent plea for clarity. Because young people can smell hypocrisy like no one else, perhaps they would respond more positively to analyzing, facing, and then dealing with the reasons people give for their horror regarding perceived errors in “grammar.”

Some may say: Effective writers follow the rules.  
We say: Effective writers have something to say and follow or break the rules to say it.

Published contemporary writers do all sorts of things students are taught to avoid. Pulitzer Prize-winning writer E. Annie Proulx’s novel *The Shipping News* is chock full of what any grammar handbook would label as “fragments,” and Booker Prize winner Roddy Doyle never uses quotations around his characters’ dialogue. Conventional wisdom has it that “people must know the rules before they can break them,” but we think more interesting phenomena are involved. We think students should read more contemporary published genres of all kinds—novels, essays, opinion pieces, humor columns, etc.—and discuss, among other things, of course, the deliberate departures from handbook dictums that they find in these works.

Some may say: Students need grammar rules to learn standard English.  
We say: Teachers need to learn the rule-bound grammars of students’ home languages.

We are going to set aside for now the problems with trying to define what is sometimes called “Standard English,” “Standard Edited English,” or—our preference—“Standardized English.” These phrasings, and the debates regarding them, could by themselves be the focus of an interesting English class unit. Instead, we want to explain our view about what teachers need to learn. As Geneva Smitherman explains, studies show that when students who speak African American Vernacular English discuss in class the rule-bound, systematic nature of their own language, they are more amenable to learning “Standard English”—and they do learn it. On the other hand, if they are simply drilled on handbook English, with their own language implicitly dismissed as rule-breaking slang, they tend not to learn what their teachers want them to (160).

Published contemporary writers do all sorts of things students are taught to avoid.

As Smitherman points out, traditional grammar instruction may be hurting these students: the longer these students stayed in school, the worse their writing in “Standard English” became (161). The point seems to be that when students see that teachers (and the society teachers represent) re-
spect students’ home language (see it as just as rule-bound and systematic as “Standard English”), they can then view themselves as code-switching, sophisticated users of two languages, not as “bad speakers.” If students feel insulted, they are probably going to tune out, increase their use of their home language, or leave.

We think the lesson here is that student writers should be respected for the language use they have at the same time as they learn the tools for another language to use in other rhetorical situations. This is not a simple binary but a challenging both/and situation. Therefore, as Noma LeMoine also argues, it is “teachers’ views” and teacher knowledge (our emphasis) that are critical in student learning (170, 177). Teachers do not need a degree in linguistics to deduce the rule-bound nature of students’ home languages. As Rebecca Wheeler suggested at the 2001 NCTE convention, teachers need only be a bit more curious about those languages.

So What Else Can We Do in the Writing Classroom?

We’ve spent a great deal of time in this essay identifying and clearing away problematic views regarding student writers and grammar instruction. Now we’d like to suggest better alternatives. In fact, we believe that perhaps the greatest motivating factor behind some English teachers’ desire to teach grammar is that they harbor a secret fear: if they don’t grade grammar, they don’t know what else to do with student writing. Here are some suggestions.

- **Teach Issues of Grammar in the Teaching of Writing.** Go ahead and immerse your students in the controversies surrounding grammar, as James Sledd suggested several years ago: “If they [students] are ready for abstractions like subjects and predicates, they are ready for the abstractions of race and class” (62). If grammar is distinctly uninteresting as a standardized set of conventions, it is fascinating as shifting sets of agreements among communities of people attempting to communicate.

- **Build and Make Use of a Grammar-Controversy Archive.** There is no shortage of arguments about the value, purpose, and need for teaching grammar from journalists, politicians, school board members, administrators, English teachers, and teachers of other subjects. You and your students can collect as many pieces as possible and identify the issues at stake in controversies about teaching grammar.

- **Hold Public Grammar Debates.** Grammar instruction is a hot issue even in the general public. Take advantage of this by engaging your students in oral and written debates or even mock trials about what is at stake in particular controversies. Have the students make their arguments in public so they can employ varieties of writing and argument appropriate for different audiences.

- **Assign Descriptive Grammar Studies.** Students could use work from “descriptive linguistics” to examine the grammars used by real people in a variety of real contexts. For example, students could record, transcribe, and analyze conversations around their dinner table, at their job, in different classes, at formal meetings, among groups of friends and groups of their parents’ friends. Descriptive grammars demonstrate how equally effective but different kinds of grammars operate in different cultures and different contexts; anyone wishing to make a moral judgment of any of these contexts would be quickly proven wrong by much professional work in linguistics. (See Bryson, Gilyard, and Wolfram.)

**Teach Students How to Use Style Manuals**

One of the major difficulties in teaching writing is that so many students have been taught that there is one set of grammar rules that apply to all forms of writing. If there were only one correct set of rules, we would not have so many different sets of professional grammar and style rules available—e.g., *MLA Handbook, Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, The Chicago Manual of Style, The Gregg Reference Manual, The Elements of Style*.

Teaching students to use manuals to “stylize” their writing appropriately for whatever context is a skill they can take with them to college or wherever else they will write in the future. But style manuals can be far more than a writing tool for students. They can also open the doors to sophisticated understanding of communication.

Student writers benefit from experiencing what counts as correct is different, depending upon where they expect their writing to be read. Instead of teaching one set of correct rules, English teachers could have their students find and examine...
many different grammar and style manuals, which could be starting places for interesting and sophisticated discussion of language and language use. Students could use the manuals to discuss answers to the following questions: How do these rules differ from other style manual rules? What is valuable to this community? Who are the members of this community and what are the purposes for their writing? Which classes in school would this style manual be suitable for? What do these rules privilege? What do these rules deemphasize? Involving students in such discussions of language use encourages them to develop sophisticated, evolving perspectives on conventions in writing. It is also more likely to help them learn to negotiate different contexts for their writing once they are out of school.

Create Assignments that Require Students to Write for Real Audiences

Many school writing assignments are not written for real audiences. Instead, the students write texts assigned by teachers for those same teachers. From the beginning the teacher knows what the text should look like and the students simply create their best approximation. After several years, some students get good at approximating and are given high grades. These high grades are attributable to effective listening and effective use of school-writing rules, but they have little to do with effective writing and rarely encourage sophisticated writing or risk-taking. Anyone who reads texts written for any purpose other than to fulfill a school assignment knows that originality and risk-taking are important parts of writing. But what counts as original and enjoyable depends upon the audience for whom the writing is intended. One struggle for teachers and students is finding audiences outside of the class. The standard outside audiences—parents, friends, local newspapers—can run dry quickly. As many effective teachers have already discovered, other audiences can include local businesses, community organizations, Internet publications, print publications for teens and children, hobbyist magazines, retail corporations, employers, fellow employees. We’ve found a great resource in other writing classes, either in the same school or at different schools. We have had our college writing students create magazines about writing tailored for high school and middle school English students in our local community. Students and teachers together can invent ideas for new audiences.

Instead of teaching one set of correct rules, English teachers could have their students find and examine many different grammar and style manuals, which could be starting places for interesting and sophisticated discussion of language and language use.

Create Assignments that Require Students to Write for Real Purposes in Which They Are Truly Invested

Once students are given writing assignments that require them to address a real audience, they will need to investigate that audience closely enough to be able to be effective in communicating with it. If students really do want to engage those audiences, they will do what is necessary to make their writing effective, including making sure it counts as grammatically correct with their audience.

Create Assignments that Require Students to Write for Real Purposes in Which They Are Truly Invested

The most important lesson we have learned in our combined thirty-plus years of writing instruction is that students write more effectively when they are motivated by the message they are communicating. Students who are bored by circling subjects and predicates on grammar worksheets (and who could blame them?) become genuinely enthused about issues of style, clarity, and appropriateness when they care about the purposes for their writing. Students may not be enthralled with yet another five paragraph essay on the meaning of the conch in *Lord of the Flies*, but there are things they do care about. It is our duty as teachers to help those students find topics that will engage them. Like finding real audiences, composing something worth asserting is sophisticated and important communications work. If teachers find that their students are not motivated to find topics of interest or truly can’t find something
to say, that's a problem worth acknowledging. Let's identify and deal with it, rather than cover it up with reams of grammar quizzes.

If students are able through their English classes to write something they really care about, and if they write to several audiences to whom they really do wish to speak, then we teachers would be hard pressed to hold them back from achieving their aims. With motivated writers, teachers become coaches and resources, not judges and rule-bearers. The greatest side benefit of this kind of writing instruction is that it is so much more interesting for the teachers!

**Juxtapose Rants about Grammar**

One sure way to revitalize writing, and writers, would be to juxtapose, for example, Dear Abby’s overreaction to *irregardless* with Crowley and Hawhee’s view that usage conflicts are really about prejudice and power. Such an examination would do two things. First, it would teach students what they need to know about grammar and usage to avoid condemnation by the grammar harumphers, thus helping them negotiate linguistically in the business and professional worlds. Second, it would help them alter and improve the world a bit. In other words, attention to writing effectiveness and grammar savviness, rather than to grammar “correctness,” would review the cherished rules while putting them in critical perspective.

A related project would be to have students take note of when and how people use the word “grammar” in our society—in conversations, newspaper syndicated columns, and letters to the editor. In class students might analyze what they think the writers or speakers mean by “grammar,” or why they are so disproportionately outraged over someone using *irregardless*. Students could examine handbooks from twenty or thirty years ago to discover how usage “rules” change or how words get added to dictionaries.

This archeological dig into how society uses and gets upset about language would also do two things. First, by giving students so much exposure to dictionaries, handbooks, and pundit rants about precise language use, this activity would incidentally teach the very “linguistic etiquette” savvy writers and speakers still need to know if they are going to be using language in our sometimes neurotic society. Second, and more importantly, it would dramatize the power and passion surrounding issues of grammar, showing clearly the stakes involved. It would teach “grammar” at the same time that it would question grammar’s use as a measure of things that have nothing to do with grammar. It would put the spotlight on language use at the same time as it puts the spotlight back on the judges of language use. Can students handle the confusions, the contradictions, the challenges such an approach would engender? We believe so. In fact, we think students and teachers would be energized by a sophisticated analysis of language and language users.

**A Final Note, and What We’re Not Saying**

We’re not saying that attention to careful language use is not important. In fact, we are saying that attention to careful language is so important that students must be taught the complex, higher order tasks of analyzing each rhetorical situation in which they write. They need to practice writing for different purposes and for readers with different expectations, so that they can make sophisticated decisions about audience, purpose, and voice. They need to make difficult but informed choices regarding each rhetorical situation: level and type of formality needed, possibilities for changes in active or passive voice, point of view, vocabulary, sentence structure, formatting, copy editing conventions, etc. These decisions are so important to effective writing that we need to help students learn how to make them. All this takes time—time we can no longer waste trying to revitalize grammar. It’s time we revitalize writers.

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