

A Positive Approach to Good Grammar

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Correct grammar is important for precise, accurate, academic prose, but the traditional skills-based approach to teaching grammar is not effective if the goal is good writing. The sentence-combining approach shows promise. However, sentence modeling is more likely to produce strong writing and enhance reading comprehension. Through sentence modeling and understanding how punctuation makes meaning, developmental writers can employ sophisticated sentences, use punctuation effectively, and follow the conventions of standard English with minimal grammar instruction. Students analyze how and why authors make certain moves in their writing, then produce similar effects in their own writing. Inspired by Constance Weaver's approach to grammar that is "positive, productive, and practical" and by Rei Noguchi's emphasis on minimal grammatical terminology, this method makes for engaged instruction and retention of skills.

A former colleague, a now-retired history professor, hosted a website to assist students with their exams. On this site, he posted lists of terms, possible essay topics, and, to the amusement of many of his colleagues, students' faux pas to test questions. One student's answer has stuck with me: in response to the question, "Who is Bob Dole?", the student wrote "He is the senate." For those who recognized the dour Dole as the Senate Republican majority leader, this was a chuckle moment, an almost satirically appropriate answer. However, history professor was holding up this student's answer as an example of *what not to write*. But, I thought, perhaps the student knew Bob Dole was a United States Senator and the student's unfortunately poor grammar had generated an incorrect answer. If only he had written, "He is a senator," the student might have received credit rather than ridicule. I wonder: was the student's incorrect answer due to lack of knowledge or to lack of good grammar?

Of course, I don't know the answer, but I do know that grammar matters. It matters especially in the academic arena in which precision and accuracy are requisite for clear writing. It matters because no one wants to say the wrong thing (particularly inadvertently). As I jokingly tell my students, good grammar is the difference between "feeling you're nuts" and "feeling your nuts," between having what you say be taken seriously or not. Clear writing allows readers to focus on the content of the message, and not be confused by the message itself.

What is the Role of Grammar Instruction in the Writing Classroom?

By grammar, I mean writing at the sentence level. I agree with Rei Noguchi's (1991) definition that "within traditional grammar, . . . the term . . . mean[s] the set of categories, functions, and rules . . . that teachers commonly employ to describe a sentence and its parts" (p. 2). In other words, grammar is not concerned with organization of ideas nor with paragraph development, but rather with clear, correct sentences. I also appreciate Constance Weaver's (2008) emphasis that grammar involves more than knowing the rules; it is knowing how to use language effectively: "The grammar of a language is its structure, which enables us to communicate whether or not we or anybody else consciously understands that structure" (p. 1). As Weaver's words suggest, it is *not* the goal of grammar instruction to turn students into grammarians, but rather to enable students to communicate effectively, to produce compelling writing. Students should have grammar knowledge on a need to know basis—what do they need to know to make their writing interesting and engaging? What do they need to know to deliver a clear message or to produce a desired effect? Grammar instruction should not be overly preoccupied with error correction; rather it should be concerned with editing and producing skillful writing. In short, grammar knowledge should help writers write well.

Different approaches to teaching grammar in the writing classroom have proven more—or less—effective. First I will review the traditional approach to teaching grammar (the skills-based approach) as well as a more recent strategy (sentence combining) and consider what research says about the effectiveness of these approaches for improving writing. Then I examine an alternative approach: sentence modeling.

Skills-Based Approach to Teaching Grammar

In a skills-based approach to grammar, students are taught grammatical terms and rules. For instance, students are asked to identify parts of speech (i.e., noun or verb), sentence types (i.e., simple, compound, complex), sentence parts (i.e., phrase or clause). Students might be trained to

spot and correct sentence errors (such as run-on sentences or sentence fragments) in sample sentences or paragraphs.

The thinking behind a skills-based approach is that teaching grammar and mechanics will enable students to understand how language works, to write more effectively and correctly, and to reduce the number of errors in their own writing. The belief is that explicit teaching of grammar rules helps students identify errors and correct these, or avoid errors in the first place. Moreover, knowing grammatical terms provides a common language for teachers and their students to discuss sentences and errors so as to improve the quality of writing.

What Research Says About a Skills-based Approach

Despite the “logic” behind it, a skills-based approach to grammar instruction is not supported by research. Since the 1960’s, researchers have acknowledged that “Study after study . . . confirms that instruction in formal grammar has little or no effect on the quality of student composition” (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963, p. 37). Hillocks (1986) in his review of research in written composition done from 1963 to 1982 draws an even stronger conclusion:

School boards, administrators, and teachers who impose the systematic study of traditional grammar on their students over lengthy periods of time in the name of teaching writing do them a gross disservice which should not be tolerated by anyone concerned with the effective teaching of good writing. (p. 248)

Moreover, research shows that students do not enjoy this type of grammar instruction. In Hillocks’ 1971 survey of over 3,000 high-school students’ attitudes toward English, he found that traditional grammar was “the least interesting part of their English programs”; students called grammar instruction “‘useless,’ ‘unimaginative,’ ‘repetitive,’ ‘passive,’ ‘complicated,’ and ‘unpleasant’” (cited in Hillocks & Smith, 1991, p. 596).

Hillocks and Smith’s recommendation about traditional grammar instruction make sense: “. . . the grammar sections of a textbook should be treated as a reference tool that might provide some insight into conventions of mechanics and usages. It should *not* be treated as a course of study to improve the quality of writing” (1991, p. 600).

Sentence Combining Approach to Teaching Grammar

As an alternative to traditional grammar instruction, a sentence combining approach shows students how to combine sets of sentences into increasingly complex structures. The thinking behind this strategy is that by manipulating

sentences students will learn to create sophisticated and varied sentences. In this way, sentence combining incorporates grammar instruction organically.

What Research Says About a Sentence Combining

Research on sentence combining is promising. Cooper (1975), writing about sentence combining, concludes that “‘no other single teaching approach has ever consistently been shown to have a beneficial effect on syntactic maturity and writing quality’ (p. 72)” (cited in Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 598). This beneficial effect makes sense since sentence-combining encourages students to write more sentences and to generate increasingly more complex sentences.

However, it is not clear whether sentence combining reduces students’ errors in writing, especially since “experimenting with more complex sentence structures, errors are bound to result” (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 600). Further, it’s not clear if sentence combining increases student’s reading comprehension:

Kerek, Daiker, and Morenberg (1980, p. 1072) state that ‘after 10 years of prolific research and in spite of some promising results, Mellon’s earlier remark that sentence combining practice ‘may contribute to the development of reading ability’ still remains more a reasonable possibility than an unassailable fact.’ (1969, p. 75 as cited in Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 600)

So while a sentence-combining approach is effective—and certainly more effective than traditional grammar instruction—a third approach, sentence modeling, is also promising and may be more effective, intuitive, and sustainable than either traditional grammar or sentence-combining.

Modeling Approach to Teaching Grammar

A modeling approach to grammar operates on a positive example paradigm: modeling what students *should* or *could* do in their writing. By examining examples from professional readings or student writing, students understand effective sentence patterns and punctuation usage that skillful writers employ. Providing useful examples—sentences budding academic writers can use in their own prose—encourages students to expand their writing repertoire.

Sentence modeling is grounded in the idea that “grammar” is about making meaning: if the goal of writing is to communicate ideas to readers, students must examine effective grammar and usage in the context of writing. Understanding the strategic use of syntax and punctuation can help writers emphasize or de-emphasize ideas, con-

form to the expectations of academic writing, and effectively communicate their ideas to their intended audience. Moreover, understanding how, why, and when writers use certain sentence patterns or punctuation marks can enable students to become better readers.

How Sentence Modeling Works

Teachers can follow a step-by-step process to enable students to create effective sentences through modeling:

1. Identify a sentence type useful to students: because it is a common move in academic writing; because students do not have that sentence pattern in their repertoire; because it will improve students' abilities to effectively express their ideas; or because they are using that sentence type incorrectly in their own writing.
2. Find examples of that sentence type in the course readings or in student writing.
3. Analyze *why* the writer uses that sentence type—to what end or to what effect.
4. Examine *how* the sentence functions—as a sentence itself and as a sentence in the larger context of the reading.
5. Have students imitate and practice the sentence type in a way they might use in their own writing.
6. Evaluate students' attempts to model sentences, encourage appropriate usage, and praise students for using target sentences in their writing.

The following is an explanation of how this process might play out in the classroom. A common move in academic writing is the appositive, a sentence type perhaps unfamiliar to novice writers. From the course readings (in a developmental reading-writing class, students read about Walter Mischel's intriguing experiment, "The Marshmallow Test") several examples of appositives can be found. Here is one:

More than 40 years ago, Walter Mischel, PhD, a psychologist now at Columbia University, explored self-control in children with a simple but effective test. (American Psychological Association)

This sentence can be highlighted in the reading, the appositive underlined. Then students can examine the logic behind this sentence pattern: *Why* did the author include the underlined information about this person in this sentence? What's the purpose of this information? *How* did the writer include the information? That is, how does it fit (grammatically) into the sentence? *When* did the writer include this information in the reading? *How often* did the writer include information like this? Once students understand the grammatical and rhetorical nature of the appositive, they can apply this sentence pattern in their own writing. Students may be prompted to reflect: Why might

you, as a writer, include similar information when you write your essay about the Marshmallow test readings? How would you do that? They can then be required to write sentences using appositives about the Marshmallow test, sentences they may incorporate into their upcoming essays. In this way, students both understand better the reading (why an appositive is used at the first mention of Walter Mischel) and develop a sophisticated sentence type they can employ immediately in their own writing.

This same modeling approach can be used to help students understand the grammar of punctuation. Instructors can identify punctuation that students are using incorrectly in their writing (such as commas), or that they are not using at all (maybe colons or semicolons). Examples of that punctuation can be located in the class readings and then analyzed to understand *why* the writer uses that punctuation and *how* the sentence functions. Students can be prompted to emulate and practice writing sentences using that punctuation in a way they might in their papers. Students can work in pairs or in groups, share their sentences, then display sentences on the board—which can be reviewed by the teacher and/or the class, and corrected or revised, if need be. Students can gain further practice with short homework assignments.

What Experts Say About Sentence Modeling

Although there is not a significant body of research on a modeling approach to teaching grammar, there is support from professional organizations and experts. For instance, the NCTE's position statement (2002) endorses modeling because it integrates reading, writing, and grammar:

Another approach is for students to imitate model sentences; when students read a model passage and then write their version of it, imitating its grammatical features, they integrate reading skill, writing practice, and grammatical understanding. Moreover, Joseph M. Williams (1989) in his classic book *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* argues that modeling is a first and logical step in helping novice college writers develop skills: "Copy and imitation, time-honored ways of teaching writing, will help the less advanced students feel the rhythm and movement that a long but clear sentence demands (Preface)."

How Sentence Modeling Can Aid Reading Comprehension

Intuitively, it makes sense that sentence and punctuation modeling can aid reading comprehension. If students understand how sentences are put together and how punctuation creates meaning, if they can replicate those patterns and effects in their own writing, they are developing a strong understanding of the logic of the language.

Sentence or punctuation modeling can be employed intentionally to aid reading comprehension. For instance, students could focus on a challenging aspect of an author's writing style, then analyze the author's style: how sentences are shaped and why, or how punctuation is employed. When students are required to imitate the author's style, they get a feel for the writing, they understand (consciously or not) how the language works.

Case in point: When students in an advanced composition course were asked to analyze Jared Diamond's use of extremely long sentences that include parallelism and parentheses, they were able to successfully imitate Diamond's style and write a thoughtful answer to a discussion question. In the process, students demonstrated their understanding not only of the reading but of parallelism, parentheses, and semicolons. Here is one student group's answer to a question requiring that students understand Diamond's explanation for the collapse of Norse Greenland's society:

Diamond explains that the collapse of Norse society in Greenland fulfills his five point framework because the Norse inadvertently inflicted irreparable damage on their environment and depleted the natural resources (by cutting trees, stripping turf, overgrazing the land, and causing soil erosion); they lived through a period of climate change (from relatively mild when they first arrived to a cold period during which they perished); their trade with Norway declined (so they were deprived of essential goods, such as iron and timber); their encounters with hostile neighbors weakened their population (the Inuit killed several Norse settlers); and their own inability to adapt to the changes in their environment (the Norse stubbornly raised cows rather than fish, and imported luxury goods for the church rather than items essential to survival) led to their demise.

By closely analyzing and understanding a writer's particular style and being able to reproduce that style, these students have demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of grammar as well as a strong grasp of the text.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Modeling Approach

An advantage of sentence or punctuation modeling is flexibility. The types of sentences or pieces of punctuation to emphasize can be modified to fit the course readings and students' own writing needs. Moreover, modeling integrates reading and writing in an authentic way: analysis and imitation of writing enables students to comprehend how style supports content. Better yet, minimal grammar instruction is needed as students get a "feel" for the language, rather than learn grammar terms. Less time spent on terms means

more efficient lessons and more time spent on writing. And sentence modeling or punctuation practice benefits most students as they generate original sentences they can use in their essays. Modeling also creates opportunities to reread the text: students see the author's writing again as they use it for models for their own writing. Furthermore, modeling helps students edit their writing. Since students learn to carefully examine sentences and punctuation, both in professional writing and in their own writing, they can apply this same scrutiny to their own final drafts. Finally, modeling is a positive, rather than punitive approach: The focus is on improving writing and developing skills, with a de-emphasis on error correction.

However, there are potential disadvantages to sentence modeling. Modeling is not systematic: sentence or punctuation activities may not progress in a logical order. This approach may be more time intensive, as instructors must create sentence and punctuation lessons from the class texts. These texts may not provide enough examples for practice, as some students need to see many sample sentences or many examples of punctuation and practice often before they master the skill. Moreover, examples from readings may be complicated or messy; course readings may not always provide clear models for beginning writers.

To address these challenges, instructors can plan a logical progression of sentence lessons, for instance, beginning with simple sentences, then adding introductory phrases and appositives, and moving toward more sophisticated sentence types, such as parallel structure or quote integration. Once lessons are created, it is easy to substitute examples from various readings, or to skip lessons students will not benefit from. Sentences from professional writers can be shortened or edited to avoid overly complex examples and to highlight key sentence elements. Moreover, instructors can generate additional examples to demonstrate how sentence patterns can be used in students' own writing.

Conclusion

Constance Weaver, in her book *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*, makes a strong case for grammar instruction that is "positive, productive, and practical" (Preface), instruction that enables students to see new ways to write and good reasons to write well. Sentence and punctuation modeling can be a positive, productive, and practical approach to grammar instruction. Students benefit from examining texts for effective language use; they practice and play with language; they hone their new reading and writing skills while composing essays for their English classes. These skills, of close reading and careful writing, can be carried with students beyond the English classroom.

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