

Disciplining Grammar: A Response to Daniel Cole

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In “What if the Earth is Flat: Working With, Not Against, Faculty Concerns About Grammar in Student Writing,” Daniel Cole relates the story of a faculty development workshop gone awry. A session on responding to student work—meant to introduce the commenting philosophies fundamental to writing studies—became derailed when faculty failed to accept the orthodoxy of deemphasizing grammar and sentence-level concerns in favor of global issues, such as content development, elaboration, and arrangement. As Cole notes, such conflicts between writing studies’ principles and the beliefs of faculty in the disciplines are common.

Cole responds to the issue pragmatically, reasoning that we will ultimately have greater success in persuading disciplinary faculty of our writing across the curriculum/ writing in the disciplines (WAC/WID) philosophies if we make some effort to address what they see as the most pressing concerns with student writing. To this end, he provides a list created by faculty on his campus of ten “things” university students should know about writing—a list he hopes will be revised as needed, over the years, and accepted by all faculty at his institution. He ends with a call to bring “discussions of grammar pedagogy out of the margins, and reconsider how grammar instruction might be optimally reintegrated into our classrooms.”

Cole should be commended for raising the issue of teaching grammar, which sometimes feels like a taboo subject in writing studies. As Cole notes—and as anyone who has extensively discussed writing with non-English faculty will confirm—writing studies’ “orthodoxies” about addressing global problems before local ones often fail to persuade our colleagues from other disciplines. The importance of such persuasion is only growing as US colleges face increasing numbers of international students who do not speak English as their first language.

This response takes up Cole’s call to better disseminate our field’s understanding of grammar by sharing an activity, successful with faculty at Carnegie Mellon University, which helps disambiguate grammatical from other types of writing concerns. While Cole’s list of common errors can help faculty prioritize certain writing issues and provide students with a consistent vocabulary across writing assignments, he acknowledges that his workshop attendees still “seem to assume that one who has learned grammar is a good writer.” My activity is intended to confront this assumption.

Part of the problem is that individuals without any background in writing instruction tend to over-apply the term “grammar” (and even writing experts can disagree on what exactly this term includes). At its worst, such over-application can lead to radical misdiagnoses, akin to a driver with a flat tire peering under the engine hood to troubleshoot why the car is running so poorly.

As a case in point, in an unpublished study, my colleagues and I asked businesspeople to respond to emails containing a variety of errors. One email had many infelicities of tone and register, but contained no grammatical errors. Despite the fact that the email was error-free, fifteen percent of participants reported being bothered by its grammar, and one even cited “grammar” as the most problematic issue with the email. I have seen similar misdiagnoses play out in my communication center when faculty refer students to work on “grammar;” for example, when the student does not grasp the assignment or the readings they are responding to. Such misdiagnoses waste time and cause frustration as tutors struggle to explain to the student that fixing grammatical errors will still produce an essay that has missed the mark.

I share below an activity I have used to help disciplinary faculty confront beliefs about grammar. After asking faculty to compare the different versions of a one-paragraph text in Figure 1, I discuss my communication center’s philosophy on grammar vis-à-vis other types of writing issues and describe the tools we have for addressing different types of writing problems. Consistently, well over eighty percent of participants in my workshops prefer version B. When I ask why, participants state that version B is easier to understand and that it “flows” better than the first version. Some may note that B moves from broad to specific—or as I frame it, version B invokes a clear macrostructure that enables readers to follow its logic.

I then ask participants if they noticed the grammatical errors in B. Heads nod. When I ask if they found the errors bothersome, participants volunteer that they were bothered but that they still found version B more comprehensible than A.

I then point out that while version B has over one grammatical error per sentence, version A has none. The two versions also have identical content. The differences that make participants prefer B lies entirely in organization and coherence.

Someone will inevitably point out that the ordering of the passages seems to stack the deck in favor of B (an observation I readily acknowledge) since content may be easier to comprehend on a second reading. A participant might also point out that the errors in B, while copious, are not particularly egregious: none interfere with our ability to understand the author’s point, and none are sentence-boundary errors, which multiple studies have confirmed are particularly bothersome (Beason, 2001; Gilsdorf & Leonard, 2001; Hairston, 1981). More egregious errors might very well affect which passage participants prefer. In fact, the errors in B are typical of those we might expect from a non-native English speaker—missing articles, incorrect

prepositions, wrong verb tense—which may make readers more sympathetic to the writer than had the errors been more typical of those made by native speakers.

Here are two versions of an introduction to a research project written for a general audience. Which do you prefer: A or B?

- A. Polylactic acid (PLA) is a thermoplastic aliphatic polyester typically derived from corn starch, tapioca or sugarcane. Current uses for PLA include biodegradable medical implants, packing materials, diapers and 3D printers. We propose a device that composts PLA and other bioplastics within a home composting environment [1]. PLA and other bioplastics may provide a sustainable alternative to petroleum plastics, which have staggering environmental impacts. PLA resembles traditional plastic and can be processed on equipment already used for petroleum plastics. PLA biodegrades under carefully controlled conditions, but it is only compostable in industrial facilities and cannot be mixed with other recyclable materials [2, 3]. This makes the commercial viability of PLA limited. We argue that our device would encourage the production of more sustainable and economic bioplastics.
- B. Although plastic has revolutionized modern life, the environmental impacts of traditional petroleum plastics is staggering. Bioplastics may provide sustainable alternative to petroleum plastics because it use fewer fossil fuels in production and reduce greenhouse gas emissions as they biodegrade. One particularly promising bioplastic are polylactic acids (PLA), a thermoplastic aliphatic polyester typically derived from corn starch, tapioca or sugarcane. PLA resembles traditional plastic and can be processed on equipment already used for petroleum plastics. However, the commercial viability for PLA is currently limited because is only compostable in industrial facilities and cannot be mixed with other recyclable materials [1, 2]. To make PLA more commercially viable, we propose a device that composts PLA and other bioplastics with home composting environment [3]. Such a device, we argue, would encourage production of more sustainable and economic bioplastics.

Figure 1. Exercise used in faculty writing workshops to explain our philosophy on grammar. Our communication center's tutors wrote both passages.

The exercise is intended to make a point, and it is one that most participants come to acknowledge: grammatically correct sentences are not the *sine qua non* of good writing. I then go on to present two fundamental tenants of my communication center's philosophy:

1. Readers are more forgiving of grammatical errors when the logic and organization are sound.

This is a rephrasing of writing studies' philosophy that global issues are more important to a text's readability than local ones. However, I think the nuances in phrasing are important. The above statement simply claims that when we improve organization, coherence, and logical development, grammatical errors appear less devastating than they might otherwise. In support of this point, I ask participants to imagine a passage combining the problems of version A and B and posit that some would identify the central textual problem of this imaginary text as one of grammar. However, these same readers are able to—if not overlook—at least provisionally absolve some of these errors when the logic, organization, and coherence of the passage are strong.

2. We have effective tools for teaching organization, coherence, and elaboration, but our tools for teaching grammar are much less effective; therefore, it is pragmatic to address the problems we are best positioned to improve

This point is central to arguments about why writing studies prioritizes “global” concerns over “local” ones. It is not just that we see “global” errors as more important—we can all think of essays where “local,” grammatical errors overshadow a writer's attempts to communicate—but that we have better tools for addressing global errors. By tools, I mean concepts such as following a clear macrostructure, placing main arguments in topic sentences, or beginning sentences with given information and ending with new. I can effectively teach one or more of these concepts in a one-hour consultation and have a writer be at least partially successful in applying it in his or her next essay. My success rate is far lower for addressing grammatical error—particularly when working with non-native English speakers.

As a case in point, consider the exercise above. We can transform version A into version B by applying two organizational principles. The first is to follow the rhetorical conventions John Swales (1990) and others (c.f., Anthony, 1999; Samra, 2005) have identified as governing the introductions to research articles. Our well-organized version follows these conventions by beginning with a statement of significance, summarizing the status quo, identifying a gap, and then filling this gap with the researchers' own innovation. By contrast, version A fails to follow any predictable macrostructure. I am usually able to teach students the research introduction

macrostructure in an hour or less. Students generally find the lesson persuasive and are able to grasp its principles relatively quickly.

The second principle we applied to transform version A into B is the given/new contract (often referred to as the known/new or old/new contract). This principle is based in the work of Michael Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) and was popularized for scientific writing by Gopen and Swan (1990). While slightly more difficult for writers to grasp and apply independently than the research introduction macrostructure, the given-new contract is typically easier to grasp than most grammatical rules.

In contrast to the two lessons needed to address the organization and coherence issues in version A, version B has at least six different types of errors. Further complicating matters is the fact that some of these errors are lexical rather than grammatical, meaning that they lack clear rules (Myers, 2004). For instance, I have no simple and compelling way of explaining why sentence five should read “the commercial viability *of* PLA” rather than “the commercial viability *for* PLA” or why an article is needed before “sustainable alternative” but not “greenhouse gasses” in sentence two. Such lexical knowledge, Meyers argues, can only be acquired through immersion in a language and may take years to develop. Even the subject/verb agreement errors in passage B (arguably the most teachable errors in the passage) are difficult to parse out since the passage contains so many complex noun phrases.

We need to admit to those outside of writing studies that our disciplinary tendency to address grammatical errors at a later stage in the writing process has as much to do with the intractable nature of grammatical problems as with the relative importance we place on this type of error. While some writing practitioners may object to the public acknowledgment that our tools are flawed, I think our disciplinary colleagues tend to understand. They all have research questions or problems in their disciplines that suffer because they are difficult or expensive to study. Our field has a similar situation with respect to grammar. The rules of English syntax and mechanics are notoriously complex, copious, and idiosyncratic. Enormous amounts of time are required to make small gains. By contrast, much less effort can yield large gains in organization, content development, and coherence.

Our colleagues in the disciplines need us to instruct them to distinguish different types of errors, and they need tools that can help them address such errors. Examples of such tools can be found in the handouts and videos at <http://www.cmu.edu/gcc/HandoutsandResources/index.html>. This site also contains resources discussing organizational patterns in scientific and technical disciplines as well as those common in the humanities. My communication center has had great success in sharing these tools with disciplinary faculty and departments.

Yes, we need to listen carefully and avoid assuming that we completely understand the rhetorical conventions of disciplines far afield of our own. This does not mean, however, that our faculty workshops should wait for good pedagogy and rhetorical understanding to emerge from our participants. We need to be prepared to provide concrete advice and tools that can help faculty recognize and teach the organizational macrostructures and rhetorical conventions common in their disciplines. At the same time, we also need to be flexible enough to modify or temper our advice when we discover disciplinary expectations that conflict with what we think we know.

My activity and discussion ultimately may not have persuaded the participants in Cole's workshop of the need to de-emphasize grammar, but it does provide a starting point. Along with providing lists such as Cole's, we need to teach our disciplinary colleagues how to diagnose and troubleshoot a range of textual problems.

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