
Introduction

A Broken Subject

At the start of this new millennium, throughout much of the K–12 English curriculum, grammar is a broken subject. If you find yourself just not knowing what to do about grammar—how to teach it, how to apply it, how to learn what you yourself were never taught—you are not alone. Grammar is often ignored, broken off altogether from the teaching of literature, rhetoric, drama, composition, and creative writing. Grammar is the skunk at the garden party of the language arts. Perhaps you’ve set aside time for labeling parts of speech, correcting errors, and modeling effective use of punctuation, but you may feel unmoored: you wonder whether the grammar you learned in school (what little there may have been) is sufficient or if the methods you learned by are up-to-date. And you certainly wouldn’t be alone if you were embarrassed to reveal to your colleagues all that you don’t know about grammar. Grammar feels like a frowning pedant reproaching you for not knowing enough about subject-verb agreement, for blithely ending sentences with prepositions, for splitting infinitives without even understanding what that means, for promiscuous use of commas and flagrant case violations. And, even if you speak and write with a confident tongue and well-schooled hand, you may tremble at the thought of trying to get your students to write complete sentences.

You are not alone. The obstacles to revitalizing the teaching of grammar are several. One is that our profession has lost sight of the connection between studying grammar and learning to read and write. As Robert J. Connors recounted in “The Erasure of the Sentence,” our interest in analyzing sentences has faded since the 1970s. Today it is the *process* of writing, along with originality, authenticity, and personal writing, that we value. The change has left sentence-level work—even such proven approaches as sentence combining—in shadow. We’re not comfortable encouraging students to be original and authentic one minute and then assigning them exercises in sentence structure the next. Many English departments, and highly respected English teachers, argue forcefully that sentence-level work is mechanical, behavioristic, antihumanistic, and, most scorn-worthy of all, boring.

Another obstacle to revitalizing the role of grammar is the tension between the traditional teaching of grammar and the varieties of language that our students speak in their homes. It’s understandable if

you feel on shaky ground at the thought of setting up rules about correct and incorrect English. After all, who are you to declare that *your* brand of English should trump anyone else's? One of the foremost goals of the curriculum is to broaden the Western canon, fostering multiculturalism, not undermining it. How does living harmoniously in a pluralistic society square with the mandate to teach, model, and prefer the variety of English spoken easily by the dominant culture? On the other hand, we acknowledge our duty to equip students with the keys they will need to open doors that might be closed to them on the basis of their speech, not to mention their writing. English, like almost all languages, has a prestige dialect: the language of power is used for business, education, and government. The opposing force is the value that we place on treasuring the diversity of American subcultures, and what is more intimate to these subcultures than their language? You may well feel caught in the middle between these obligations, and there is no easy way to find a balance.

These two tensions—between the traditional teaching of grammar and the goals of both confident writing and the culturally inclusive classroom—entail complex issues and valid charges. This guide from the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar does not analyze or deny the charges. Instead it is a proposal for overcoming both conflicts by integrating grammar into the multicultural reading/writing classroom. It asks and proposes answers to several questions:

- How can we teach grammar to support learning in all language skills?
- How can we teach grammar so that students discover its rules and principles on their own instead of hearing us impose those rules and principles on them?
- How can we teach grammar so that we strengthen rather than undermine our efforts to honor the voices and cultures of all students?
- How can we teach grammar so that the knowledge it provides can help learners feel confident about their own language and appreciate the languages of others?

We must answer these questions because, despite the rejection of traditional grammar teaching, grammar does not go away. It appears in almost all language arts texts. Almost all schoolchildren are assigned lessons on the parts of speech and the basic rules—even if they do not understand them, do not remember them, and cannot apply them. We have a nagging sense that we may not be delivering the full package when we disregard grammar. But we don't know where to begin. You

are probably reading this book because you want to teach grammar or have been required to do so. The education courses you took, however, probably neglected grammar and linguistics, so you may feel that you have little choice but to follow the mostly dry, mechanical treatments of grammar, the “no-no’s” of the rules and errors, that have changed little in the textbooks and are the reason so many believe that grammar should instead be shelved.

Two Kinds of Grammar

The underlying reason that grammar hangs on in the curriculum is that we realize that knowledge about language is valuable. Actually, the term *grammar* refers to two kinds of knowledge about language. One is subconscious knowledge, the language ability that children develop at an early age without being taught. As children begin to talk, as they become able to form sentences, their brains are forming their “grammar circuits” automatically. The other kind of knowledge is the conscious understanding of sentences and texts that can help students improve their reading and writing abilities by building on that subconscious knowledge. This conscious understanding includes knowing the parts of sentences and how they work together, knowing how sentences connect with one another to build meaning, and understanding how and why we use language in different ways in different social situations.

In teaching grammar in school, we are not really teaching grammar at all: children learn that automatically; rather, we are teaching students *about* grammar, and we are hoping to bring them the added confidence and clarity that go with any knowledge that strengthens skills and deepens understanding. That we are “teaching *about* grammar” is an insight that comes to us from work in linguistics over the last century. This book includes some of that work.

The problem with school grammar has not been grammar itself as much as it has been the way grammar is usually taught. Instead of helping students to focus on real literature or on the actual paper they are writing, traditional grammar pedagogy requires students to divert their attention to the isolated and often contrived sentences in a textbook. It encourages students—and teachers—to believe that the authority for Standard English is that separate book of rules rather than literature and the language of those with power and prestige in the living culture. It focuses on errors instead of on the understanding of language. Some teachers still lament that they can teach comma rules or subject-verb agreement at length only to find that their students continue to make the errors. But many other teachers do understand that

writing is an exceedingly complex cognitive and social task. The reduction of conventional errors takes a great deal of experience in reading, in writing, and in talking about reading and writing. Formal grammar is a tool for talking about and thinking about sentences; it is not, by itself, a tool for making errors go away (as Constance Weaver emphasizes in *Teaching Grammar in Context* and in her other books, listed in the “Sources and Resources” section at the end of the book).

Let’s consider the traditions that stand behind the way formal grammar has been taught out of the textbook. We do this to understand how grammar education has become what it is today. Until the modern era, the teaching of grammar rules was primarily a method for teaching a *foreign* language. The emphases on the parts of speech, the dissection of sentences, and the correct answers to exercises all have ancient and medieval roots in grammar as a method for teaching a second language. (Brock Haussamen has traced the history of many of our traditional grammar rules and terms in *Revising the Rules: Traditional Grammar and Modern Linguistics*; see “Sources and Resources.”) Grammar books were first used to teach Homeric Greek to non-Greeks, then Latin to non-Romans. Then, in eighteenth-century England, educators who believed that they needed to correct the “flawed” language of working-class children and adults adopted the same classical tools and models (they fussed, for example, that perhaps sentences should not end with prepositions because they never did so in Latin), and we have been using the same approaches ever since.

The result has been that we have traditionally taught grammar to students without appreciating the fact that they already have a full grammar system—an ability to organize language meaningfully—in their heads. Consequently, the grammar of the classroom has often seemed to students like so much unnecessary jargon they have to learn about a language they already know. Or, if students are dialect speakers for whom mainstream English is puzzling and strange, traditional grammar, with all its rules and exceptions (do you remember all the exceptions to the subject-verb agreement rule?), is not much help. Today, we know more about language, we know more about how brains learn, and we need to reorient ourselves about grammar.

The time may be propitious for a new approach to grammar because attitudes toward traditional grammar and mechanical correctness have been shifting in recent decades. The English profession in general and the National Council of Teachers of English in particular began to reduce the emphasis on the traditional teaching of grammar in the 1960s and 1970s as research began to show that teaching grammar in isola-

tion failed to improve writing and only cut into time better spent on fluency, process, and voice. In the 1990s, pockets of revitalized and genuinely useful grammar appeared in books—the most popular ones by Constance Weaver, Martha Kolln, and Rei Noguchi—that integrated linguistic grammar and traditional grammar and showed teachers ways to apply this modernized grammar in the classroom. But a new trend looms. High-stakes testing threatens to bring back grammar in its most reactionary and ineffective form—the monotonous drilling on errors and parts of speech. We can only hope that standardized testing prompts all English educators to take a closer look at the new insights into the teaching of grammar if for no other reason than to avoid taking a giant step backwards.

Grammar Alive! consists of two parts. Part I focuses primarily on strategies for teaching grammar. Part II focuses more on grammar itself and information about grammar that you might find useful.

Part I opens with “Three Goals for Teaching Grammar,” goals with equal priority that enable grammar to take on a balanced and positive role in the language arts classroom. Chapter 2, “Discovering Grammar,” discusses such terms as *Standard English* and offers approaches for introducing students to the presence of grammar in the full range of spoken and written language. Chapter 3, “Teaching the Language of Grammar,” discusses new approaches to describing the parts of speech and to helping students understand and apply them. Chapter 4, “Flexing the Students’ Sentence Sense,” focuses on how much students already know about sentences and how they can apply that knowledge to improve their writing and their appreciation of literature. Chapter 5 is “Non-Native Speakers in the English Classroom”; this section discusses some of the differences between English and the other languages that students may be speaking, and it covers many suggestions for helping such students in the English classroom. Vignettes—narrations of classroom grammar lessons—are integrated into or follow each of these chapters.

Part II, “On Grammar,” covers information about grammar that can clarify your own understanding of the subject and give you further options in the classroom. Chapter 6, “Grammar Superstitions: The Never-Never Rules,” discusses such supposed errors as the split infinitive that you may not be sure about. Chapter 7, “Diagramming Sentences,” provides a short guide to traditional sentence diagrams. Chapter 8, “An Overview of Linguistic Grammar,” is a full introduction to the current linguistic descriptions of word classes and sentence structure.

In the conclusion, you will find a grammar glossary that will help you refresh your understanding of exactly what all the grammar terms mean, and it includes plenty of examples. An annotated list of sources and resources in print and on the Internet will help you find further information about the teaching of grammar.