TEACHING GRAMMAR IMPROVES WRITING

Patricia A. Dunn

Teaching grammar improves students' knowledge of linguistics. But if students' writing is to improve, teachers need to teach *writing*.

Long before any of us were born, people were complaining about the writing and grammar of other people, usually younger or less powerful than the complainant. Ironically, "these kids today," who were once criticized for their allegedly bad writing, may now be shaking their own grey heads at the writing of others or laughing about all this drama in a more tolerant afterlife.

What usually follows fast upon a complaint about other people's writing is a wistful longing for the days when traditional grammar exercises were ubiquitous in the schools, as if they're not today. In fact, those who complain that grammar is no longer taught in schools should do a quick Google search of "grammar worksheets" and then sit back to scroll through page after page of links. This postlapsarian longing for allegedly defunct traditional grammar instruction springs from a mistaken assumption that all those grammar drills turned those who did them into flawless writers. Those drills didn't work then; they don't work now.

One way to improve writing is to stop looking for a better way to teach grammar. To improve writing, find a better way to teach writing.

The Research No One Believes

For years, composition/rhetoric professionals (people who conduct research on writing, often have doctorates specializing

in the teaching of writing, and teach in or direct college writing programs) have been encouraging new writing instructors to focus on the teaching of writing, not the teaching of grammar, and certainly not isolated grammar exercises disconnected from the students' own writing. There are good reasons for this advice.

Decades of research have shown that isolated grammar exercises are among the worst uses of time in a writing class, given that such practices can result in students' writing actually getting worse. Education researchers did a meta-analysis (a compilation, summary, and recommendation) of many research projects on writing over the years. In their 2007 report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Steve Graham and Dolores Perin found that isolated (traditional) grammar teaching was the only instructional practice to actually have a negative—that's right, negative—impact on students' writing. In the 1980s, George Hillocks, Jr. conducted a comprehensive synthesis of writing research that went back to studies done in the early 1960s. Hillocks's academic article, "Synthesis of Research on Teaching Writing," and his book, *Research on Written Composition,* could not have been clearer about the harmful effects of traditional grammar.

However, a technique called sentence combining (where students take a series of short sentences and combine them into longer ones, using a mix of clauses, phrases, and linking punctuation) did fairly well in multiple studies of student writing. In other words, students who did sentence combining (crafting short sentences into longer ones, actively manipulating sections of sentences, rearranging clauses and phrases, adding or deleting modifying words, and punctuating the longer sentence so that it was smooth) saw their own writing improve after this work. But grammar exercises—quizzes on parts of speech, the naming of types of phrases, clauses, and sentences? After those, students' writing got worse.

But no one believes this research—other than those who conduct or study writing as a career. So convinced is the general public that young writers are in desperate need of old-fashioned, rigorous grammar, that writing teachers from grade school through grad school continue to be pressured to teach grammar as a way to improve writing. Even some teachers continue to think that if only grammar could be drilled into students in a fun, engaging way, students would write correctly ever after. It doesn't happen.

Time to Throw in the Towel?

The reasons so many people believe in the almost religious benefits of what they call *grammar* are complex and deep, with disturbing—perhaps unconscious—connections to class, disability, race, national origin, and gender. As a recent rhetorical analysis of grammar rants has demonstrated, many such rants are laced with moral judgments about the departure from allegedly proper grammar. In a disturbing, repeating trend, the offending speaker or writer is seen as uneducated and lazy, the latter judgment being connected not so subtly to one of the Seven Deadly Sins (Sloth).

So maybe it's time to give up—to let people go ahead with their beloved acontextual grammar worksheets, to use them to their hearts' content (they do, anyway, as the massive number of search results prove). But those promoting these grammar drills should also be shown how to observe what happens in their classes when they inflict such lessons on their students, as well as how to document the before-and-after writings of these students. Perhaps their first-hand experience will convince them when other people's research could not.

Those teachers should be encouraged to actually analyze students' writing projects before and after the isolated grammar treatment. Designing such a study takes some hefty background in research methods. What concrete, measurable features have researchers agreed would constitute improvement in writing (no easy task to agree on, actually), and what measureable differences are there in the before-and-after samples? Objectively measured, did the student's writing get better, stay the same, or deteriorate?

And to keep everyone honest and the results as objective as possible, someone *else* should do the analysis—not the teacher of the grammar lessons—in order to avoid confirmation bias, which is when researchers really, really want to see, for example, improvement in writing, so they do see it, even if the writing didn't actually improve. Students, too, can praise their grammar lessons, thinking they are now good writers, when the objective evidence that they've improved is, in fact, not evident.

Better Ways to Teach Writing

Setting aside for a moment the conclusions of future studies, which will no doubt also be ignored, what can teachers do right now to help students improve their writing? They can teach writing in context. They can teach students to write in real-world situations,

helping them notice how different writing projects can have very different constraints. No one is arguing here against grammar or against intense, sophisticated language study. In fact, people who know the most about grammar are aware that many so-called rules are not rules at all but merely conventions, which are not universal and can change over time and from genre to genre. The best teachers help their students keep pace with these changes and help them decide when and whether to use a reference from a 1950 or 2016 grammar handbook, or to look online for the most up-to-date guidelines. (The most informed text on language conventions and change is *Garner's Modern American Usage*, which obtains its evidence from a wide range of current usage.)

It goes without saying that everyone appreciates clear, well-edited writing. But teaching grammar won't help because clarity is slippery. What's clear to one reader might be unclear to the next, depending on his or her respective background knowledge. For example, sewing directions would be clear to a tailor, but not to someone who has never picked up a needle and thread. An article in a physics journal would be clear to a physicist, but not to a pharmacist.

Even what is considered so-called *correct* writing can vary depending on the conventions expected in a particular genre or publication. (Google "Oxford comma" if you want to see sparks fly over conflicting views of punctuation.) As Elizabeth Wardle points out in this volume, "There is no such thing as writing in general." Every writing project is constrained by previous iterations of that type of writing. Is it a memo, résumé, game manual, business plan, film review? Its context and publication also shapes its readers' expectations. A letter to the editor of *The New York Times* has some features in common with a letter to the editor of *Newsday* (a local Long Island paper), but even this same genre looks different in these two publications. Everything from punctuation to evidence presented in the respective letters is noticeably different, including sentence structure and length, vocabulary level, and rhetorical appeals aimed at different readerships.

Someone wishing to teach students something about grammar, including syntax, parallel structure, agreement, clauses, verb tense, and so on, could, of course, use these letters or other real-world writing to do so. But what's more important is that students learn to discover for themselves the subtle or substantial differences in the writing, depending on what it's supposed to do in that place and time. It's the educator's responsibility to help students

see those differences and to understand how important this skill is. No one knows what students will be asked to write five years from now, what not-yet-invented writing projects they'll face. They need these analytical skills to tackle writing needs in their future professions.

What does it mean to teach students to notice how writing shifts and changes? This analysis can start with examining supposed truisms. For example, young writers are often given the generic advice to vary their sentence structure, a good plan for some college application essays and news stories. But many how-to pieces, including recipes—in the convention of that genre—are usually a list of short, imperative commands, often missing articles or even pronouns. Many teachers tell young writers to increase their use of sensory imagery. Describing in detail more sights, sounds, textures, and aromas might enhance restaurant reviews or travel narratives, but not business plans, meeting minutes, or memos.

If young people are to be knowledgeable, ever-learning, active citizens in a participatory democracy, they must develop a wide-ranging, flexible literacy. Writing instructors should help students become informed, alert, and engaged readers and writers of a variety of texts and contexts, so that they learn to notice, appreciate, and master (should they so desire) all kinds of writing. This nimbleness requires opportunities to be challenged by a variety of writing tasks, not time squandered by having students circle adverbs.

Further Reading

For more than 50 years, researchers have studied how teaching traditional grammar (parts of speech, names of phrases and clauses, types of sentences, etc.) has affected student writing. The results have been consistent: Writing does not improve and sometimes worsens after that instruction. To see a meta-analysis of which studies show these results, start with George Hillocks's 1986 book, *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. His 1987 article in *Educational Leadership,* "Synthesis of Research on Teaching Writing," is a shortened version of his book, and there is a chart on p. 75 of that article that shows which approaches to teaching writing work better than others. To see a more recent summary of such studies, see Steve Graham and Dolores Perin's 2007 report to the Carnegie Corporation: *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve*

Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools. Comparatively, sentence combining does moderately well in many of these studies, which Robert Connors eloquently explained in his 2000 article, "The Erasure of the Sentence."

Most writing specialists today recommend that students engage in real-world, authentic writing. For a succinct explanation of what authentic writing involves, see Ken Lindblom's widely shared 2015 essay, "School Writing vs. Authentic Writing," on the *Writers Who Care* blog. A more involved explanation is Grant Wiggan's 2009 piece in *English Journal*, "Real-World Writing: Making Purpose and Audience Matter."

For an explanation of why some people get so upset when they see grammar errors (or perceived errors) in other people's writing, see Lindblom and Dunn's 2007 *English Journal* article, "Analyzing Grammar Rants: An Alternative to Traditional Grammar Instruction." For a more thorough study of this issue, see their 2011 book, *Grammar Rants: How a Backstage Tour of Writing Complaints Can Help Students Make Informed, Savvy Choices About Their Writing*. For a well-researched, comprehensive, and humorous explanation of usage and language change, see *Garner's Modern American Usage*.

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