

To Grammar or Not to Grammar: That Is *Not* the Question!

“Should we teach grammar, or shouldn’t we?” Often presented with this apparent all-or-nothing choice, even the teachers asking the question may not have clear instructional goals for teaching grammar; they may simply think they *should* teach it. Sometimes they have other reasons, though, for thinking they ought to teach grammar: they find parents, the public, and even the politicians clamoring for grammar instruction in the hope that teaching traditional grammar from handbooks or CDs will somehow improve students writing, or at least their ability to avoid “errors.”

Most often it doesn’t.

Yes, some students learn the conventions of grammar, usage, and punctuation from a handbook. Or at least they appear to have learned these conventions when doing and drill exercises on one concept at a time, followed by related tests. But do students remember and apply these conventions in their own writing? Here, the payoff severely declines.

The problems with this common view of “why teach grammar” lie deeper than most people realize. First, we must contend with an underlying, implicit, and largely erroneous learning theory: if teachers teach something well, students will learn it and, what’s more, will apply it well. What we now know from cognitive psychology is that stu-

dents need guidance in developing concepts, such as the concepts of “sentence” and “not sentence.” In addition, no matter how motivated the students may be to apply such concepts—for example, to avoid or eliminate run-ons and fragments in their writing—they still often need help applying these concepts in practical situations. Such help may be needed even by the students who enjoy and take pride in their schoolwork and who love analyzing data.

Much of what we teach in the name of grammar amounts to labeling parts of speech and their functions or identifying kinds of sentences, yet students need very little of this to learn the conventions of written edited English. For most students, teaching grammar as sentence analysis is another reason why the grammar doesn’t transfer to student writing.

It is convenient for us to be able to refer to “nouns,” “verbs,” “subjects,” and “predicates” when talking about things like subject-verb agreement. However, a little grammar goes a long way when it comes to helping students edit for the use of standard conventions in their writing, and the concepts can be taught as we discuss literature and the students’ own writing.

Yet another major problem with the demand for teaching grammar is exemplified in the tendency to limit the concern about “grammar” to just the issue of conventions, or what is commonly called “correctness.” Even teachers often fail to realize that they can do a great deal to help students write more effectively by attending to grammatical options, such as reducing a sentence with supporting details to an appositive, a participial phrase, or an absolute (see examples in Connie’s and Carol’s sections of this article). When we help

students see how to *add* details in such phrases, we are actually helping them to generate content. Other grammatical issues we can attend to are modifier placement, sentence variety, and sentence structure. The choice and placement of these grammatical options join with word use and other features to create a distinctive style and voice in a piece of writing. Thus, guiding students in sentence expansion and revision is critical to helping them become more *effective*, not just more *correct*, as writers. See, for example, Harry Noden's article in this volume and his book *Image Grammar* (1999), a teacher resource that we enthusiastically recommend.

Both our personal teaching experiences and the findings of research studies support the conclusion that most students do not benefit from grammar study in isolation from writing, if indeed our purpose in teaching grammar is to help students improve their writing (e.g., Hillocks and Smith, 1991). In short, teaching traditional grammar in isolation is not a very practical act.

What we *have* found practical, though, is drawing upon literature for models of effective sentences and paragraphs, while incorporating only the most useful grammatical concepts (and even less terminology) into our teaching of writing. This enables us to help students improve sentences as they learn to recognize skilled use of detail, style, voice, and, of course, the conventions of edited American English. When we have stu-

dents do activities—let's say brief writings to practice using a particular grammatical construction—it is typically as a prelude to writing another piece where we simply encourage students to experiment with the grammatical options they've been learning. If we think of writing as a recursive process, as exemplified in the Michigan model of writing in Figure 1, we would suggest that teaching grammatical options and syntactic effectiveness is most appropriate as a prelude to writing and during revision, while teaching writing conventions is most helpful during the editing phase. Revising for greater grammatical effectiveness and editing for conventions can be spurred by mini-lessons, but ultimately, we have found individual conferences to be absolutely indispensable.

Teachers who are familiar with NCTE's resolutions on the teaching of grammar will see that the teaching of grammar in and for writing is in line with those resolutions, while isolated teaching of grammar is not. Teaching grammar in context is also in line with the NCTE standards for the English language arts, particularly standard 6 (NCTE, 1996):

Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (p. 36)

There is nothing in the NCTE standards about teaching grammar—or anything else—as an isolated subject. Rather, the language arts are seen as a unit, permeating inquiry and learning throughout the curriculum.

It should not be surprising, then, that our teaching experiences as well as our professional reading have convinced us that teaching a limited number of grammatical concepts in the context of their use is far better than isolated grammar study in getting students to appreciate and use grammatical options and conventions more effectively. Or as Rei Noguchi (1991) puts it, "Less is more" (p. 121).

Connie's section of this article begins by alluding to minilessons and writing practice, after which she focuses on "grammar emerging" as

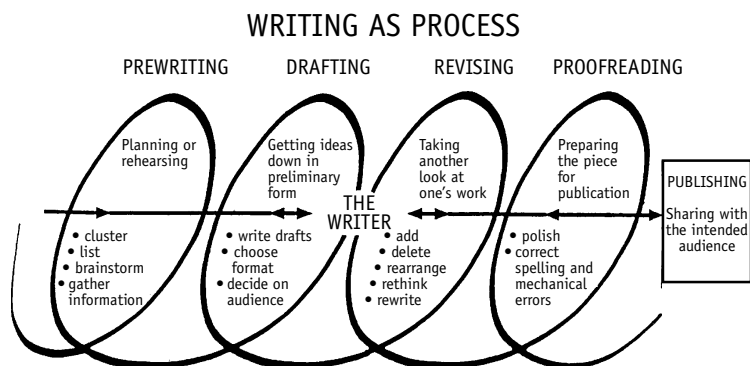


Figure 1. Michigan model of the writing process, Michigan State Board of Education, 1994

viewed through writings from the students of a seventh-grade teacher and a fifth-grade teacher. Such examples encourage us to rethink how we can best promote detail and grammatical variety in students' writing. In the following section, Carol discusses some activities that are helping her students to appreciate and use longer, more interesting sentences, and to draw upon a wider repertoire of syntactic options. This is followed by a section on revising sentences in a paragraph. Finally, Sharon discusses the importance of keeping the issue of writing conventions in perspective, while nevertheless helping students learn to edit their own writing.

For us, the question is *not* a simple dichotomy, "To grammar or not to grammar?" Rather, the question is, "What aspects of grammar can we teach to enhance and improve students' writing, and when and how can we best teach them?" "In the context of writing" is our short answer, but we keep learning more ways as we keep taking risks as teachers.

Connie: Prewriting and "Grammar Emerging"

Decades ago, I was deeply affected, as a writer and as a teacher, by a little book called *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric* (1967). In this book, Francis Christensen pointed out that "Grammar maps out the possible; rhetoric narrows the possible down to the desirable or effective" (p. 39). With respect to sentence combining (which had not yet seen its heyday), Christensen wrote: "We need a rhetoric of the sentence that will do more than combine the ideas of primer sentences. We need one that will generate ideas" (p. 26).

Through Christensen's generous examples from both professional and student writing, I became convinced that focusing on certain grammatical forms was the best way to help students generate details and images. Christensen's research on the kinds of constructions commonly used by adult published writers but seldom used by twelfth graders led me to focus on two of these three constructions, namely participial phrases and absolutes. After having my freshman writing students

practice these two constructions by doing sentence-combining exercises (yes, sentence-combining, not sentence-generating), I used to read them all but the ending of Ray Bradbury's "The Foghorn," after which I asked them to write their own endings, being sure to include participial phrases and absolutes that would carry narrative and descriptive details.

Here is an example of the kinds of sentences my students produced as part of their narrative conclusion, with the requisite constructions italicized:

- participial phrase → The monster lunged forward, *leaving a trail of slime,*
- absolute → *his eyes fixed on the red, white, red, white of the revolving light,*
- absolute → *his mournful voice echoing the sound of the foghorn.*

A participial phrase begins (usually) with a participle, either a present participle ending in *-ing*, or a past participle, such as *broken*, *frightened*, *sung* (as in the opening phrase of this sentence: *Frightened* by the foghorn, the monster lunged forward). An absolute is a phrase that usually can be restored to full sentencehood by adding *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, as in the examples above. By focusing on participial and absolute phrases that provide detail, zooming in like the zoom lens on a camera, my students found themselves able to infuse images and sensory detail into their narratives, and the use of detail even seemed to carry over into their expository and persuasive writing. In short, their writing improved greatly.

Today, I use sentence-imitating and sentence-generating activities that result in real pieces of writing. I draw upon Harry Noden's *Image Grammar* as a source not only of ideas but of literary and student examples, plus paintings that can be used to generate writing. I have also learned—from my students, middle school teachers, and their stu-

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dents—how grammar and detail can emerge through good preparation for writing, including art and the reading and discussion of good literature.

Grammar Emerging through Prewriting Activities

We can learn valuable lessons from Sarah, a seventh-grade teacher and former student in my Grammar for Teachers class (Woltjer, 1998;

Asking students to focus on “adjectives” and “adverbs” might actually limit students’ use of the more sophisticated structures they would use naturally.

Weaver 1996b). Before taking this class, Sarah had been inclined to teach traditional, isolated grammar in the hope of improving students’ writing. She admitted that “Last year, I have realized, I did too much traditional grammar, and

sadly enough, I am afraid I did not teach my students how to become better writers.” So it became her goal to improve her teaching of writing and not concentrate on the traditional grammar lessons. She wrote:

Already this year, it has been exciting to watch the difference in my classroom as I implement new teaching ideas. This year I see much more enthusiasm for writing and grammar because the students are not fully aware they are being taught grammar. Disguising my grammar lessons behind the minilesson format in the writer’s workshop has prevented me from having to endure a repetition of last year’s groans regarding how boring grammar is.

Sarah had previously encouraged her seventh graders to use adjectives and adverbs in their writing, but found that often her students’ “descriptive” poems or paragraphs included little description and no details to make the pieces come alive. When it was suggested that she guide her students in writing a “five senses” poem about fall, Sarah decided to experiment with two different ways of encouraging students to use adjectives and adverbs. First, she asked the students to write about fall but gave them little direction, except for mentioning “Be sure to use those adjectives and adverbs

for detail!” The students turned in their writings at the end of class.

About two weeks later, Sarah guided the students in writing their second fall poems, the “sense” poems. She explains:

The Monday before, I had each student bring in one or two leaves, so by Wednesday we had a large basket of them. Before writing on Wednesday, we did prewriting exercises together as a class. My students loved it! We threw the basket of leaves in the air and watched them fall in different directions. Then the students took turns placing their leaves on the hot air register and watched as their leaf got blown up toward the ceiling. After this, they went around the classroom sharing a favorite fall memory or Thanksgiving tradition. Finally, with that introduction, I explained the writing assignment as using the five senses, and they began writing. Those that had trouble with the first fall writing assignment now had previous knowledge and ideas from the prewriting activities on the five senses to provide organization. The difference in their writings was amazing!

Figure 2 shows the “before and after” poems from two students. One important thing to notice is that many of the descriptive words in the “after” poems aren’t necessarily adjectives or adverbs; they are nouns (“razor blades”) or verbs (“mulched”), as in the sensory poem from Tom. Another important point is that while the “before” poems used some adjectives and/or adverbs, the “after” poems used a much greater variety of constructions that function adjectivally (to modify nouns) or adverbially (to modify verbs or whole clauses). Examples are the participle and participial phrases in Tom’s and Amy’s “after” poems.

What is to be learned from Sarah’s experience? Several things, I think (Weaver 1996b):

1. Various kinds of prewriting experiences can greatly enhance the quality of students’ writing. This is something Sarah already knew and typically practiced.
2. A variety of adjectival and adverbial constructions will probably emerge when students are guided in focusing on the details of experience, rather than on grammar.
3. Asking students to focus on “adjectives” and

“adverbs” might actually limit students’ use of the more sophisticated structures they would use naturally.

The last two lessons were important ones Sarah learned—and important, I think, for many of us to learn, as teachers. (For a fuller version of Sarah’s story, in her own words, see Woltjer, 1998).

Grammar can help us generate ideas; thus the revision section of this article demonstrates how focusing on the addition of certain grammatically subordinate constructions can help writers add detail and thereby make their pieces more interesting. However, the reverse occurs as well, as we see from Sarah’s students and from Judy Davis’s students, below. Not only can grammar generate ideas, but ideas can generate grammar. The two are mutually reinforcing.

Grammar Emerging through Art and Literature

As I walked toward Judy Davis’s fifth-grade classroom at the Manhattan New School, I was struck by the beauty of the student paintings hung high

on the wall outside her classroom door. Curious about the notebook resting on a table beneath the pictures, I opened it and found a smaller, photocopied version of the same paintings, accompanied by a creative piece of writing and an expository piece describing how the piece was written.

It was not only the paintings that seemed exceptional; it was the writings and—yes, I’ll admit it—the use of sophisticated grammatical constructions conveying concrete detail. Alexandra, for example, used some especially effective features in the poem she wrote to accompany her painting.

	“Alone”
	In my mind
	people walk by
participial →	<i>pretending</i>
phrase	<i>not to see me.</i>
	I slowly walk past them
participial phrase →	<i>biding behind trees,</i>
absolute →	<i>my head</i>
phrase	<i>pointed to the ground.</i>
	The sun folds
	its rays into
	the sunset.
	My mind

Tom’s poems

Before

It is fall you rake the leaves crustily over a pile “o” mud.
It is nearly ear shattering when you rake the flames on the ground. How chilling it be, no one knows. It (fall) is so unpredictable.

After

Smells like destruction when burned.
Clogging your lungs.
Tastes like the dirt of the earth, *destroying your taste buds.*
See the leaves on the trees fall effortlessly to the ground,
Where they will be raked, mulched, and burned.
Touch them—they feel like razor blades, when you jump
on them.
Hear them? You can’t!
But if you can’t hear them, do they really fall?

Amy’s poems

Before

Fall is the leaves changing colors; they can be green,
yellow or red.
Fall is the cold and the freezing at night.
Fall is when your backyard is covered with leaves.

After

I can smell the apple pie *baking in the oven.*
I can smell the *burning* leaves in the neighbor’s yards.
I hear the leaves *crackling under my feet as I trudge*
through the yard.
I hear children *yelling as they jump in a pile of leaves.*
I see blended colors on the leaves like someone painted
them.
I touch the leaves and I feel the veins.
I touch the leaves and sometimes they break in my hands.
I taste the turkey as the grease runs down my throat.
I taste the pumpkin pie and now I know it is fall!

Figure 2. “Before” and “after” poems from Sarah’s seventh graders

three parallel → reads tangled *thoughts* ← three parallel
phrases as about *the previous day*, phrases headed
as objects *the books I've read*, by "thoughts"
of "about" *and home*.

*Thoughts that separate me
from other people
that drift through my sleep.
Thoughts that make me
alone.*

Alexandra

Three grammatical devices that Alexandra uses effectively are participial phrases, an absolute, and two sets of parallel phrases. Impressive, I thought, for a fifth grader.

But Alexandra's piece did not stand alone. Several other pieces, such as Bari's in Figure 3 or Lauren's in Figure 4, include exceptionally effective details and structure. Bari offers details within participial phrases, while Lauren uses three sets of three parallel phrases each. In her piece, Lauren leads up to a particularly effective ending:

"This is a place of magic."

When I asked the students' teacher, Judy Davis, whether she had explicitly taught such grammatical constructions as participial phrases, absolutes, and parallel constructions, she said no. She hadn't taught any of these, but had simply immersed her students in reading and discussing good literature, including poetry. Students' use of these grammatical constructions had simply "emerged" in their writing, as a result of their engagement with art and especially literature.

Both Sarah's and Judy's experiences as teachers, as well as my own, have confirmed for me that the use of sophisticated grammatical constructions in writing does not necessarily have to be taught. It can be generated through a focus on ideas for writing, including art, and through the examples offered by quality literature. For other students, though, the explicit use of imitation and sentence generation may produce a breakthrough in writing, as Carol describes in the next section.

Carol: Learning Grammar with *The Giver*

Specific grammatical constructions evident in the current literature students read are potential springboards for teaching stylistic writing options that students can integrate into their writings and revisions. When read in the context of a great book, grammatical constructions used by professional authors model syntactic options that can be used by student writers.

Drawing upon research, Connie Weaver states that sentence combining helps students "expand their syntactic repertoire in order to write more syntactically sophisticated and rhetorically effective sentences" (1996, p. 142). Indeed, one of the most prevalent tendencies of middle school writers is to include a high frequency of short, choppy sentences—all of like construction—in their writing.

Just to show my seventh grade students what could be done to revise a piece of writing containing short, choppy sentences, I took a passage from Chapter 9 of *The Giver*, beautifully written by Lois Lowry, and put it through a regression process that turned it into a piece of writing that any middle school student might have written:

His training had not yet begun. He left the auditorium. He felt apartness. He made his way through the crowd. He was holding the folder she had given him. He was looking for his family unit. He was also looking for Asher. People moved aside for him. They watched him. He thought he could hear whispers.

I had the students read through this altered rendition of Lowry's writing and asked them to discuss what they thought of it. As I predicted, the students thought it was too choppy, and even questioned that it was actually from the book they were currently reading, since it differed so drastically from Lowry's style. I assured them that it was actually from the chapter we would be reading later that same day, but told them I had changed Lowry's writing to reflect what I often saw in their own writing.

As a group, we discussed how the first two sentences might be combined into one, longer, more interesting sentence. Then, I invited the stu-

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dents to rewrite the altered passage, revising the paragraph toward what they imagined they would find in Lowry's actual text.

Joe wrote:

Training had not yet began for Jonas's assignment. Leaving the auditorium Jonas felt apartness. Making his way through the crowd was tough because of the number of people. Trying to find Asher, and his family unit, Jonas thought he heard whispers.

Ann wrote:

His training had not begun yet, but he left the auditorium feeling apartness. He made his way through the crowd, as he was holding the folder she had given him. He was looking for his family unit. But he was also looking for Asher. People were moving aside for him. The crowd was watching him. He thought he could hear whispering.

Brian wrote:

Training had not yet begun for Jonas. Leaving the auditorium Jonas felt apartness. Holding the folder the chief elder gave him he made his way through the crowd. Jonas was looking for his family unit and Asher. Watching him, the people moved aside for him. Thinking he could hear whispers.

Compare the writings of these students to Lowry's actual passage where she describes Jonas leaving the Ceremony of Twelve:

But his training had not yet begun and already, upon leaving the Auditorium, he felt the apartness. Holding the folder she had given him, he made his way through the throng, looking for his family unit and

for Asher. People moved aside for him. They watched him. He thought he could hear whispers. (p. 62)

The students were a bit dismayed that the last three sentences were actually as choppy in Lowry's text as in my chopped up version. We discussed why Lowry chose to do this, and the class realized that the choppiness of construction mirrored the apartness that Jonas was beginning to feel immediately following the Ceremony of Twelve. It was Lowry's stylistic choice to use simple sentence construction to parallel Jonas's growing feeling of isolation.

I must state here that this class had previously studied the effects of beginning sentences with participial phrases via Noden's *Image Grammar* and his concept of "brush strokes." So, in addition to combining sentences, many students also integrated this previously learned stylistic grammar choice to enhance their re-creations of Lowry's passage.

Noden directly compares an artist's development of a painting with the writer's development of a piece of writing:

Just as the painter combines a wide repertoire of brush stroke techniques to create an image, the writer chooses from a repertoire of sentence structures. Although professionals use an array of complex structures, students can begin to learn the art of image

The sun peaks out of a group of lazy clouds and lightens the scene of my backyard.
I feel like being carefree, alone, and lost, tossing and twirling through the large cornfield . . .
Tossing water over my feet while mud trickles in between my toes and then swim freely in the cool water of a pond . . .
Crawling under the cow fence and running east with them gallivanting behind . . .
Bicycle riding up a challenging hill and then shouting down another . . .
Watching birds caw overhead as I sip lemonade at the picnic table . . .
Climbing up a tree with a book in my hand, just sitting on a limb, reading.

Figure 3. Bari's writing

Utopia

You can come here.
You have to climb in the direction of the sky.
And when you are standing on a cliff
where the soft whispers of wind stir the tall grass,
and a hawk beats the air with his wings,
and a tree reaches toward the sun that fills the sky,
you will know.
This is it.
With the realization should come a drum roll,
and music,
and celebration.
But none come because any drum roll would be too loud
It would make the hawk fly away,
the wind stop,
the grass shrivel.
This is a place of magic.

Figure 4. Lauren's writing

grammar by employing five basic brush strokes: (1) the participle, (2) the absolute, (3) the appositive, (4) adjectives shifted out of order, and (5) action verbs. (p. 4)

The text of *The Giver* provides many examples of each of Noden's "brush strokes." In another minilesson, I retyped the following sentences from Chapters 16 and 18 for the students to examine:

"Warmth," Jonas replied, "and happiness." And—let me think. *Family*. That it was a celebration of some sort, a holiday. (p. 117)

The Old of the community did not ever leave their special place, the House of the Old, where they were so well cared for and respected. (p. 117)

Jonas thought of his favorite female, Fiona, and shivered. (p. 132)

I asked the students to carefully consider the construction of these sentences. I had to ask them

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to look beyond the comma before they really started to catch on to the fact that the word or phrase after the comma actually just renamed the noun before it. The students were grasping the idea of the appositive, even though they didn't know its name!

I modeled writing sentences with appositives for them by asking them to give me several words or phrases that described Jonas and using those nouns or noun phrases as appositives in writing my sentences about Jonas.

Next, I invited them to try the same approach in writing about the Giver.

David wrote:

The old receiver of memory has now moved on to become the Giver. The Giver, Jonas's instructor, holds the memories of what it was like before sameness was among them and their society.

Christina wrote:

Giving memories to Jonas, the Giver shares the pain and the joy. The Giver, the old receiver of memory, is giving Jonas painful memories as well as joyful memories.

Mindi wrote:

The Giver, an old man weighed down by positive and negative memories, is kind but to the point. He is shut away from everyone, chosen when he became a Twelve to be different and endure the pains of some awful memories.

Notice these descriptions not only use appositives correctly, two of them also make use of participial phrases and none are short, choppy sentences by any means.

The goal is to see students incorporating these grammatical constructions into all of their writing and, consciously or unconsciously, to become more sophisticated writers. And this is beginning to happen. I was delighted when I read these most recent journal entries from the following students who were writing in response to Chapter 19 of *The Giver*:

Charlene wrote:

How could this place seem so peaceful and wonderful? Why would they kill little children and elderly people? I hate this community! This is such a bad thing and people actively kill other people. I would never be able to live with that, knowing that the life of someone has been taken away from them and that they actually killed other people. I thought it was a utopia. A utopia should not have people killing other people. It's just not right to do that!

Mindi wrote:

Oh wow! How could they just kill a baby, so innocent, so unknowing? How could Rosemary kill herself? I understand, I guess, that the community doesn't feel emotions, but Rosemary could feel. She knew what would happen. Why does the Receiver let that happen? So is there really an elsewhere or is Elsewhere really death? I think this community needs help!

If I had started these lessons by telling my students we were going to be studying grammar, or more specifically, participial phrases and appositives, and doing sentence combining, my guess is their attitude would have precluded the positive results that I see more and more often in their everyday writing. Indeed, exercises on these aspects of grammar from an English book would have been just that—exercises—the results of which would most likely not have transferred to real student writing at all!

My experiences with teaching grammar in the context of literature are similar to an experience Sharon recently had with one of her students in an editing conference. In both cases, students were engaged in improving their writing, not just learning grammar for the sake of knowing the proper terminology or in order to pass a grammar test. Students were learning grammar incidentally as they focused on improving their writing.

Connie: Revision of Sentences and Paragraphs

Most of us English language arts teachers have not actually had much guidance in revising sentences to create more effective paragraphs. We have had our sentences “corrected” if they were actually fragments or run-ons or victims of a comma splice. We may even have had an exercise or two in moving elements within sentences. But few of us have received help expanding or combining sentences within our own writing in order to add detail, to reduce whole sentences conveying details to subordinate constructions, to make our sentences flow, or to use form to reflect content. Therefore, we tend to teach as we were taught, limiting ourselves mostly to the “correcting” of sentences. But we need to do better in order to help students write better than we were taught to write. We need to have students combine, move, revise, and expand sentences for greater effectiveness.

I’ll use myself as an example. After six years of repeated grammar study in junior high and high school, I could use not only subordinate clauses but also appositives and participial phrases that occurred at the beginning of a sentence or immediately after the subject. But my narrative and descriptive writing was stiff. Stylistically, it sounded like ineffective expository writing with unnatural sentence structures and insufficient detail. As I mentioned earlier, it wasn’t until I read the Christensen book, *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric* (1967), that I learned to write more effective sentences with more concrete details. After examining published adult writing, Christensen concluded that the constructions most lacking in

high school students’ writing were appositives, participial phrases, and absolute constructions. Equally or more important for me as a writer, Christensen pointed out that these and other constructions, when serving as nonessential “free modifiers,” most often occurred in the final position in a sentence. Next most frequent was initial position, before the subject. Least frequent were exactly what my teachers unfortunately had emphasized, modifiers right after the subject. (Note to teachers worrying about my use of “be” verbs in these last two sentences: I chose to include the clarifying material last in the sentences, for emphasis.)

Years later, in trying to illustrate for my students what I had learned about using subordinate detail and the judicious placement of modifiers, I wrote a short piece about my experience whitewater rafting in Costa Rica. Here is how a certain excerpt read in my first draft, with few details, and these details occurring in complete sentences instead of being subordinate to a main subject-verb unit:

So on the third day of our trip, I shouldn’t have been surprised that the flooding Pacuare rose while we slept beside it for the night. Nor should I have been surprised, I suppose, that we were now “going swimming” for the second time.

But this time was worse than the first. The wall of water momentarily crushed me. I surfaced quickly. I was grateful that this time I had not come up under the raft. Thank God! But then another wave engulfed me. It drove me deeper into the blackness. I dared not open my eyes.

Keeping in mind what I had learned from Frances Christensen about using participial phrases and absolutes, and about placing most of them in final position, I then expanded my draft to produce the following, with the absolute and the participial phrases italicized:

So on the third day of our trip, I shouldn’t have been surprised that the flooding Pacuare rose while we slept

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beside it for the night, *its muddy waters picking up speed as it swelled its banks* [absolute]. Nor should I have been surprised, I suppose, that we were now “going swimming” for the second time.

But this time was worse than the first. The wall of water momentarily crushed me, *pushing me toward the bottom of the river* [participial phrase]. I surfaced quickly, grateful that this time, I had not come up under the raft. Thank God! But then another wave engulfed me, *driving me deeper this time, much deeper, into blackness* [participial phrase]. I dared not open my eyes. (Weaver, 1996a, p. 119)

While revising, I kept in mind that I wanted to do four things: to add participial phrases and absolutes if or as appropriate, in order to convey details; to reduce most sentences focusing on details to these or other subordinate constructions; to include most of these “free modifying” constructions at the ends of sentences; and especially to cre-

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ate a narrative sense of movement with the participial phrases in final position. I think I have accomplished all four goals in this short excerpt. Over the years, I have learned to address these goals mostly as I write my first draft, instead of having to go back later to deal with sentence and paragraph structure in a separate revision cycle. I have also learned to experiment with choices in grammar and punctuation that support, mirror, and convey content (see Romano, 1998). But most important, I have learned to focus on using certain grammatical constructions—namely participial phrases, absolutes, and their placement—and that attempt, in turn, has nudged me into adding details that convey images or ideas (Christensen, 1967, p. 26).

In *Image Grammar* (1999), Harry Noden demonstrates how to help writers appreciate and achieve such goals as I attempted with the white-water rafting piece—and many more. For example, he discusses a revision scenario described in Olsen’s *Envisioning Writing* (1992). The teacher asked the students to write a brief character sketch. One of the sixth-grade students wrote the following:

The Big Guy

James weighs 240 pounds and use to be the champ. He beat Mohamad Ali for the crown. He’s 38 now and he had drugs and pot. He’s been in jail for 5 years and that ended his career. He’s had a tough time finding a job. His face is scared. He wears a ripped T shirt with knee pants. He’s trying to make a come back in the boxing world.

It’s tempting to wield the red pen and go straight for the jugular of the Error Beast (Weaver, 1982). Instead, however, the teacher had students draw the character they were describing, then revise the writing to include details from the drawing. Here is this student’s final edited version:

The Big Guy

The lonely man stood in a ring holding tight to the ropes. His head was bald. His chest was hairy and sweaty. His legs looked like they were planted to the ground like stumps. His muscles were relaxed in the dark ring. His mouth looked mean and tough the way it was formed. He was solid looking. His boxing gloves had blood stains on them. His still body structure glowed in the darkness. He braced himself against the ropes. His white pants had red stripes, the hair on his chin prickled out like thorns.

In terms of detail, this paragraph is *much* better than the original. Nevertheless, I was struck by the monotonous nature of the sentences, almost all of which begin with “his.” The details all had equal grammatical status, since they all were presented in independent clauses rather than subordinate grammatical constructions. To my ear, this had created a boring, clumpy-clump rhythm within the paragraph.

What, I asked myself, would I do to help the writer make the sentence structures themselves more interesting, and how could I develop one or more minilessons using this piece of writing? What details would I subordinate? Indeed, what details would I group together before even trying to combine sentences and thereby subordinate some details? In the revised paragraph, I marked sentences whose details I would combine. Here, one combinable pair of sentences is indicated with italics, while a group of three is indicated with boldface:

The lonely man stood in a ring holding tight to the ropes. *His head was bald. His chest was hairy and sweaty.*

His legs looked like they were planted to the ground like stumps. His muscles were relaxed in the dark ring. **His mouth looked mean and tough the way it was formed. He was solid looking.** His boxing gloves had blood stains on them. His still body structure glowed in the darkness. He braced himself against the ropes. His white pants had red stripes, *the hair on his chin prickled out like thorns.*

Next, of course, came the problem of ordering. I decided to restructure one sentence and to group together sentences that might go together in terms of content, with some details to be subordinated in a next draft:

The lonely man stood in a ring holding tight to the ropes.

His head was bald.

The hair on his chin was prickling out like thorns.

His chest was hairy and sweaty.

His muscles were relaxed in the dark ring.

He was solid looking.

His legs were planted to the ground like stumps.

His mouth was formed mean and tough.

His boxing gloves had stains on them.

His still body glowed in the darkness.

He braced himself against the ropes.

Doubtless my reordering was influenced by the fact that I already had some idea how I wanted to restructure the sentences. One version of a final draft could read as follows:

The Big Guy

The lonely man stood in a ring holding tight to the ropes. His head was bald, the hair on his chin prickling out like thorns, his chest hairy and sweaty. His muscles were relaxed in the dark ring, but he was solid looking, his legs planted to the ground like stumps, his mouth formed mean and tough. His boxing gloves had blood stains on them and his still body glowed in the darkness as he braced himself against the ropes.

In this particular revision, I created four new absolute constructions: *the hair on his chin prickling out like thorns*, *his chest hairy and sweaty*, *his legs planted to the ground like stumps*, *his mouth formed mean and tough*. Perhaps this was overkill, but at least I had grouped and subordinated details to make the sentences more interesting and the passage more flowing. The student writer had already

added details after drawing a picture of the big guy, but still needed help with recombining, reordering, and revising sentences. For ideas on recombining and revising sentences, look for any of the several books Don Killgallon has published on sentence composing, including not only a theory booklet but a book for high school, one for middle school, and one for elementary.

It's unfortunate when we teachers ignore the possibilities for revision in a piece like this student's original, but instead see only a need for wielding the "red pen," defacing the student's work, and often demoralizing the student as a writer. It is unfortunate when we assign writing and then simply grade it, making the writing assignment merely an opportunity for testing. Much better to help students like the writer of "The Big Guy" become more proficient in writing by making the writing situation an opportunity for genuine teaching.

As teachers, we need to help students learn various revision strategies at the sentence and paragraph level. Occasional minilessons like those I developed with "The Big Guy" may help substantially, but they will still need to be followed by assistance in individual conferences or small groups. Incidentally, I have used this particular example in workshops with teachers who never group or combine the sentences in quite the same way as I have done! There is much opportunity here for experimentation and learning—both teachers' learning and students' learning. We need to take risks as teachers in order to encourage our students to take risks as writers.

And we need to hold off with the infamous "red pen," instead *guiding* students not only in sentence and paragraph revision but in editing, as Sharon demonstrates in the next section. We need to hold off, becoming mentors and advocates rather than adversaries. In short, we need to become more fully what we are: teachers.

We need to take risks as teachers in order to encourage our students to take risks as writers.

Sharon: Putting Conventions into Perspective and Helping Students Edit

Recently in my graduate class “Grammar for Teachers” with Connie Weaver, I read aloud the following essay written by one of my eighth-grade students in response to the “Life Map Assignment.” (See Figure 5 for original assignment.)

My Grandfather’s Death
by Chasity

I still remember my mom in the living room with her brothers as my grandfather took his last breath. I was only seven and I was the only kid there. I knew my grandfather was sick for awhile and that he may die soon, but I never thought that it would change my life that much.

My mom was the saddest. She was a daddy’s girl, and as she rested her head on his arm, I couldn’t even imagine what might be going through her head. As she walked in the kitchen, you could see the sadness and misery on her face.

The next day was very hard for her and the family. When we went to the funeral home everyone was hugging and kissing each other. I wanted to go up there and see him, but that being the first time I had ever seen a dead body, I was a little scared to, so I made my cousin Ashley go with me. He didn’t look dead to me, he just looked like he always did except he was wearing a light blue dress shirt and he had a very peculiar smile. It was weird.

When “Amazing Grace” played, my mom burst out in tears with about seven other people that I saw. So I put my hand on hers thinking it would help, but she cried more. I couldn’t even look at her.

When we went to the cemetery, my mom was staring at him going down, crying, but her eyes were glowing. I could tell she was thinking about what his last breath was: “I’ll tell Mom you said hi.” I knew she was happy he went where he wanted to be—with his wife.

My grandfather and I were very close. I sometimes think of me on his lap with hot cocoa watching Scooby-Doo. Sometimes I think he’s still here with me, holding my hand, walking me through life.

When I finished reading this piece, I looked around the room at the tear-filled eyes. I was not surprised—I had the same reaction when I read it. Then I asked them, “Would you FAIL this piece?” They looked at me as though I had just arrived from outer space. Then I put Chasity’s

piece—exactly as she had written it when she turned it in—on the overhead (see excerpt, Figure 6). “*Now* what do you say?” I asked them.

This time they were silent for a different reason.

If a rubric were derived from the holistic scorepoint descriptions for grade 8 of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (Michigan Department of Education, n.d.), Chasity would have earned the lowest score—1—for conventions, because the surface errors in this piece severely interfered with understanding. But what about content and ideas? Organization? Style? Just as clearly, Chasity would score well in those areas. (See Figure 7 for the rubric I developed from the MEAP criteria for this particular assignment.) Would it be fair for Chasity to fail based on the number of convention errors?

I have to admit, when I first looked at Chasity’s piece I was perplexed, and it took several attempts before I could decipher what she was trying to say. But once I realized the depth of her feelings and her ability to articulate them, I was completely taken aback. Chasity is one of those students we call “resistant” and “reluctant.” She doesn’t hand in a lot of work, and what she does hand in isn’t always up to par. I couldn’t help thinking it was no wonder; she must be a discouraged student—and a discouraged writer. But this! This piece had style and voice. It had depth and feeling. Clearly she had created pictures in my mind, and she had evoked an emotional response. For the first time, Chasity had handed in a completed piece of writ-

Life Map Assignment

Students make a list of at least 15 events that have occurred in their lives. Once they generate the lists, they make a life map on a 16 x 20 sheet of tag board depicting those events. They can be as creative as they want, but they must start with their birth dates and chronologically show at least 15 events, including the date and a word or two describing the event, and draw a symbol representing the event. Once the life maps are finished and displayed in the room, we begin the writing—simply writing the story of one of the events from the life map.

Figure 5. Life map assignment

ing. I wanted to support her, assure her that this really was a good piece of writing, and that we could work on editing the piece together. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if I handed Chasity's story back to her full of correction marks, she would likely shut down again. She had taken a risk, and I did not want to discourage her.

This was our first serious piece of writing this year. We had already spent some time revisiting the writing process and had practiced prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Before getting started on this writing assignment, we did some minilessons on introductions and conclusions, and we talked about what it means to stay focused and organized. We read some personal narratives and discussed what was good, what we liked, and what we didn't like. I instructed them to make me laugh,

make me cry, but make me do *something* when I read their papers. "Put me there! Make pictures in my head as I read your papers!" I told them dramatically. "Put a WOW at the end!" I gave them a "Life Map Essay" rubric consistent with our state assessment for eighth grade (Figure 7) and asked them to score their own writing before turning it in for me to score.

Chasity had, indeed, created pictures in my head. I could vividly see her mother, a daddy's girl, resting her head on her dying father's arm. I could feel Chasity's pain and confusion as she tried to console her inconsolable mother, only to see her cry more. But what about the misspellings, the misplaced periods and commas, the lack of quotation marks . . . ?

Like so many of my colleagues, I strive to be the best English teacher I can possibly be, so I persistently ask myself, "What is best for my students?" Research consistently shows teaching grammar in isolation does not work: most students do not remember it, and they seldom transfer it to their writing. As Weaver noted in *Grammar for Teachers* (1979): "There seems to be little value in marking students' papers with 'corrections,' little value in teaching the conventions of mechanics apart from actual writing, and even less value in teaching grammar in order to instill these conventions" (p. 64).

The grammar debate rages not only in English teacher journals, listservs, and classrooms, but also in my own head. Where does teaching grammar fit in? Should I teach grammar in isolation (skill and drill) and have students identify parts of speech on worksheet after worksheet? Based on current research, my experiences as a teacher, my participation in Third Coast Writing Project, and improvement in my students' writing, I think not.

Research over the last two decades gives us no reason to challenge these conclusions. So I ask myself, "Why should I waste valuable classroom time fighting what has already been proven a losing battle?" The answer to this question was even more apparent with Chasity's piece about her grandfather. If Chasity had focused on conventions instead of content, I am not even sure she

Chasity

My ~~grandpa's~~ ^{grandpa's} death

I still remember my mom in the living room. When her father took his last breath. I was only seven and I was the only kid there. I knew my grandfather was sick for a while. and that he may die soon. but I never that it would change my life. That much, my mom was the sadest. she was a daddy's girl. as she rested here head on his arm. I can't even imagine what must be going through her head. as she walked in the kitchen you could see the sadness and misery on her face.

The next day was very for her and the family. when we went to the funeral home. every one was hugging and kissing each other. I wanted to go up there and see him but that evening the first I ever seen a dead body I was a little scared to. so I made my cousin Ashley

Figure 6. Excerpt of Chasity's essay

Life Map Essay RUBRIC

(Based on MEAP Rubric)

	Excellent, Outstanding, Brilliant (EOB)	Almost Excellent, Outstanding, and Brilliant	Missed EOB, but is still very good	Missed EOB, but is adequate	Not adequate (You can do better)	Missing
Direct focus. (What the paper is about, without saying, "This paper is about . . .")						
Stays on target. (Doesn't go to the mall.)						
Well organized. (There is a sequence.)						
Richly developed supporting ideas. (It's as though the reader was there.)						
Vivid details and examples. (Use sensory images; make a picture in the reader's brain.)						
Writing holds reader's attention. (Reader didn't want to stop reading.)						
Writing achieves a sense of wholeness. (No gaps in the story. No "huh?")						
Writer displays control over language. (Best choice of words.)						
Variety of sentence structures. (Not every sentence is the same number of words.)						
Few conventional errors. (PROOFREAD!!! Correct all the spelling, grammar, punctuation.)						

WRITING PROCESS

Prewrite

Draft

Revise

Proofread and Edit

Published Piece

Interesting Essay

Figure 7. Life map essay rubric

would have tried writing the piece. I recalled Weaver's advice in *Teaching Grammar in Context* (1996a):

To avoid stunting students' growth as writers, we need to guide our students in the writing process, including the phases of revising and editing their sentences and words. It would also be helpful to avoid correcting the kinds of construction that published writers use with impunity and indeed with good effect. And we need to respond positively to the new kinds of errors that reflect syntactic risk and growth. Time enough to help students correct these errors when they have gotten their ideas down on paper, experimenting with language in the process. In short, the Error Beast is to be welcomed and tamed, not slain. (p. 101)

I talked to Chasity before school the morning after I read her essay. I told her that she had done a terrific job of putting me there with her, of making pictures in my mind and evoking an emotional response. She seemed genuinely pleased. I explained that I was concerned about her editing, and asked her if she would conference with me individually so that we could edit it together. Thankfully, she agreed.

In an article titled "Developing Correctness in Student Writing: Alternatives to the Error Hunt," Lois Matz Rosen states:

Although numerous research studies show that there is little or no transfer of learning from isolated drills to actual writing experiences and that the time-intensive practice of the teacher's "error hunt" does not produce more mechanically perfect papers, this 100-year-old tradition still persists. (p. 139)

Later in the same chapter, Rosen goes on to say

Research has never been able to show that circling all the errors—the error hunt approach to marking—makes a significant difference in writing quality; instead it discourages the student whose paper is full of mistakes and focuses students on errors instead of ideas. Students are more likely to grow as writers when the teacher's primary purpose in reading student papers is to respond to content. (p. 149)

With Weaver's and Rosen's advice fresh in my mind, Chasity and I sat down together. I asked her to read the piece to me *exactly* as she wrote it. She read it, and as I suspected she would, she read it as she *intended* it to be read. We talked about

conveying meaning, and how important it was for the reader to understand the significance of her grandfather's death. Suddenly, conventions and correct spellings had *relevance*. She cared about correctly placing periods and commas. She agonized over her words and sentences. She corrected as she read, and as we conferenced, she began to feel her way through her corrections. She was actually engaged in the editing process! She

Chasity had, indeed, created pictures in my head. . . . But what about the misspellings, the misplaced periods and commas, the lack of quotation marks . . . ?

knew what she wanted to say, she just needed some help making the conventions correct. It was the first step in encouraging her to write more, read more, participate in class more. In other words, it was a step toward success. For me, it was confirmation that "taming the Error Beast" truly was better than trying to slay it.

I have come to realize that I simply must allow my eighth graders time to grow as writers, teach them to say what they mean first, encourage them to effectively communicate their thoughts and ideas. Writing is a process. It's ongoing and alive. Just like my kids.

Conclusion

In recent decades, as English language arts teachers have learned to teach writing instead of merely assigning it, it has become increasingly obvious that engaging and guiding students in the writing process instead of having them perform countless grammar exercises is a more effective way to teach writing. The research clearly shows that most students do not transfer "skill and drill" into vivid, imaginative writing, or even into focused and interesting informational or persuasive writing that contains specific and precise vocabulary.

We need to analyze what makes our students' writing effective. Is it the organization? The specific, even vivid details? What is it they do well? In all cases we have cited here, it was not the ability of any of the students to regurgitate grammar

terminology or label the parts of sentences that made their writing more powerful. It was their ability to create images, evoke a response from the reader, and use the craft of writing to create better writing. We have found, too, that students who understand the importance of vivid detail in cre-

We need to be mentors and master craftspersons who assess their writing only after helping them improve it, which in turn helps them write more effectively the next time.

ative writing find it easier to grasp the importance of specific detail in informational and persuasive writing.

Through minilessons, writer's workshop, and conferencing, we teachers can help students determine a purpose and audience for

their writing, work with them to develop ideas, and guide them in organizing and reorganizing their piece of writing, as necessary. Our role as writing teachers does not stop here, however, nor should we leap from this point to wielding the red pen in a bloody and usually futile attack on the "Error Beast."

Instead, as we've tried to demonstrate in this article, we teachers need also to help students add effective detail through constructions like appositives, participial phrases, absolutes, and the other "brush strokes" and constructions that Harry Noden describes in *Image Grammar*. We need to help them manipulate elements within sentences, and sentences within paragraphs. Furthermore, we need to help students learn to edit for the conventions of writing. This is not a one-time process, because noticing and revising our departures from convention is not an easy task, even for most adults. Furthermore, learners make new kinds of errors as they try new things in their writing (Weaver, 1996a). We need to be students' advocates rather than their adversaries, appreciating their risk taking and guiding them as writers instead of just grading their writing. We need to be mentors and master craftspersons who assess their writing only after helping them improve it, which in turn helps them write more effectively the next time.

One way to gain more time for mentoring is to eliminate isolated study of grammar from the curriculum, replacing it with minilessons and hands-on guidance in developing more effective sentences and paragraphs, followed by assistance in learning to edit.

Perhaps we will need to assign fewer writing projects in order to spend time helping students polish some pieces of writing, but the results are well worth it in students' self-esteem, willingness to write, and increasing ability to demonstrate more aspects of good writing with less direction and guidance. In this respect, too, we have found that less is more.

Many students of language, especially linguists, argue for restoring grammar to the curriculum. But when we examine their arguments, we discover that they, too, do *not* usually mean that we should return to teaching traditional grammar from a grammar handbook. Typically, they mean that we should explore some of the interesting phenomena about language structure—interesting, but often not directly related to improving our writing. They mean that we should study language more broadly, including dialects, language history, and the origins and meanings of words and word parts. They mean that we should study theories of how language develops, universals in language development, and how language is acquired in a child's early years. They mean that we should study how people use language to exercise power and control over others. Some of them also mean that we should teach grammar in the hope of improving students' writing—though they're not agreed as to which grammar. They mean all of these and more—but *not* that we should teach traditional schoolbook grammar.

We agree that language study is important and can be made interesting, meaningful, and useful to students. We agree that language study should be included in the English language arts curriculum. But this is not "teaching grammar," as conceptualized by many teachers and most administrators, parents, and the public. We agree that "grammar" should be taught, too, but only as it aids writing, or in an elective course. Thus we

strongly proclaim, “To grammar or not to grammar: That is *not* the question!” It’s a question of why, when, what, and how to teach selected aspects of grammar, in order to strengthen students’ writing.

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