

Laura R. Micciche

## Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar

---

Rhetorical grammar analysis encourages students to view writing as a material social practice in which meaning is actively made, rather than passively relayed or effortlessly produced. The study of rhetorical grammar can demonstrate to students that language does purposeful, consequential work in the world—work that can be learned and applied.

---

**G**rammar makes people anxious, even—perhaps especially—writing teachers. Just as writing teachers dread when, our identities discovered, strangers announce that they had better “watch their grammar,” we also recoil at the idea of teaching grammar, often considered a mind-numbing pedagogical task that offends our rhetorical sensibilities. In composition studies, grammar instruction is unquestionably unfashionable. It is frequently associated with “low-skills” courses that stigmatize and alienate poor writers while reproducing their status as disenfranchised. This association emerges naturally from teaching methods that present grammar as a fix-it approach to weak writing rather than, as Martha Kolln describes, “a rhetorical tool that all writers should understand and control” (*Rhetorical Grammar* xi). As a result, students’ understanding of the tight weave between what we say and how we say it often gets short shrift as we reserve instruction on grammar for the very final stage of drafting.

CCC 55:4 / JUNE 2004

In composition's disciplinary discourse (and perhaps in practice, though it's hard to know), teaching grammar and teaching writing are separate enterprises. While teaching style, the "extraordinary" use of language, is a familiar enough focus in disciplinary scholarship, teaching the "ordinary" use of language—grammar—is often constructed as ineffective because, it is widely believed, grammar knowledge out of context doesn't translate to grammatical correctness in context.<sup>1</sup> Further complicating the problematic place of grammar in writing instruction is the matter of what *kind* of grammar we're talking about. Often *grammar* is used in a way that assumes we all understand and agree upon its meaning—and, in fact, grammar referred to loosely seems to signify traditional "school grammar" and its focus on repetitive, decontextualized, drill-and-kill exercises. However, grammar has a range of referents (i.e., prescriptive, descriptive, rhetorical) that describe very different kinds of intellectual activities, differences that matter tremendously. These differences evaporate, reducing the issue of grammar instruction to a rather simple rejection of a banal practice, when we fail to specify just what kind of grammar we're rejecting.

My aim in this paper is to establish grounds for teaching grammar rhetorically and for linking this pedagogical effort to larger goals of emancipatory teaching. Teaching grammar is not *necessarily* incompatible with liberatory principles; binaries that suggest otherwise constrain our teaching and our thinking, solidifying and casting as unquestionable rehearsed assumptions about writing. The absence of a sustained contemporary conversation about grammar instruction at the college level does not eclipse the practical reality that nearly every writing teacher struggles with at one time or another: how to teach students to communicate effectively. And effective communication, which entails grammar knowledge, is essential to achieving many of the goals regularly articulated in composition studies. Chief among them are teaching students to produce effective writing that has some relevancy to the world we live in, to see language as having an empowering and sometimes transformative potential, and to critique normalizing discourses that conceal oppressive functions.

Rhetorical grammar instruction, I argue here, is just as central to composition's driving commitment to teach critical thinking and cultural cri-

**Rhetorical grammar instruction is just as central to composition's driving commitment to teach critical thinking and cultural critique as is reading rhetorically, understanding the significance of cultural difference, and engaging in community work through service-learning initiatives.**

tique as is reading rhetorically, understanding the significance of cultural difference, and engaging in community work through service-learning initiatives. Yet, teaching students grammar skills is rarely associated with the political programs that characterize our disciplinary rhetoric and is seldom linked with rhetorical education or the practice of cultural critique. Grammar instruction, in short, is decidedly not sexy but school-marmish, not empowering but disempowering, not rhetorical but decontextualized, not progressive but remedial.

I hope this study of rhetorical grammar will contribute to our collective thinking about the work of rhetorical education, its possibility and its promise. Donald Bryant, in “Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope,” offers an instructive description of the need for rhetorical education:

If enlightened and responsible leaders with rhetorical knowledge and skill are not trained and nurtured, irresponsible demagogues will monopolize their power of rhetoric, will have things to themselves. If talk rather than take is to settle the course of our society, if ballots instead of bullets are to effect our choice of governors, if discourse rather than coercion is to prevail in the conduct of human affairs, it would seem like arrant folly to trust to chance that the right people shall be equipped offensively and defensively with a sound rationale of informative and suasive discourse. (291)

The construction of “informative and suasive” discourse includes knowing one’s audience, responding appropriately to a particular situation, and drawing on relevant examples and illustrations. As I suggest here, it also requires an ability to communicate effectively, using grammatical devices that enable us to respond appropriately and effectively to a situation. Like Bryant, I believe that rhetoric—including rhetorical grammar—should occupy a place of “uncommon importance” in general education (291). While this emphasis is consistent with that of some ancient rhetoricians,<sup>2</sup> contemporary rhetoricians, by omission rather than vocal opposition, tend to construct grammar as outside the realm of rhetoric.

We need a discourse about grammar that does not retreat from the realities we face in the classroom—a discourse that takes seriously the connection between writing and thinking, the interwoven relationship between what we say and how we say it. In addition, we need to ask questions about the enabling work of grammar instruction alongside composition’s view of writing and its instruction as social practices that have the potential to both reproduce and challenge cultural values, truths, and assumptions. Can grammar knowledge be conceived as extending the work of cultural critique? How might

we teach grammar in a way that supports rhetorical education? I believe that the examinations of language made possible through rhetorical grammar pedagogy encourage students to view writing as a material social practice in which meaning is actively made, rather than passively relayed or effortlessly produced. In this sense, rhetorical grammar instruction can demonstrate to students that language does purposeful, consequential work in the world—work that can be learned and applied.

### Rhetorical grammar as a way of thinking

*Let no man, therefore, look down on the elements of grammar as small matters; not because it requires great labor to distinguish consonants from vowels, and to divide them into the proper number of semivowels and mutes, but because, to those entering the recesses, as it were, of this temple, there will appear much subtlety on points, which may not only sharpen the wits of boys, but may exercise even the deepest erudition and knowledge.*

—Quintilian (in Murphy 29)

The chief reason for teaching rhetorical grammar in writing classes is that doing so is central to teaching thinking. The ability to develop sentences and form paragraphs that serve a particular purpose requires a conceptual ability to envision relationships between ideas. Such relationships involve processes of identification with an imagined or real reader and reflection on the way our language invites and/or alienates readers. The grammatical choices we make—including pronoun use, active or passive verb constructions, and sentence patterns—represent relations between writers and the world they live in. Word choice and sentence structure are an expression of the way we attend to the words of others, the way we position ourselves in relation to others. In this sense, writing involves cognitive skills at the level of idea development *and* at the sentence level. How we put our ideas into words and comprehensible forms is a dynamic process rather than one with clear boundaries between what we say and how we say it.

**The grammatical choices we make—including pronoun use, active or passive verb constructions, and sentence patterns—represent relations between writers and the world they live in. Word choice and sentence structure are an expression of the way we attend to the words of others, the way we position ourselves in relation to others.**

Of course, linking grammar and conceptual thinking is not the first thing that comes to mind when we think of teaching grammar. Usually, our minds

go to those unending rules and exceptions, those repetitive drills and worksheets, perhaps even to diagramming sentences with a ruler, performing a quasi-scientific operation on language (one that I found particularly satisfying while in middle school). These are the hallmarks of formal grammar instruction, the deadening effects of which are widely known. A familiar argument against teaching formal grammar, particularly forceful since the rise of process pedagogies, insists that integrating grammar instruction would dangerously reduce time spent on higher-order concerns like invention and arrangement. Another argument contends that if students can't articulate their ideas in a comprehensible form, correct grammar does nothing to improve their writing. Both lines of argument rely on the faulty assumption that grammar instruction means only *formal* grammar instruction, the deadly kind that teaches correctness divorced from content and situation. Both lines of argument keep intact the binary that defines grammar instruction in opposition to composing and thinking, a binary that reproduces the notion that grammar-talk is most appropriate for the end stage of drafting.

When grammar is reserved for end-stage drafting, it is most often a version of formal grammar or "school grammar." The following passage, excerpted from the *Instructor's Manual and Answer Key to Accompany The Writer's Harbrace Handbook*, provides a familiar, though not an isolated, example of just what generates fear and paranoia in students and teachers alike:

Once we diagnose and show students how to correct errors, then they must correct them consistently. Making comments about errors on drafts and then requiring students to turn in revisions provide immediate practice. However, only through subsequent assignments, however [sic], can we assess students' mastery over errors. Therefore, instructors and students should record errors, and instructors should hold students accountable for correcting those errors. (Winchell 21)

The orientation to grammar here is error driven and disciplinary, as evidenced in the description of efforts to "diagnose," "record," and "correct" errors. The goal is student "mastery over errors," resulting in self-conscious correction. Intentionally or not, the framework is one of finding and fixing errors rather than of active choice making for a purpose. Rhetorical grammar instruction, in contrast, emphasizes grammar as a tool for articulating and expressing relationships among ideas. The purpose of learning rhetorical grammar is to learn how to generate persuasive, clear thinking that reflects on and responds to language as work, as *produced* rather than evacuated of imperfections.

How we think and give shape to ideas is intimately tied up with the forms, patterns, and rhythms of spoken and written language. Thus, writing is profoundly reflective of the deep grammars that we absorb as inhabitants of a particular place and time. For this reason, when we reserve grammar-talk for the end of the drafting stage, I think we miss opportunities to discuss with students how the particulars of language use show us something about the way we figure relationships among people, ideas, and texts. Writing teachers need to be able to talk about how a well-coordinated sentence can keep your reader breathlessly moving with you, how techniques that create rhythm and emphasis heighten the feeling being conveyed, how subordination expresses relationships among ideas, how someone like Eminem uses repetition and power words—or words of emphasis—to create culturally relevant and, for some people, resonant stories.

More than a systematic application of rules, Mina Shaughnessy reminds us, grammar involves “a way of thinking, a style of inquiry,” as opposed to “a way of being right” (129). For instance, we learn through Quintilian’s excerpt above that *men* and *boys* are the subjects of education; his word choice reveals his “way of thinking” about who is entitled to an education. His male referents point to the real exclusion—as opposed to functioning as convenient placeholders for all people—of women and girls from the educational enterprise in the eighteenth century. When we broaden the goals of rhetorical grammar, it’s possible to see how the intimate study of language it encourages has enormous potential for studying language as central to constructions of identity and culture. Rhetorical grammar enables such readings because it is “grammar in the service of rhetoric,” which means that grammar is never divorced from ideological functions (Kolln, “Rhetorical Grammar” 29).

I am talking about rhetorical grammar as an integral component of critical writing, writing that at minimum seeks to produce new knowledge and critique stale thinking. One of the key operations of critical writing is that it locates an object of discourse in space and time, thereby placing it in a system of relationships. Joan Didion, in “Why I Write,” describes this function when commenting on grammar’s “infinite power”: “All I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed” (7). As Didion’s

**“All I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed.”**

comment suggests, grammar is a positioning tool, a way of framing and presenting ideas that influences how and what we see.

This shaping of meaning through writing is intimately connected with a writer's grammatical choices. Elizabeth Bruss illuminates this idea in her brilliant study of the discourse of literary theory, *Beautiful Theories*. She suggests that the rhetoric of grammar is an important factor in the construction and consumption of theoretical discourse, and it tells us something about the "mind" in the writing. She explains, "In reading theory, one often notes where the energy of the writing seems to have been expended—in lush diction or well-turned phrases, in the juxtaposition between sentences or organization of larger episodes. From this, one receives a first (if not always a lasting) impression of the power or delicacy of mind that informs the theory" (117). She notes that the "manipulation of syntax" in theoretical writing creates a "disturbing sense of disorientation," a point that nicely describes the way grammar and content work together in theoretical writing to disturb settled or "natural" ways of thinking (122).

Referring to language as "conceptual machinery," Bruss observes: "One comes to know the nature of this machinery through watching how it functions and using it for oneself, rather than by visualizing or possessing it as a set of properties" (131). Bruss's emphasis on *use* as a way to test and experiment with the possibilities of language informs my commonplace book assignment, designed for teaching rhetorical grammar. As demonstrated in the student writing samples in the next section, the study of rhetorical grammar encourages students to experiment with language and then to reflect on the interaction between content and grammatical form. While this approach entails study of sentence slots, structures like participial phrases and adverbials that add information to a sentence, and the difference between independent and dependent clauses, rhetorical grammar more generally requires students to think about the work these aspects of grammar achieve for a writer's message. In practical terms, as well as identifying a dependent clause, students are asked to construct a sentence with a dependent clause in it and to explain the discursive effects of subordinating one idea to another.

Among other things, I want students to consider how such a sentence-level choice might reflect configurations of power in a more general sense. Explaining how discursive practices signify more than technical skill, Michel Foucault writes, "Discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behavior, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in

pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them” (128). To illustrate just how language practices are embodied in cultural institutions, I have asked students to read a variety of texts that bring this issue to life. Selections have included George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language,” bell hooks’s “Language,” excerpts from Robin Lakoff’s *Language and Woman’s Place*, and James Baldwin’s “If Black Language Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” In different ways, each reading offers students a framework for understanding how grammar and language practices are schooled and maintained in culture. In addition, we learn that grammar use can sometimes function as a form of resistance, a point that bell hooks discusses in relation to slave songs. She writes that the English in these songs “reflected the broken, ruptured world of the slave. When the slaves sang ‘nobody knows de trouble I see—’ their use of the word ‘nobody’ adds a richer meaning than if they had used the phrase ‘no one,’ for it was the slave’s *body* that was the concrete site of suffering” (170). hooks argues that the syntax of the songs did not change over the years because “the incorrect usage of words” expressed “a spirit of rebellion that claimed language as a site of resistance” (170). hooks’s essay, along with the readings named above, encourages my students to think about grammar as a crucial tool for both communication and the expression of identity. This way of thinking about grammar often challenges students’ preconceptions about grammar as a rigid system for producing correctness, preparing them for the commonplace book assignment described below.

**Each reading offers students a framework for understanding how grammar and language practices are schooled and maintained in culture. In addition, we learn that grammar use can sometimes function as a form of resistance, a point that bell hooks discusses in relation to slave songs.**

### **Getting close to language**

I emphasize the rhetorical aspects of grammar by asking students to focus on connections between grammar and concepts such as audience and purpose, paying particular attention to grammar as an art of selection. I want students to consider how and why discourses take the form they do, seeing discourse as a production that involves work and intention and craft. In setting up a classroom study of grammar as rhetorically produced, I use Kolln’s *Rhetorical Grammar* as the primary theoretical framework, supplemented by excerpts on figures of thought from Sharon Crowley’s *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. My course<sup>3</sup> is based on the assumption that learning how to use grammar to best effect requires lots of practice and a good deal of exposure to varied writ-

ing styles. To this end, students maintain a commonplace book throughout the semester in which they imitate and record passages of their own choosing. In *Ancient Rhetorics* Crowley explains the history of commonplace books as follows: “In pre-modern times, most rhetors kept written collections of copied passages; these were called *florilegia* (flowers of reading) in medieval times, and **commonplace books** during the Renaissance and into the eighteenth century” (250; emphasis in original). She defines such a book as “a notebook kept by a rhetor as a storehouse of materials to be remembered or quoted” (335).

As I have conceived the commonplace book, students follow each entry with at least one paragraph of analysis in which they identify the work achieved by specific grammatical techniques in the passage. I ask students to look critically at writing by analyzing passages from their favorite authors, literature and textbooks they are reading in other courses, syllabi, Web-based texts, television advertisements, segments from presidential debates—in short, any text that students find interesting. I have two goals for the commonplace books:

**Learning how to recognize and reflect on language as made and made to work on people’s lives is central to being able to use language strategically.**

first, to emphasize the always entangled relationship between *what* and *how* we say something; second, to designate a place where students

document and comment on their evolving relationship to writing and grammatical concepts. Both goals circulate around the idea that learning how to recognize and reflect on language as *made* and *made to work on* people’s lives is central to being able to use language strategically.

Commonplace books encourage students to read and analyze texts as skillfully crafted documents that convey and perform different kinds of meanings—among them, aesthetic, rhetorical, and political. Students are able to tinker with language, seeing how it is crafted and directed rather than as simply “correct” or “incorrect.” Thinking of language as correct or incorrect distorts it into an objective medium consisting of ahistorical rules and truths, obscuring the living quality of language. This aliveness—the changing, transforming capacity of language—is what makes the study of rhetorical grammar especially relevant and necessary. Rhetorical grammar offers a perspective on the way people purposefully use language to describe problematic or possible new realities. It presents students with a framework and a vocabulary for examining how language affects and infects social reality, as it also provides them with tools for creating effective discourse.

Understanding how language is made and then deployed for varying effects has the potential to highlight the important work of language in our culture. This goal is especially important at the present time, as political dissent is increasingly under suspicion, and the USA Patriot Act of 2001 threatens speech acts both within and beyond the classroom. An ability to examine closely and carefully the work of language could influence discussions of political texts in the classroom. For instance, in my fall 2002 Functional Grammar class, students analyzed the grammar of President Bush's speech to the United Nations on 12 September 2002. The speech, printed in the *New York Times on the Web*, sought to present evidence to the U.N. that would make a case for moving "deliberately and decisively to hold Iraq to account" for its harboring of weapons of mass destruction. In a large-group discussion, my students analyzed Bush's use of hedging, or qualification of claims. They noted the following language choices: "U.N. inspectors *believe* Iraq has produced two to four times the amount of biological agents it declared"; "United Nations inspections also reveal that Iraq *likely* maintains stockpiles of VX, mustard, and other chemical agents. . ."; if not for the Gulf War, "the regime in Iraq would *likely* have possessed a nuclear weapon no later than 1993" ("Bush's Speech"; emphasis added).

The students' examination of hedging, demonstrated by Bush's word choice, evolved into a lively discussion about what counts as evidence in the context of declaring war; indeed, more recently, critics worldwide have begun asking questions about the "facts" regarding Iraq's weapons development program. This example is meant to suggest that rhetorical grammar analysis can form the basis for wider analyses of civic discourse, enabling students to hone in on the specific grammatical choices that give shape and meaning to content. While the following student applications of rhetorical grammar analysis do not take this sort of politicized focus, the close study of how grammar enhances and conceals meaning can certainly be applied in this way.

I ask students to make a variety of entries in their commonplace books. Recordings are entries that require students to record a passage of their own choosing and then analyze how grammar and content work together to convey meaning. In the following recording,<sup>4</sup> the student writer illustrates how language works on her as a reader. She records a passage from Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle." Rip comes down the mountain after being asleep for twenty years and is confused by the amount of time that has elapsed and by the figure, which turns out to be his son, who looks remarkably like Rip himself. "'God knows,' exclaimed [Rip], at his wit's end; 'I'm not myself—I'm some-

body else—I'm somebody else—that's me yonder—no—that's somebody else got into my shoes—I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they've changed my gun and every thing's changed, and I'm changed, and I can't tell my name, or who I am!" In her analysis, this student writes,

I think Irving does a great job of showing the puzzlement Rip Van Winkle feels when he comes down the mountain and doesn't know himself or anyone else. The use of dashes in this text is effective, which is sometimes hard to accomplish. If dashes are overused, the reader can get confused and have a hard time grasping the feeling the author is trying to convey. But in this passage, Irving uses dashes to help the reader understand how Rip is feeling. Rip is disoriented, confused, and he feels lost. The dashes break up his thoughts, and the reader can hear the panic he is feeling.

The structure of the sentence also conveys the alarm Rip feels. As I read the passage out loud, I found that my voice got higher and I read faster as I got toward the end. The emphasis is put on the end of the sentence, and this lets the reader know that Rip is getting more and more upset as his thoughts go on.

This analysis explains how grammatical techniques intertwine with meaning to convey Rip's confusion. When the writer points out that the dashes help the reader to experience Rip's fragmented sense of identity, she demonstrates her ability to see that meaning emerges from the very specific marks a writer chooses. The writer's analysis offers a reading of how feeling is suspended in this passage, which creates, to borrow from Bruss, an "impression of the power or delicacy of mind" that shapes the narrative (117).

Other commonplace entries include imitations of a writer's form—not, it should be noted, imitations of content.<sup>5</sup> In these entries, the student writer must not only mimic the writer's syntax, but must also identify the specific effects created by the syntax. In an example from Brian's commonplace book, he begins with a quotation from Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. In this scene, Atticus, a lawyer, is questioning Mr. Ewell to determine why he failed to retrieve a doctor to examine his daughter who was allegedly raped. "Mr. Ewell, Atticus began, 'folks were doing a lot of running that night. Let's see, you say you ran to the house, you ran to the window, you ran inside, you ran to Mayella, you ran for Mr. Tate. Did you, during all this running, run for a doctor?'" In his analysis, Brian writes,

Lee, through Atticus, uses parallelism to emphasize that Mr. Ewell seemed to be running everywhere. By beginning each clause with *you ran*, he adds emphasis each time as he builds to the final point. Lee uses an asyndeton series style sentence to add emphasis to the final point. By using this type of series, there is no

*and* used between each item in the series. This absence says to the reader that I could go on and on. This type of series is important in the underlying motive of the statement. Atticus is trying to emphasize that Mr. Ewell should have run for a doctor. By using the asyndeton series, he is saying that you ran here, you ran there, and I could go on and on pointing out where you did run, but the most important thing is that you didn't run to the doctor.

Having decided that Lee's passage is similar to "the kinds of speeches a coach might give his team for motivation," Brian creates the following imitation: "Boys,' the coach began, 'this team has been doing a lot of scoring on us today. Let's see, they scored on a free kick, they scored on a header, they scored on a penalty kick, they scored on a cross, they scored on a nice shot. Did you, during all their scoring, score any of your own?'"

A similar attention to the grammatical work of a passage characterizes Chris's analysis of one passage in Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*. Explaining Vonnegut's use of the word *charm* in a passage, Chris writes,

In his definition, Vonnegut uses the word "charm" in one form or another six times within five sentences, and he uses the word "oodles" three times. He also uses the same basic sentence structure for the last three sentences. These repetitions convey the satirical nature of the explanation. That is, Vonnegut is mocking the word by over doing its definition. Rather than combining the subjects in the last three sentences and making one compound sentence, Vonnegut chooses to repeat the same sentence format three times in a row. This has the effect of enforcing each separate subjects place in the explanation. In this case the word comes out as being somewhat discredited. Vonnegut's point is that lots of people have charm and those who don't can usually fake it.

Drawing on descriptions of sentence structure and repetition that Kolln describes in *Rhetorical Grammar*, Chris shows us how Vonnegut reinforces the idea of the passage through grammatical techniques. He chose to examine Vonnegut's work because he had always admired it and wanted to get a better look at how Vonnegut creates such an effective tone. By requiring students to select texts to record or imitate in their commonplace books, this assignment can work well to get students to look closely at language that pleases or disturbs them. Students are pushed to think in unfamiliar ways about texts to which they have developed familiar responses. Or, in some cases, students analyzed texts that they come into contact with on a regular basis but never read attentively.

Getting close to a passage in order to reveal the technical processes that make it work forms the basis of another student's reading of Ambrose Bierce's

story, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” This excerpt, taken from a student’s grammatical analysis paper,<sup>6</sup> was originally a recording in her commonplace book. In her discussion of Bierce’s use of parallelism, she writes,

Bierce masters this technique, and seems to understand the effects that it has on the rhythm: “The water, the banks, the forest, the now distant bridge, fort, and men—all were commingled and blurred” (86). To achieve parallelism, Bierce repeats “the,” followed by a noun phrase, four times. He opts not to use it, though he has the opportunity, a fifth and sixth time—doing this may make the parallelism redundant or gratuitous. Bierce thoughtfully controls the rhythm of this sentence. The reader is made to slow down where the word “the” appears—it takes more time to say “the water” than to say “water.” Furthermore, the sentence gets progressively slower as we push through “the now distant bridge” and then are set free by the sleek, and fast flow of “fort, and men.” This control of rhythm relates to control of emphasis, and thus drama. We emphasize the words following “the” simply because we slow down and have more time to absorb the image. Correspondingly, we pass over words without the “the” in front of them and do not have time to savor their meanings.

This writer’s analysis highlights Bierce’s use of momentum and rhythm to mirror the feeling of the passage. As I think her reading illustrates, the close-

**The closeness to language encouraged by the commonplace book assignment requires students to dig around in the writing of others and really think about what makes it tick. This intimacy with the language of others can be an enormously powerful way to impress upon students that writing is made and that grammar has a role in that production.**

ness to language encouraged by the commonplace book assignment requires students to dig around in the writing of others and really think about what makes it tick. This intimacy with the language of others can be an enormously powerful way to impress upon students that writing is made and that grammar has a role in that production. In addition, the commonplace book assignment offers a productive space

where students document their sense of writing as reflecting intentional choices that have consequences.

While the examples I’ve included draw from literary texts, I want to note that my students have selected a variety of texts as the basis for commonplace book entries. These have included billing information accompanying phone bills and credit card bills, instruction manuals for appliances, text on food packaging, advertisements, textbooks, and syllabi. Whatever the textual source for entries, the model of rhetorical grammar pedagogy described here can be an

asset to teaching practices that view analytical thinking as a necessary component of any socially engaged pedagogy.

### **Rhetorical grammar and empowering pedagogies**

Composition scholars have yet to map out the potentially productive connections between rhetorical grammar and composition's disciplinary commitment to cultural difference and ethical rhetoric. What's notable about liberatory pedagogies of the 1980s and 1990s is not that they reject grammar instruction but that grammar is largely absent from their descriptions of critical education. The higher level concerns of liberatory pedagogies focused on creating social change by teaching students skills with which to challenge cultural norms (Berlin; Fitts and France; Luke and Gore) and by articulating teaching and writing as cultural practices that transmit and produce cultural meanings (Giroux and McLaren; Sullivan and Qualley). Internal analyses of composition's identity as a discipline have revealed the troubling working conditions and wages of part-time teachers (Schell); the gender, race, and class politics of composition studies (Bullock and Trimbur; Jarratt and Worsham); and the relationship between pedagogy and diverse student populations (Ashton-Jones; Severino et al.).

This body of work has profoundly shaped my intellectual and political orientation in composition studies, and I believe that its politicized dimensions can provide insights about teaching grammar as a study of how language does work *in* (and sometimes *against*) the world. Gary Olson's "Encountering the Other" offers a framework for considering this claim. Olson notes that composition studies has increasingly come to focus on "issues of gender, race, or 'contact zones'" as an ethical commitment to foregrounding "interaction with an Other" (92). Ethics, for him, deals with "how we balance our own needs, desires, and obligations with those of the Other" (92). This balancing act, which requires careful consideration of self/other relations, is relevant to grammatical choices that writers make because it is part of the conceptual work that we do as writers. We envision and construct an audience through diction, tone, and the selection of examples; and as writers we seek to reach across the space that separates us from our audience, using techniques that engender trust, establish credibility, and sometimes build connection.

A student in my sophomore-level Writing with Style course demonstrates how attention to grammatical choices dovetails with an understanding of self/other relations in his analysis of the grammar and style that typifies Malcolm

X's writing. He argues that Malcolm X's use of "you" in "Not Just an American Problem but a World Problem" involves his African American audience in an intimate way:

Speaking in the second person helps urge audience members to personally take responsibility for creating a political change and becoming active participants in the revolt for racial equality . . . By constantly using words and phrases that signify "togetherness" to refer to himself and his audience, Malcolm urges African-Americans to organize and unify.

Throughout his paper, this student examines how grammatical choices reinforce Malcolm X's emphasis on black unity as a necessary component of meaningful social change, a focus that centers on the relations between the speaker and conditions in the world. Like other forms of textual analysis, grammatical analysis can yield engaged political and cultural insights about language as "the carrier of culture, the facilitator of humanity, and the most powerful of the means of social control" (Sledd 62).

Such insights form the basis of critical pedagogy, which reveals how language constructs and reproduces oppressive cultural discourses that naturalize inequality. For instance, Ira Shor describes critical pedagogy as a teaching method that "questions the *status quo*," and is consistent with democratic values, political activism aimed at eliminating inequalities, and efforts toward "desocializing" (3). Critical pedagogy, for Shor, entails a questioning "posture towards the construction of the self in society" (16), a model of inquiry that is

**This kind of cultural work associated with liberatory pedagogical efforts is not incompatible with analyses that foreground rhetorical grammar analysis. In fact, such analysis can enrich our understanding of how writers use language to construct identity—both that of self and other—and to position themselves alongside or in opposition to the status quo.**

also key to Krista Ratcliffe's conceptualization of feminist composition pedagogy. This pedagogy "foregrounds the functions of gender as it intersects with other categories (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation, nationality); as such, it attempts to empower real historical students, particularly real historical women students, by helping them to recognize their own politics of location and negoti-

ate such positions" (58). This kind of cultural work associated with liberatory pedagogical efforts is not incompatible with analyses that foreground rhetorical grammar analysis. In fact, such analysis can enrich our understanding of how writers use language to construct identity—both that of self and other—and to position themselves alongside or in opposition to the status quo.

In a large-group discussion of Gertrude Stein's grammatical inventions and subversions, for instance, my students commented on the way Stein uses language to deconstruct prescribed subject positions. Stein, the students argued, constructs something like a new language, using repetition and alliteration of words to do the work of punctuation. She constructs herself as a builder of meaning who uses the conventional tools of language in unconventional ways. My students were interested in how Stein, rather than duplicating moves that characterize "good writing," uses language to assert her identity as a different kind of writer; in addition, they made links between Stein's disruption of language conventions and her disruption of sexual categories and desires (portrayed especially in *Tender Buttons*).

As I'm suggesting, rhetorical grammar analysis promises to offer students more tools for analyzing culture. Cultural studies scholars, according to Pamela Caughie, make "the construction of the subject in cultural institutions and social discourses central to their investigations" (111–12). Interdisciplinary approaches to cultural studies share a common goal of investigating "the complex ways in which identity itself is articulated, experienced, deployed" (Nelson et al. qtd. in Caughie 112). By looking at practices of representation in various discursive forms, cultural studies methodologies tell us something about the way desires are fabricated and reproduced in order to construct certain kinds of subjects. Rhetorical grammar analysis can work in concert with these goals by making available to students a vocabulary for thinking through the specificity of words and grammatical choices, the work they do in the production of an idea of culture and an idea of a people.

This insight is revealed not only in studies of grammar use but also in studies that make visible the cultural attitudes and assumptions informing grammar instruction itself. Miriam Brody's *Manly Writing*, for instance, examines gendered metaphors in advice texts from the Enlightenment through the twentieth century that liken good writing to manliness and virility. Brody's study reveals what she calls the "hidden curriculum" of writing instruction—a curriculum that, mirroring the shift from a rural to an industrialized culture, ennobled masculine virtues and repelled feminine "vice," or the arts of deception, emotion, and flowery language. Brody discusses early grammar texts, in which a "fusion of patriotic, linguistic, and gendered issues forged an ideology for an age that frankly and reasonably imagined itself as perfectible, if only young boys learned their mother tongue well" (96). In this context, Brody argues, writing was gendered as a male activity that signaled a boy's civility, intelligence, and cleanliness. In addition, grammar texts from the late-1700s and

early-1800s compared writing to men's work, just as the increasing industrialization during the period was seen as male labor requiring strength, forcefulness, and muscular achievement. Brody contends that the grammar exercise was the method by which young boys learned their trade: "The grammatical exercise assumed that the student was like a master builder with words, which, like so many levers and bolts, became tools for production" (105). The simplicity and cleanliness of grammar exercises, while no longer gendered in the same way that Brody describes, continue to provide students with a sense of achievement and mastery and, perhaps most satisfying of all, finality. Yet, as many have noted, when correcting language outside a meaningful context, students and teachers alike are often frustrated by the lack of transfer from the exercise to the rhetorical situation (see note 1).

The point I want to emphasize is that grammar skill and instruction are linked to cultural attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions. But an absence of attention to grammar instruction prevents us from considering productive links. Instead, we adhere to a normalized reflex against teaching grammar in the

**Grammar skill and instruction are linked to cultural attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions. But an absence of attention to grammar instruction prevents us from considering productive links. Instead, we adhere to a normalized reflex against teaching grammar in the context of writing instruction.**

context of writing instruction. David Lazere makes a similar point in "Back to Basics" when he questions leftists' automatic reflex against "basic skills" instruction. "Basic skills," for him, refers to a somewhat amorphous "factual knowledge" and to the more explicit "mechanical and analytic skills (including remedial instruction in reading and writing standard English)" (19). While he

does not utter the *g*-word here, it seems that Lazere's focus on mechanical skills and Standard English is connected to teaching grammar. He finds that a lack of "basic skills and factual knowledge" among students and teachers creates obstacles "to autonomous critical thinking and to openness toward progressive politics," a point largely overlooked or simplified by leftist educators (9). By rejecting "basic skills" as dogmatically as conservatives endorse it, leftists err, Lazere contends, in failing to see that basic skills instruction "might be a force for liberation—not oppression—if administered with common sense, openness to cultural pluralism, and an application of basics toward critical thinking, particularly about sociopolitical issues, rather than rote memorizing" (9). Although the particulars of basic skills instruction are never made clear, Lazere poses a useful challenge to binaries that refuse to see skills instruction—including grammar instruction—as anything other than conser-

vative and dehumanizing, a position that bespeaks the already achieved privileges of rhetorical skill and the cultural capital that accompanies it (see Delpit). The opposition between teaching grammar and teaching writing—which depends on an understanding of grammar instruction in the traditional, formal sense—limits and forecloses productive discussion about rhetorical grammar as a tool for supporting and extending cultural analysis.

Grammar competency has always been linked with social power or the lack thereof. As a component of written literacy, grammar knowledge often functions to “draw lines of social distinction, mark status, and rank students in meritocratic order” (Trimbur 279). In addition to its association with class markers that lock people into social place, grammar competency also raises difficult questions concerning second-language learners and the teaching of grammar as a skill (not a craft, an art, or a tool for cultural critique) that serves the dominant economic order (i.e., see Giroux). We can challenge these associations, exploring what it might mean to teach grammar in a way that promotes composition’s goals to equip students to be active citizens of the worlds they inhabit. Rather than abandon grammar instruction, I’m suggesting that writing teachers seek avenues from which to revitalize practice, positioning rhetorical grammar as a necessary component of rhetorical education.

### **Acknowledgments**

*An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 2000 NCTE Conference in Milwaukee. I want to thank Alice Gillam for introducing me to rhetorical grammar in her Teaching Composition seminar; thanks go also to Gary Weissman, Martha Kolln, and an anonymous reader for their generative feedback on earlier drafts. In addition, I want to acknowledge my graduate research assistant, Sean Memolo, who so carefully gathered and summarized research materials for this project. His assistantship was supported by the English Department at East Carolina University.*

### **Notes**

1. A number of studies questioning how formal grammar instruction translates into writing improvement have been influential in composition studies (Braddock et al.; D’Eloia; Hartwell; Hillocks; Meckel; Sutton; Tabbert). For useful reviews of this work, see Bonnie Devet, Susan Hunter and Ray Wallace, and Rei Noguchi.
2. On ancient rhetoricians and grammar instruction, see Gina Claywell, Cheryl Glenn, or Jon Olson.
3. In this section, I describe and draw examples from two different courses in which I taught the same material. One is Writing with Style, a sophomore-level course

that I taught in spring 1999 while a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. This course integrated rhetorical grammar study with issues of style, a pairing that reflects the frequent blurring of distinctions between grammar and style in composition scholarship (see Zemliansky).

The other course described in this section is a sophomore-level course entitled Functional Grammar, which I have taught during three noncontiguous semesters at East Carolina University since fall 2000. Like several of the linguists in my department, I teach the course as rhetorical grammar because this terminology highlights grammar as integral to persuasive speech acts. As an approach to studying language, however, rhetorical grammar shares several principles with functional grammar, including the idea that language *does* something, language use varies according to context, and learning grammar entails sentence-level and larger discursive-level knowledge. See Charles Meyer for a useful overview of functional grammar with specific attention to M.A.K. Halliday's functional theory of language.

4. I'd like to extend special thanks to those students who gave me permission to quote from their commonplace books; those whose names are not given wished to remain anonymous. All student writing appears here exactly as it was written.

5. Resources on using imitation exercises in the writing classroom are plentiful. For a sampling, see Robert Connors on rhetoric and imitation, Frank D'Angelo on "strict" and "loose" imitations, and Winston Weathers on "creative imitation."

6. Students wrote an eight-page analysis of the grammar of any text of their choosing. For more information on this and other assignments, visit the following links on my Web site: <<http://personal.ecu.edu/miccichel/grammar02.htm>> and <<http://personal.ecu.edu/miccichel/2730.htm>> and <<http://personal.ecu.edu/miccichel/style.htm>>. Send me an e-mail at [miccichel@mail.ecu.edu](mailto:miccichel@mail.ecu.edu) regarding suggestions and/or comments about the ideas discussed in this article.

## Works Cited

- Ashton-Jones, Evelyn. "Collaboration, Conversation, and the Politics of Gender." *Feminine Principles and Women's Experience in American Composition and Rhetoric*. Ed. Louise Wetherbee Phelps and Janet Emig. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995. 5-26.
- Baldwin, James. "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" *Ten on Ten: Major Essayists on Recurring Themes*. Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Bedford, 1992. 321-24.
- Berlin, James A. "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." *College English* 50.5 (1988): 477-94.
- Braddock, Richard, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer. *Research in Written Composition*. Champaign, IL: NCTE, 1963.
- Brody, Miriam. *Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition*. Carbondale, IL: SIUP, 1993.
- Bruss, Elizabeth W. *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary*

- Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982.
- Bryant, Donald C. "Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope." *Professing the New Rhetorics: A Sourcebook*. Ed. Theresa Enos and Stuart C. Brown. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994. 267–97.
- Bullock, Richard, and John Trimbur, eds. *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991.
- "Bush's Speech to U.N. on Iraq." *New York Times on the Web* 12 Sept. 2002. 12 Sept. 2002 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/12/politics/12AP-PTEX.html>>.
- Caughie, Pamela L. "Let It Pass: Changing the Subject, Once Again." *Feminism and Composition: In Other Words*. Ed. Susan C. Jarratt and Lynn Worsham. New York: MLA, 1998. 111–31.
- Claywell, Gina. "Reasserting Grammar's Position in the Trivium in American College Composition." *Hunter and Wallace* 43–53.
- Connors, Robert J. "The Erasure of the Sentence." *College Composition and Communication* 52.1 (2000): 96–128.
- Crowley, Sharon. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. New York: Macmillan, 1994.
- D'Angelo, Frank. "Imitation and Style." *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*. 2nd ed. Ed. Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 199–207.
- D'Eloia, Sarah. "The Uses—and Limits—of Grammar." *Journal of Basic Writing* 1.3 (1977): 1–20.
- Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: The New P, 1995.
- Devet, Bonnie. "Welcoming Grammar Back into the Writing Classroom." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 30.1 (2002): 8–17.
- Didion, Joan. "Why I Write." *Joan Didion: Essays and Conversations*. Ed. Ellen G. Friedman. Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review P, 1984. 5–10.
- Fitts, Karen, and Alan W. France, eds. *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy*. Albany, NY: SUNY, 1995.
- Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980.
- Giroux, Henry A. *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning*. Granby, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1988.
- Giroux, Henry A., and Peter McLaren, eds. *Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle*. Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989.
- Glenn, Cheryl. "When Grammar Was a Language Art." *Hunter and Wallace* 9–29.
- Hartwell, Patrick. "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar." *College English* 47.2 (1985): 105–27.
- Hillocks, George, Jr. *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. Urbana, IL: NCRE/ERIC, 1986.
- hooks, bell. "Language." *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 167–75.
- Hunter, Susan, and Ray Wallace, eds. *The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction: Past, Present, Future*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1995.
- Jarratt, Susan C., and Lynn Worsham, eds. *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*. New York: MLA, 1998.
- Kolln, Martha. "Rhetorical Grammar: A Modification Lesson." *English Journal* 85.7 (1996): 25–31.

- . *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*. 4th ed. New York: Longman, 2003.
- Lakoff, Robin. *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
- Lazere, David. "Back to Basics: A Force for Oppression or Liberation?" *College English* 54.1 (1992): 7–21.
- Luke, Carmen, and Jennifer Gore, eds. *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogies*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Meckel, Henry C. "Research on Teaching Composition and Literature." *Handbook of Educational Research*. Ed. N. L. Gage. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963. 966–1006.
- Meyer, Charles F. "Functional Grammar and Discourse Studies." *Discourse Studies in Composition*. Ed. Ellen Barton and Gail Stygall. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton P, 2002. 71–89.
- Murphy, James J., ed. *Quintilian on the Teaching of Speaking and Writing*. Carbondale, IL: SIUP, 1987.
- Noguchi, Rei R. *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1991.
- Olson, Gary A. "Encountering the Other: Postcolonial Theory and Composition Scholarship." *Ethical Issues in College Writing*. Ed. Fredric G. Gale, Phillip Sipiora, and James L. Kinneavy. New York: Peter Lang, 1999. 91–105.
- Olson, Jon. "A Question of Power: Why Fredrick Douglass Stole Grammar?" *Hunter and Wallace* 30–42.
- Orwell, George. "Politics and the English Language." *Ten on Ten: Major Essayists on Recurring Themes*. Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Bedford, 1992. 309–20.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions: Virginia Woolf, Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich*. Carbondale, IL: SIUP, 1996.
- Schell, Eileen E. *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1998.
- Severino, Carol, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnnella E. Butler, eds. *Writing in Multicultural Settings*. New York: MLA, 1997.
- Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Shor, Ira. *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Sledd, James. "Grammar for Social Awareness in Time of Class Warfare." *English Journal* 85.7 (1996): 59–63.
- Sullivan, Patricia A., and Donna J. Qualley, eds. *Pedagogy in the Age of Politics: Writing and Reading (in) the Academy*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994.
- Sutton, Gary A. "Do We Need to Teach a Grammar Terminology?" *English Journal* 65.9 (1976): 37–40.
- Tabbert, Russell. "Parsing the Question 'Why Teach Grammar?'" *English Journal* 73.8 (1984): 38–42.
- Trimbur, John. "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis." *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*. Ed. Richard Bullock and John Trimbur. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991. 277–95.
- Weathers, Winston. "Teaching Style: A Possible Anatomy." *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*. 2nd ed. Ed. Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 187–92.
- Winchell, Donna A. "Teaching the Rhetoric of Grammar and Style." *Instructor's*

*Manual and Answer Key to Accompany  
The Writer's Harbrace Handbook.* Ed.  
Robert K. Miller, Suzanne S. Webb, and  
Winifred B. Horner. New York: Harcourt

College Publishers, 2001. 16–58.

Zemliansky, Pavel. "Mechanical Correctness."  
*Composition Forum* 10.2 (2000): 1–19.

### **Laura R. Micciche**

Laura R. Micciche, who has taught at East Carolina University since 1999, will join the faculty at the University of Cincinnati beginning Fall 2004. In addition to rhetorical grammar pedagogy, her research and teaching interests include visual rhetorics and rhetorics of emotion in relation to pedagogy, professional identity, and academic workplace practices. Recent publications include *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies*, co-edited with Dale Jacobs, and articles in *Rhetoric Review*, *Composition Forum*, and *College English*.