

Teaching Grammar Judiciously

In Secondary Schools and First-Year University:

Lessons from the Field

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2019

Abstract

Teaching stand-alone grammar lessons is not as beneficial as instructors think if they want their students to learn how to write. If teachers truly want their students to become better at writing grammatically correct papers they will provide practice in writing, lots of practice. It is only through the practice of writing can students improve their writing. Filling in grammar sheets and teaching students how to parse a sentence serves the purpose of getting students to practice skills that they may not need to learn. It also provides practice in isolation and, as a result, students often can't transfer what they learnt from the grammar sheets to their own writing. It is not unusual to have students who can explain grammar rules but can't use them when they are completing assignments. The purpose of teaching grammar should be to show students why they need to learn some of these rules and why they are important if they want to improve their own writing. Therefore, it is important to teach the grammar they need and not to do a blanket teaching of every grammar rule that exists. This is not productive and students will not learn how to follow those rules. Teaching grammar needs to be used judiciously.

Introduction

When I ask my students what they need to know to improve their writing they invariably say that they need to learn grammar. It is troubling, to me, that students persist in thinking that their writing will get better if they could only learn the grammar rules of the English language. This is troubling because no one ever learned to be a more effective writer by being able to differentiate between a dangling participle and a comma. Writing is not that easy. If it was there would be no need to teach people how to write. We could just give them the rules and then sit back and let writing happen. Learning to follow rules may work for learning how to drive, or learning what not to do when cooking with a hot stove, but I can tell you from experience that learning the rules of grammar does not work for teaching writing. Let me tell you why. Writing does not follow the rules. Oh sure, we need to understand syntax and how words go together but we do not learn that from reading a rule book. We learn that from speaking and writing. We understand that certain words go together in a certain order like *she was on the phone*. We know that it is not correct to say *on the phone she was*. This does not sound right to our ear when we say it and therefore we know it is not correct. However, if someone tried to get you to learn rules about syntax by itself, out of context, it would not work. Why? Because unless you are working with the words and experimenting with them you won't understand the lesson. This is what happens when teachers attempt to teach grammar. It doesn't work because there is no context for the grammar lesson except as a lesson.

Many writing teachers think that teaching grammar will help students improve their writing. It won't. Correct grammar is not learned by sitting down and memorizing rules of usage. Correct grammar is learned by writing. I find that most grammar errors can be caught by the writers themselves when they read their essay out loud. The problem with teaching grammar

in isolation is that students find it difficult to transfer the knowledge they have about grammar to their written pieces.

I have colleagues, at the university level, who incorporate grammar lessons and grammar quizzes in their classes. I don't know why but they do. If you were to compare the essays my students write, with the essays written by students who were taught grammar, you will not be able to tell who had the grammar lessons and who did not. In fact, my students' essays might be better because they are not writing to rules. They are writing to express themselves in the best way possible. Their goal is to make sure their reader understands what they are trying to convey. They do not get marks for correct grammar because, for the most part, they write grammatically correct and all without a specific lesson on grammar. The teaching of grammar is so entrenched in our education system that many teachers feel they are doing a disservice to their students if they do not teach some grammar. I am not one of those. However, I also know that most English Language Arts teachers want to teach some form of grammar in their classrooms as they believe that teaching grammar will make their students better writers. No matter how many times I tell them that it won't, the myth persists, so I will spend time talking about some of the things students need to understand about grammar.

Before you embark on any grammar lesson it is important to provide the context for the grammar lesson. What this means is that you have to have a purpose for the lesson. There is no point in just randomly deciding to teach grammar unless you know if your students actually need the grammar lesson you plan on teaching. This means that if your students are not having a problem with tenses then why teach tenses. The purpose of a grammar lesson should be to teach a lesson on something you notice is a problem in your students' writing. You should wait to teach grammar until you have had the chance to grade your students' papers. Once you have

noted the problems your students are having then you can schedule mini grammar lessons. And, by mini grammar lessons I do not mean giving students grammar sheets to correct. Students do not learn grammar by filling in grammar work sheets.

So, how do you decide what to teach and how to teach it? As I mentioned, you start by noting the types of grammatical errors that students are making in their essays. Then you pick a couple of the most common ones and explain what problem they are having and how to fix it. For example, you notice that students are having difficulty using commas in their essays. You would first bring it to their attention, then show them how to decide if a comma is necessary or not. And, please do not use the breathe test. By this I mean do not teach students that every time they pause for a breathe they have to put in a comma. I learned this when I was in school and let me tell you that it doesn't work. I, myself, like nothing better than a comma, good or bad. I like commas and I put them everywhere. You have probably already noticed that in my writing. And, you may have wondered why I insist on putting commas where they don't belong. This is a good question and one that my colleagues have been trying to figure out for years. I can't tell you why I put in a lot of commas, but I do. And, I am powerless to stop. I just see no need to stop, and this is what you will find with your students. They won't stop doing something unless you tell them why it is not correct.

So, first of all you have to show the students the mistakes they are making in their writing, then explain why they are not grammatically correct, tell them what is correct, and let them correct their own essays watching for that mistake. When students are allowed to correct their own errors they learn more than they would from completing worksheets. And, this allows you to focus only on what you notice is an error rather than teaching them about something they do not have an issue with such as nouns and verbs.

Here are the most common mistakes I notice in my students' writing and you will likely notice the same errors in your own students' writing. But, remember that if you don't notice these patterns of mistakes then don't mention them. Each class and each set of students will have different errors so if you are teaching more than one class do not assume that each class will have the same errors.

Punctuation

I like to tell my students that the only punctuation they need is the period. That's because in academic writing writers do not ask questions of their readers, and they do not emphasize points with an exclamation mark. This leaves the period. However, periods, question marks, and exclamation points are not the only types of punctuation. There are other forms of punctuation that students still struggle with when writing. These are some of the ones you might choose to talk about if you notice your students are having difficulty with understanding how to use proper punctuation. Remember that if your students are not having problems with one of these forms of punctuation then don't worry about it. There is no need to teach something that students are already doing correctly.

1. The Semi-Colon

This is one of the most misunderstood forms of punctuation. Many people, including students, do not use it correctly. As a matter of fact I completely discourage the use of semi-colons in my students' writing. It does not really serve a purpose. A semi-colon is supposed to be used when writers want to join two independent clauses without using a conjunction. What is an independent clause? An independent clause means that the sentence can stand alone. If you were to write: *Johnny went to the store to buy ice cream.* This is an

independent clause because all of the information the reader needs to understand what Johnny did is included in the sentence.

Now, what is a conjunction? A conjunction is a connector between two independent clauses. Some of the most common connectors are *and*, *but*, *if*, *or*. These words show the connection between two ideas. The problem with semi-colons is that they are often placed indiscriminately in the sentence without understanding why they are there. Students may have learned at some point to use a semi-colon in their writing. Instead of trying to figure out how and when to use a semi-colon in a sentence it makes more sense to tell students to use a conjunction instead or to use two separate sentences.

2. Quotation Marks

Quotation marks are useful for indicating the exact words of an author when citing them in an essay. Quotation marks are also useful for indicating when someone is speaking. Quotation marks should NOT be used as a way to draw attention to words such as “Free”. Students think that when they want to highlight a word they should use quotation marks. This is not correct. If a student wants to draw attention to a word they can italicize it the first time they use it and then write it out normally the rest of the time. Remember that quotation marks should only be used when citing direct quotes or when indicating dialogue. Otherwise they are not necessary and not correct. If students are learning to format in APA, the guidelines allow for quotation marks to be used when listing journal articles, articles from edited collections, song titles, and television series episodes as in-text citations. But, these are exceptions and I do not mention them unless students ask me how to cite these sources within their essays otherwise it is too confusing to give them these rules when they are learning about quotation marks.

3. Dashes

I find my first-year students like to use dashes in their writing. I don't know why and I don't pretend to understand the lure of a dash in written work. When I ask them why they use a dash they tell me that they want to emphasize the word(s) following the dash. The problem is that the dash is a form of informal writing. A dash may be used in a report but does not belong in an academic essay. The use of dashes should be discouraged when students are writing. Explain that using commas achieves the same purpose as a dash but commas are more grammatically correct. Dashes are sloppy and make the text look choppy and could give the impression, to the reader, that the essay is missing words which have been replaced with dashes.

4. Brackets

The bracket is another misuse of punctuation. Students often use brackets to include information that is an addition to the main point they are making. The rule should be that if the student deems that the information, in the bracket, is useful for the reader than they should include it without using a bracket. If the bracket is removed the meaning stays the same so a bracket is redundant.

It is not necessary to use brackets in formal writing and so students should be discouraged from using brackets just because they like them. Instead tell them to incorporate the information in the essay without brackets.

5. Commas

The comma is controversial. Can you believe it? A punctuation mark that creates controversy among writers. It is not that the comma sets out to be quarrelsome. In fact, the comma does not create the controversy, writers create the controversy. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind when teaching students how to think about where to include commas. I will

warn you in advance that even though these appear to be simple ways they are still complex and you really cannot blame your students, if even after the lesson, they still make comma errors.

- a. Use a comma to separate independent clauses. An independent clause means that it stands alone and makes sense by itself. It is useful to think about adding a comma when two separate clauses are joined by common conjunctions such as *and, for, but, yet, so, or, and yet*. For example: *John went to the store, and he bought an ice cream cone*. Both parts of the sentence can stand on their own and do not lose meaning.
- b. Use commas after you have written introductory clauses, phrases, or words that come before the main idea. For example: *In order to understand English, Bill had to study many years*.
- c. Use commas to separate three or more words, or phrases in a list. For example: *Sue bought milk, eggs, bread, and cheese at the grocery store*.
- d. Use commas when necessary to prevent possible confusion for the reader. This is harder to provide an example for since including a comma is dependent on what is being written.

Tense

Tense has to be taught. What I mean by teaching tense is to show students that things happen at different times. There is the present tense which means that things are happening right now such as *I am eating breakfast*. There is past tense which means things that already happened such as *I ate breakfast*. And there is the future tense which means that things will be happening in the future such as *I will eat breakfast*. Most speakers use the correct tense when speaking but run into problems when writing.

The two most common tenses that trip students up are the past and present tenses. For some reason students do not typically have issues with future tense. The problem arises when

students use present and past tense in the same sentence. For example: *I am cranky when I was hungry*. This sentence is not correct because it uses present and past tense in the same sentence. The sentence should be revised to say I get cranky when I am hungry OR I am cranky when I am hungry OR I was cranky when I was hungry.

A way to teach tense is to get students to practice giving the correct response to things such as:

1. What would you say when you wanted to tell someone that you were late because you slept in? Answer: I was late because I slept in.
2. What would you say if you thought you might sleep in because you were very tired the night before? Answer: I might be late for practice tomorrow because I am so tired.
3. What would you say if you woke up and realized that you slept in and were now going to be late for practice? Answer: I am late for practice because I slept in.

Do you see what I mean about teaching tense? It is important that students practice writing sentences that contain tense and having them identify which tense belongs where. I suggest using sentences that your students actually wrote because it is difficult to come up with good examples just by trying to think about them. It is extremely difficult to write a sentence that is grammatically incorrect because we are so used to writing things the way they should be.

TIP #1: When you come across a sentence that a student has written that uses two different tenses in it, copy it, and keep it in a bank of incorrect grammar that you can refer to when necessary.

TIP #2: Do not use sentences written by your current students as examples of incorrect grammar. Instead, use sentences that were written by previous students who are no longer in

your class. If you use a sentence written by a present student they will recognize themselves and will feel terrible. Sure, the other students won't know that you used a sentence from one of their classmates but that student will know and will feel awful about their writing. There is nothing worse than insulting a student in your classroom by using their work as an example of something that is incorrect. Trust me when I say this is never a good idea. The scars last a long time.

TIP #3 Just as I said to not use a student's incorrect sentences to show a point, do not use a student's work to show how good writing can sound. This may make the good student feel really good about themselves but it does nothing for the other students in the class. Chances are the students already know who the good students are and they do not need a constant reminder that those students are better than everyone else. There is no need to do this. Remember that you are not getting students to compete against each other. You are trying to get each student to improve their own writing and that means not having them compare themselves to someone else. For example, think about how you would feel if your supervisor sent you to observe in another teacher's classroom by saying that you might benefit from seeing how a good teacher teaches. You would be insulted, and with good reason, because the supervisor is basically telling you that you are not a good teacher. When you read good writing, completed by a student in the current classroom, you are in effect telling the rest of your students that they are not good writers. This is never a message you want to perpetuate in your classroom.

Shorthand Writing

When I talk about shorthand writing I am referring to the type of writing that people use when they are texting, twittering, or using any other number of smart phone applications that call for them to communicate with others. They use abbreviations, incomplete sentences, and symbols for their words in these exchanges. The problem arises when they think they can use

these forms of communication in an essay or any other assignment that they hand in to their teachers.

Students have to be taught that the language they use when talking to friends or family is a form of informal writing and is not acceptable for class assignments. This is a difficult habit for them to break because they are so used to the method of communicating that takes the least amount of letters due to the letter limits on their social media apps. This would be a good time to discuss audience and purpose with your students.

Using Signal Words

Signal words refer to those words that signal to the reader what's coming. They are typically used at the beginning of a paragraph or a sentence. For example, words like *firstly*, *secondly*, *thirdly*, *last but not least*, *in conclusion*, *in summary* and any other number of words that are used by writers. These are called signal words and are not necessary in written communication. If the reader is not sure it is the conclusion by the time it shows up then there is something seriously wrong with the essay. Similarly, if someone feels the need to say *last but not least* that is also a problem with the way that the essay is structured.

Using signal words means that the writer is not sure of their essay and therefore needs to signal to the reader when they change ideas. Again, a well written essay will not need to make use of these so-called signal words. I tell my students that those words may have been useful when they were first learning how to structure an essay but now that they know that fundamental principle there is no need to continue to use them. I make the comparison between signal words and senior citizens. Signal words have served their purpose but now it is time to let them retire.

Capitalization

What words need to be capitalized? Learning which words to capitalize is one thing that needs to be taught and can't be understood through use alone as can many of the other elements of writing that have already been discussed. Knowing when to capitalize and when not to capitalize is something that needs to be learned through rote learning or strict memorization. It is difficult for some students to decide when and where to use a capital letter which is why they need direct instruction concerning capitalization. Here is a list of common words that your students might be using in their writing that need to be capitalized:

1. Students should be taught that each sentence begins with a capital letter. A capital letter lets the reader know that there is a new thought coming. For example: *A squirrel ran in front of my car and I could not avoid hitting it. It died instantly, I hope.* Notice that there are two sentences and each sentence begins with a capital letter.
2. Capitals should also be used for proper nouns like names of people, places, or countries. For example: *Bill met his friend Bob, at the local hockey arena. The team they played for was called the San Francisco Golden Gates.* Note that the names of the men are capitalized, as is the name of the hockey team.
3. If students are using an acronym these should also be capitalized. For example: *One of the organizations that helps people injured in car crashes caused by drunk drivers is MADD [Mothers against Drunk Driving].* The name of the organization is capitalized.
4. And, the word I is always capitalized in a sentence. For example: *There was a bottle of cold water in the fridge and I drank it.*

5. Brand names of products are always capitalized. For example: *Bob bought a new t-shirt made by Nike.* Or *Jim saw a bottle of Ginger Ale in the fridge so he drank it.*
6. Names of government sites are capitalized but not the word government by itself. For example: *Marijuana will be legalized in Canada by the Government of Canada in 2018.* But not: *Some governments are against mandatory vaccines for children.* In the first instance the word government is capitalized because it is a proper name but in the second instance the word government is not capitalized because it is a general term and not specific to any country or city.
7. Days of the week and months are always capitalized. For example: *It was Monday, May 10th, when she left home for the first time.*
8. Holidays are always capitalized such as *Easter, Christmas, Hallowe'en, Mother's Day, Father's Day, New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, and Labour Day* to name a few.

For whatever reason, some students really struggle with knowing when to capitalize a word. They often end a sentence with a punctuation mark but then fail to capitalize the next word or they do not capitalize proper names.

Possessive Nouns

Another issue I find with my students is their use of possessive nouns. The only time possessive nouns are used is if they refer to someone's possessions such as *Joe's horse* but not *Joe's gone to town* which should be *Joe has gone to town*. This misuse of possession is one that needs to be explained to students. They will understand better if you explain that an *apostrophe* is only used to indicate possession, or things that are owned or belong to someone such as a smart phone, textbooks, clothes etc. This is someone's possession and therefore must be acknowledged as such.

Sometimes students use the apostrophe when writing nouns that are plural but not possessive such as record's instead of records. This dog is your's should be this dog is yours without the possessive apostrophe.

Conclusion

In case I haven't been clear enough I will reiterate that you should not teach grammar in isolation. Grammar should only be taught when you recognize there are issues in your students' assignments. There is no need to teach grammar if your students are not having difficulties with grammar. It is always a good idea to give a mini lesson when you notice things that are incorrect, in their writing, such as the use of incorrect tense. Then you can provide examples of incorrect usage and let students read their assignments looking for tense issues.

Students do not learn grammar by studying it in isolation. They might be able to do a grammar quiz, or fill in a worksheet, but they will not be able to use the lessons learned in their own writing because they will have learned the lesson in isolation and often cannot reconcile the abstract with the concrete act of writing.

Reference

Adapted from: Soiferman, L.K. (2018). Teaching writing in high school: Best Practices and how to implement them. Winnipeg, MB: University of Winnipeg.