1 Three Goals for Teaching Grammar

The three goals presented in this chapter are intended—in words borrowed from the introduction to the NCTE/IRA *Standards for the English Language Arts*—to "embody a coherent, professionally defensible conception of how a field can be framed for purposes of instruction" (viii). They state outcomes in grammar instruction that include a wide range of abilities related to grammar, from the ability to write Standard English to an understanding of language prejudice.

You may find them ambitious and idealistic, and they are. These goals are intended to provide direction and context for grammar instruction up through the completion of high school. You may have asked yourself what you can possibly teach your students about a complex subject like grammar during the year they will be in your class. You may not know what grammar, if any, your students have been taught or will be taught by other teachers. When we as teachers are not sure whether grammar is included throughout our curriculum, we tend to stick to the basics—the basic writing errors, the basic parts of speech. For students, the result is often tedious repetition. In such a disconnected grammar curriculum, students lose out on much of grammar that is important and exciting.

In contrast, these three grammar goals summarize three strands of a comprehensive grammar curriculum. In a language arts curriculum that included these strands, students would not only develop a command of Standard English, but they would also understand at a basic level the role that language structure plays in literature, the way language changes through time and in different social situations, and the fact that all languages and language varieties have grammatical structure. Ambitious? Certainly. But the following chapters will each discuss ways that you and your students can work toward these achievements.

About the Three Grammar Goals

Goal A

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Every student, from every background, will complete school with the ability to communicate comfortably and effectively in both spoken and written Standard English, with awareness of when use of Standard English is appropriate.

Goal B
Every student will complete school with the ability to analyze the grammatical structure of sentences within English texts, using grammatical terminology correctly and demonstrating knowledge of how sentence-level grammatical structure contributes to the coherence of paragraphs and texts.

Goal C
Every student will complete school with an understanding of, and appreciation for, the natural variation that occurs in language across time, social situation, and social group. While recognizing the need for mastering Standard English, students will also demonstrate an understanding of the equality in the expressive capacity and linguistic structure among a range of language varieties both vernacular and standard, as well as an understanding of language-based prejudice.

> spoken and written Standard English, with awareness of when use of Standard English is appropriate.

"Standard English" is the variety of English that many people in the economic mainstream and predominant social culture of the United States speak and write. Sometimes it is called Mainstream American English. Standard English is the variety of English that grammar books describe. It is standard not in the sense that it is better English than other varieties but in the sense that it is the widely recognized and codified version of English.

A more precise name for it is Edited American English—"Edited" since it is the version of our language that writers and editors of books and periodicals follow, and "American" in that it is the language written in the United States as opposed to England, where some spellings (*color, colour; airplane, aeroplane*), vocabulary (*mailbox, pillar box; gasoline, petrol*), and usage (e.g., the deletion of the definite article, as in *She is in hospital*) are different.

Standard English is sometimes referred to also as the Language of Wider Communication, a name reflecting the belief that when people in the United States talk or write to people other than friends and family in another part of the country, this is the language that is most likely to be the "common currency." It is the language variety that the stranger in an office at the other end of the telephone or letter or e-mail will probably be the most familiar with.

But the notion of a *standard* language raises some questions that are obvious if you think about the word for a moment. *Standard* for whom? Everywhere? Always? In all details? Standard English is not a single, pure type of English, although some people like to think that it is so specific and so solid, like a yardstick made of gold, that we can compare it with samples of language and find out easily whether the samples fall short.

For instance, there is an important category of English known as Informal Standard English. The *American Heritage Dictionary* uses the label "informal" to designate "words that are acceptable in conversation with friends and colleagues [but that] would be unsuitable in the formal prose of an article written for publication in the journal of a learned society" (3rd edition, xxxvii). *Wish list* is an example of Informal Standard English.

In addition to this category, there are what linguists designate as regional standards, the entirely acceptable, clear, and "normal" ways that people talk in specific geographical regions. Regional standards may differ in some ways from the specifications in the grammar books of Edited American English. And yet to ask whether, for that reason, a certain regional phrase is "correct" makes no sense. Martha Kolln and Robert Funk illustrate this point well:

> Imagine that your job is to record the speech of Pennsylvanians. In Pittsburgh and its surrounding areas, you hear such sentences as "My car needs fixed" and "My hair needs washed" and "Let the door open." In Philadelphia, three hundred miles to the east, you hear instead "My car needs to be fixed" and "My hair needs washing" and "Leave the door open." As a linguist are you going to judge one group's speech as grammatical and the other's as ungrammatical? Of course not. You have no basis for doing so. . . . Many of the sentences that get labeled "ungrammatical" are simply usages that vary from one dialect to another, what we sometimes call regionalisms. (7)

So keep in mind that "Standard English" is a concept with some flexibility to it. It has its gray areas. Nonetheless, clearly an essential goal of education is for students to gain as much mastery of Standard En-

glish as they can. Goal A recognizes that students, no matter which language variety they speak and hear at home, will be expected to use the codes and conventions of Standard English in many situations. In the workplace, a written report or memorandum will require Standard English, as will most conversations with supervisors. Outside of the workplace, students-turned-adults should be able to communicate with professional people such as lawyers or doctors in Standard English. The study of grammar is by no means the only, or even the primary, method for achieving this goal. More important, as English teachers know, are generous amounts of reading, speaking, listening, and writing. But students need a conscious knowledge of grammar so that they can talk about sentences and about the conventions of Standard English.

Goal B

> Every student will complete school with the ability to analyze the grammatical structure of sentences within English texts, using grammatical terminology correctly and demonstrating knowledge of how sentence-level grammatical structure contributes to the coherence of paragraphs and texts.

This goal emphasizes the value of understanding the basic components of and relationships between sentences. This understanding is valuable not only for helping writers understand the conventions of Standard English but also for helping both writers and readers understand how sentences work together to create coherent, meaningful text. Often, you may have found yourself teaching students about the parts of speech and the word groups that make up sentences only to find that neither you nor the students could put that knowledge to much use in writing a clear essay or in appreciating literature. The grammar lesson is finished, the work sheets are handed in, the students open up their literature books, and the grammar is left behind. Goal B is about not leaving grammar behind. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on these topics of terminology and coherence.

Goal C

> Every student will complete school with an understanding of, and appreciation for, the natural variation that occurs in language across time, social situation, and social group. While recognizing the need for mastering Standard English, students will also demonstrate an understanding of the equality in the expressive capacity and linguistic structure among a range of language varieties both vernacular and standard, as well as an understanding of language-based prejudice.

We use the term *language variety* in this book instead of the word *dialect*. In linguistics, *dialect* refers to any variety of a language in which the use of grammar and vocabulary identifies the regional or social background of the user. African American Vernacular English, now generally referred to as African American English, is a dialect of English. For linguists, so is Standard English. But the word *dialect* carries some serious baggage. For many people, and perhaps for you as well, dialects are "bad" English—nothing neutral about them—and it seems contradictory to think of Standard English as a dialect. So to minimize the confusion, language specialists recommend using the term *language variety* in its place. Language variety refers to any socially or regionally distinctive pattern of grammar and vocabulary within the larger language. This is the practice we are following in this ATEG guide.

Goal C includes the word *vernacular:* "a range of language varieties both vernacular and standard." *Vernacular* is both a noun and an adjective that refers to the everyday language of a region and to everyday language in general. Sometimes it is used to distinguish between "plain" conversational language and "flowery" literary language. Also, as here, it distinguishes between ordinary speech and formal Standard English (in either writing or speaking). "Me'n Jim'r goin' over his house after school" is an example of the vernacular of an eighth-grade boy who is speaking to his friends.

Although *vernacular* does not carry the same intensely negative connotations that the term *dialect* does, it often brings out our assumptions, perhaps unconscious ones, about "better" and "worse" language. It may be hard to resist the belief that a sentence in the vernacular such as the example in the previous paragraph is a sloppy and careless sentence—one that, understandably, people may say in the rush of conversation but that nonetheless would be "better" if the pronoun case were corrected—*I* instead of *me*—if the *to* were added after *over*, and if the pronunciation were clearer.

Goal C asks that we look at such examples of vernacular English not with suspicion about their adequacy but from several different perspectives: First, with an appreciation of the natural variation of language—this speaker was, presumably, speaking in exactly the style and with just the grammatical structures that his listeners found appropriate. Second, with an appreciation that such a sentence is equally effective and expressive for its listeners as the revised standard version would be *(Jim and I are going over to his house after school)* if the audience consisted of his teacher. Third, with an understanding that such a sentence does not have "less" grammar than the standard version; it fol-

lows common grammatical patterns to the same degree that the standard version does. For instance, in the conversation of many young people, the objective pronoun regularly appears in compound structures *(me and Jim, her and Mary, him and me)* that play the role of sentence subject. Such a pattern is different from Standard English, but it is not random. (It has its own complexity: the speaker would certainly use the subjective pronoun if it stood alone—*I'm going over to Jim's house*—but uses the objective pronoun in compounds.) Fourth, with an understanding that for many people, prejudice against such language may have its roots in prejudice against the people who speak it. Just as Standard English seems "right" because the people who use it are held in high regard, many people view vernacular language as "sloppy" or "uneducated" because that is how they view many of the people who speak that way. A vicious cycle is created. Prejudice about certain people leads to prejudice about their language, which deepens the prejudice about people. Certain features of vernacular English (subject pronouns in the objective case, the omission of certain prepositions, the double negative, an irregular verb form, as in *I seen it*) come to be considered "bad English" because the people who use them are looked down on by others. Then, in turn, other people may be looked down on when their speech includes those stigmatized features. This is what Goal C means by "language-based prejudice."

Goal C encourages the view that knowing grammar can foster an appreciation of *all* language varieties. When students have grammar as a tool for discussing the basic parts of any language, you can help them acquire a broad and democratic understanding of language variation. You can show them that they use different grammatical structures when they talk with their friends *(me and Jim)* compared to when they talk with their teachers *(Jim and I)*. You can encourage them not to look down on or make fun of the ways other people talk by showing them how language that often sounds "wrong" or "weird" usually follows a pattern of its own that is just as consistent as the usage in mainstream English. We will look at lots of examples in the next chapter.

How well do your grammar lessons help students meet these three grammar goals? Ask yourself the following questions about your grammar lesson plans:

- Are students applying grammar to a real communication context?

- Does the lesson take audience and purpose into consideration?
- Will the lesson broaden the students' understanding of and respect for different varieties of English? Different languages?
- Are students using grammatical terminology correctly?