At first sight, teaching only the grammatical categories relevant to the improvement of writing—for example, sentence, subject, verb, modifier—would not seem an overly difficult task. It would certainly be easier than teaching all the categories in a comprehensive grammar like Otto Jespersen's seven-volume *Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* or even the categories from the more recent one-volume, 1,779-page *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by Randolph Quirk et al. Teaching a minimal set of grammatical categories would also seem easier than teaching what many teachers often present as "basic" grammar, that is, the traditional eight parts of speech, the major syntactic constructions and their functions, along with a heavy dose of correct usage. Yet, as these teachers can readily attest, presenting even a small number of grammatical categories, such as sentence, subject, verb, and modifier, can prove a difficult, time-consuming, not to mention frustrating, experience for both teachers and students. The problem stems from the methods teachers customarily use and, ultimately, from the nature of grammar and grammatical description. If we wish to give students a sounder working knowledge of a minimum number of grammatical categories and thereby make grammar a more efficient and effective tool for writing improvement, we need to present the grammatical categories in ways that are less time-consuming and more accessible to students.

### The Problems of Teaching Grammatical Categories

The problems associated with teaching grammatical categories, even a small set of them, become readily apparent if we try to introduce even a basic category such as "sentence" (or, roughly, "independent clause"). The notion of sentence is important in writing if only because formal writing consists of an organized sequence of sentences. More particularly, the notion of sentence is also involved in correcting some frequent and highly resistant syntax-based stylistic errors, such as sentence fragments, run-ons, comma splices, and several kinds of errors involving punctuation, most notably commas and semicolons.
Yet instilling students with a working knowledge of the category "sentence" usually proves an exasperating undertaking. Common sense might suggest that all we need to do here is to present students with a notional, or semantic, definition of a sentence, such as, "A sentence is any group of words which expresses a complete thought."

To define a sentence in this way will not, unfortunately, always differentiate a sentence from a nonsentence. Consider the sequence

*Jim didn't do his math homework. Because he hates it with a passion.*

Certainly, *Jim didn't do his math homework* constitutes a complete thought and hence, by the given semantic definition, is a sentence. A student could, however, plausibly argue that *Because he hates it with a passion also expresses a complete thought and hence is also a sentence.* The same holds for sequences like *What a winner!* or *Good evening, Mr. Jones* or *Ah, to visit Paris in the spring.* Notice that simply questioning students about the lack of a "doer" in such sequences will not always produce the "complete thought." Indeed, for the sequence *Ah, to visit Paris in the spring,* asking for the doer might result in revisions like *Ah, for me to visit Paris in the spring* or *Ah, if I could visit Paris in the spring.* The main problem with defining a sentence semantically as "a complete thought," then, is specifying just what qualifies as a complete thought. Unfortunately, that often depends on the person with the thought. If the purveyor of the thought can reply, "It may not be a complete thought to you, but it's a complete thought to me;" there is little, if anything, that teachers can do—at least from a semantic standpoint—to change the view.

Chiding the person for having (or writing with) partial thoughts will not work either if we consider that partial thoughts, whatever they are, are still thoughts, and if these "partial" thoughts make sense to their producer, they are, for that person, complete. In short, while a complete thought and a sentence may overlap to a considerable degree, the areas of nonoverlap are large enough and problematic enough to make identification of sentences unreliable.

If defining a sentence semantically is unsatisfactory, we might resort to another commonly used definition, namely, "A sentence is a group of words having a complete subject and a complete predicate." Leaving aside the recurring problem of what is meant by "complete," we still confront the problem of defining what is meant by "subject" and "predicate." Consider first the seemingly easier of the two, the problem of defining "subject." Many teachers try to equate subject with doer; that is, a subject is the doer or actor of the action expressed in the sentence. In many cases, however, this will not work for the simple reason that sentences often do,
not express an action, and hence, lack a doer (e.g., *The temperature is low today or Mike's two books lay on the table or My younger brother did absolutely nothing yesterday*). Worse yet, even if the sentence expresses an action, the subject of the sentence still may not be the doer of that action (e.g., *The door suddenly opened or It is a fact that American soldiers fought in World War II or Jogging is slow running*). If defining a subject is difficult, defining "predicate" proves even more so. We can try equating predicate with the verb and its modifiers, but that would involve the burdensome task of defining "verb" and "modifier." Still worse, we would mislead students, since predicates more often than not involve not just verbs and their possible modifiers but also verb complements (e.g., direct object, indirect object, predicate nominative, objective complement, and all their, modifiers). In brief, in trying to define "predicate," we run the risk of opening up a can brimming with grammatical worms. Retreating but still undaunted, we might try another tack and define a sentence as "a string of words containing a noun-phrase subject and an associated verb phrase." This definition, being more syntactically based (and less semantically based) than the preceding definitions, would seem to offer students a more accessible working definition of a sentence. Unfortunately, it does not. Even if we were able to define "subject" and "associated" in a manner clear enough for students to understand, we still would face in this definition the formidable tasks of defining "noun" (and all its modifiers) and "verb" (and all its modifiers and complements and complement modifiers). As a last resort, we might try to define verb phrase (or predicate) negatively—all that which is not the (complete) subject (or subject noun phrase). However, this ploy only sends us back to the previous problem of defining the subject (or noun phrase), not to mention the problem of specifying the meaning of "complete." Thus what first looks like a simple task again ends up as an incredibly time-consuming and, inevitably, frustrating undertaking.

*The Root of the Problem*

The root of the definitional problem lies in the nature of grammatical description, and, ultimately, in the nature of language itself. All human languages (and their dialects) work in rule-governed ways, or put in another way, all human languages (and their dialects) are systematic. If they were not so, humans could not learn them so readily as children. The systematicity of English is probably most obvious in syntax, for example, in the regular way we sequence elements in declarative sentences (e.g.,
usually subject first, verb next, and, if necessary, complement following) or in the regular way we form commands and yes-no questions. This systematicity pervades not just the syntax of a language but all levels of language—phonological, semantic, pragmatic. Language has often and aptly been called a "system of subsystems." Grammars of a language, whether traditional, structural, or transformational/generative in approach, try to describe this system, not only of the parts but also of the whole. Grammatical description reflects this systematicity of language, as it must if it seeks an accurate description of the language. Thus, for example, smaller parts are often described in relationship to larger parts, or larger parts to smaller parts. This method of description, it should be noted, characterizes not just descriptions of language systems but descriptions of all systems (e.g., planetary system, political system, family system, digestive system, traffic-control system).

That languages are systematic and are described as such allows us to make an important distinction between two kinds of rules concerning language: rules of language (i.e., descriptive rules) and rules about language (i.e., prescriptive, or usage, rules). Rules of language (e.g., those of English) are rules which involve only the self-contained system. Violations of the descriptive rules of English result in "non-English." Take, for example, the descriptive rule "Articles (a, an, the) precede nouns." The sentence *The girl is tall,* with the article the preceding the noun girl, is English, but *Girl the is tall,* which violates the descriptive rule of article and noun sequencing, is not English, even though it contains English words. In contrast to rules of language, rules about language (i.e., prescriptive, or usage, rules) involve language and an external social system which regulates the choice of linguistic variants. Violations of the prescriptive rules still result in English sentences, even though the sentences may not be socially approved. Consider the two prescriptive rules "Don't use the word ain't" and "Don't end a sentence with a preposition." The sequences Sam ain't going and Whom did you give the gift to? violate prescriptive rules, but they are English sentences as much as Sam isn't going and To whom did you give the gift?

That languages are systematic and are described as such means that the study of grammar is, to a large extent, self-contained. This means that interrelationships of elements make up a large, if not the most important, portion of grammar study. Stated in a slightly different way, parts of the language system (e.g., parts of speech, larger constructions, rules of formation) must necessarily be described—and defined—in relation to other parts. Thus, a sentence is sometimes defined as a group of words
composed of a complete subject and a complete predicate or as a string of words composed of a noun-phrase subject and a verb phrase. The fact that English (like all other languages) is systematic makes it easier for grammarians to describe language since they can state regularities succinctly in terms of relationships among elements. (Think how difficult description would be if the elements of English sentences occurred randomly.) The fact that grammatical descriptions of English reflect the systematicity of language, however, makes it difficult for teachers to introduce important categories such as "sentence" or "subject," since categories are often defined in terms of other categories.

The Difficulty for Students

Given the nature and number of interlinking definitions, it is no wonder that teachers have experienced great difficulty in getting students to master formal grammar, even a selected small portion of it. It would be no exaggeration to claim that students trying to learn even a small portion of grammar resemble cryptographers trying to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics. Both processes involve analyses of languages found in antiquity; one, the written language of ancient Egypt; the other, the metalanguage (i.e., a language used to describe language) of grammar originating in ancient Greece. Both involve interrelated linguistic entities; one, the actual words of a language; the other, a set of abstract grammatical categories. Both crucially involve the cracking of a code to understand the meaning of the language; one, of the writing code; the other, of an interlinking metalanguage. Where the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics was aided greatly by the accidental discovery of the Rosetta stone in 1799, the decipherment of grammatical terminology has not, in the main, been aided by any comparable code-breaking information, including, and perhaps especially, information contained in most grammar textbooks.

Cracking the Grammar Code

How can students crack the "grammar code"? How can they gain a working knowledge of basic grammatical categories such as sentence, subject, verb, etc., if such categories are defined in terms of other categories? Isn't it much like looking up the word structure in a dictionary and finding the definition "form" and under the entry for form finding the definition "structure"? I believe students can crack the grammar code but not by the time-consuming and frustrating methods of the past. The
solution lies not in presenting semantic or compositional definitions, which inevitably entail either opaque or interlinking definitions of the categories, but rather in operational definitions. By an operational definition here, I mean a definition which defines by means of what an entity does or can have done to it rather than what comprises the entity. To cite a mundane example outside of grammar, one definition of *water* would be an aqueous chemical compound composed of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen. This definition focuses on the composition of the entity and thus resembles many of the problematic definitions found in the study of grammar (e.g., "A sentence is composed of a subject and a predicate"). In contrast, an operational definition of *water* would be a liquid ingested by plants and animals to sustain life, or, perhaps, a liquid used to wash and rinse cars, dishes, etc. Granted, operational definitions are not as impressive or as delimiting as nonoperational definitions. The important point here is that they do not have to be. All that is required of operational definitions is that they work in actual use and that they avoid interlinking technical terms, something which the nonoperational definition of *water* does not do.

The Underlying Knowledge of "Pronoun"

As startling as it may sound at first, all students who have acquired English as a native language (as well as many who have acquired it non-natively) already possess an immense knowledge of the operations (i.e., descriptive rules) of English, including its syntax. This must be so, or they would not be able to produce grammatical sentences in everyday conversation. This knowledge, however, is largely unconscious. Students normally cannot explain the operations, or rules, but the knowledge is nonetheless there and waiting to be tapped. Consider pronouns. Most grammar books state explicitly that a pronoun is a word that "substitutes for a noun." Yet this traditional definition of pronoun is clearly incorrect, or at least incomplete, since a pronoun can substitute not just for a noun (e.g., *boys* → *they*) but also, among other things, a noun phrase (e.g., *the noisy boys in the back of the room* → *they*) or any construction that functions as a noun or noun phrase, including other pronouns (e.g., *he and she* → *they*). Indeed, if students dutifully mastered and meticulously applied the grammarbook definition of a pronoun and only that, they would be unable to identify many pronoun substitutions in the language. Whether grammar books state the definition of a pronoun correctly or completely, fortunately, does not really matter in the end. Native students already
unconsciously know the correct version of the pronoun substitution rule; otherwise they could not use pronouns in everyday conversation.

If given the following sentences and personal pronouns, students who are native speakers of English would find little difficulty in substituting the pronoun for the appropriate word or words in the sentence:

1. Jane and Bob bought a book during the trip to San Francisco. (*she*)
2. He and she live in New York City. (*they*)
3. It was the Beatles who first made British rock music popular. (*they or them*)
4. That Mary studied hard was very clear to John. (*it*)
5. Most people believe that the world is round. (*it*)
6. Sometimes, exercising can be relaxing. (*it*)

Items 1-6 above illustrate two important facts concerning personal pronouns. First, personal pronouns do, indeed, substitute for a variety of constructions in English. In (1), *she* substitutes for the noun *Jane*; in (2), *they*, for the compound pronoun *he and she*; in (3), *they*, for the noun phrase *the Beatles*; in (4), *it*, for the noun clause *that Mary studied hard*; in (5), *it*, for the noun clause *that the world is round* or, alternatively, for the noun phrase *the world*; in (6), *it*, for the gerund *exercising*. Second, errors involving prescriptive rules (i.e., usage errors) may often occur but errors involving descriptive rules rarely occur. For example, in (3), students may substitute the pronoun *them* for *the Beatles* instead of the more formal *they*. However, this is a very different type of error from substituting a personal pronoun for *made* (a verb) or for *popular* (an adjective). Stated more generally, though students may substitute the incorrect form of a personal pronoun, they will never substitute a personal pronoun for any grammatical category other than a noun, a noun phrase, or a construction that serves as such.

The above exercise with personal pronouns helps point out some significant advantages of operational definitions in the teaching of grammar. If students can substitute pronouns for the appropriate word or words in exercises like (1-6) above and in utterances of daily speech—in ignorance of or, perhaps, despite the inaccuracy or incompleteness of the common textbook definition—then teachers do not really have to teach the definition of pronoun, not even the operational one. Students already have that knowledge. Put in a more general way, teachers cannot teach students what they already know. Although students probably cannot state the operation of pronoun
substitution in the metalanguage of grammar, they must already possess
the tacit knowledge that a personal pronoun, at the least, is a word that can
take the place of a noun, noun phrase, or something that functions as
either. (The foregoing is a rough operational definition of a personal
pronoun.) Again, without this kind of unconscious linguistic knowledge,
students would be unable to make pronoun substitutions for the
appropriate words in daily speech.

The fact that students already have such knowledge can also help
teachers clarify some facts about English grammar. If students already
unconsciously know that a personal pronoun can substitute for a noun,
noun phrase, or some construction that functions as either, then they must
also know that these elements which accept pronoun substitution are all
syntactically (though not necessarily semantically) similar. That is, despite
the various forms and lengths which these units take, students already
unconsciously know that they function as one category, namely, that of
noun. Indeed, precisely because the noun clauses *that Mary studied hard*
and *that the world is round* in (4) and (5) above allow the personal pronoun
*it* as a proper substitution, teachers can plausibly argue that these
constructions, while not having the form of nouns, are functioning as
nouns. That is, even though the shapes are different, the function is the
same. This fact is important since it means teachers can use pronoun
substitution as an operational test for nouns (and vice versa). If a personal
pronoun can appropriately substitute for a word or group of words, then
the word or group of words is functioning as a noun, regardless of its
form. This, in turn, obviates the need to teach formally the definitions of
noun, noun phrase, and the other constructions which substitute for nouns.
If such constructions allow personal pronouns as substitutions in a
sentence, then, operationally, they are nouns.

Reliance on this kind of unconscious underlying knowledge of the
language, of course, has always been implicit—and crucial—in the
development of transformational/generative grammar and its derivative
applications for the classroom. It should come as no surprise that the basic
design and the general success of sentence-combining exercises rest
greatly on this kind of intuitive knowledge. Indeed, without such
knowledge, students would be unable to carry out the instructions (i.e.,
perform the operations) required of such exercises. Yet, with the
exception of a small number of studies (D'Elia 1977; DeBeaugrande
1984a; Noguchi 1987), little has been done to exploit this powerful
resource to define grammatical categories for writers, even though the
very same resource has been used fruitfully by linguists in their syntactic
analyses for the past thirty or so years.
The Underlying Knowledge of "Subject"

An approach capitalizing on intuitive linguistic knowledge can be used to define, for example, the notion of "subject of a sentence." For students, being able to locate the subject of a sentence easily is a valuable skill since several kinds of common stylistic problems require the identification of subjects—for example, errors in subject-verb agreement, unnecessary shifts in person, overuse of nonagent subjects. Locating subjects can most easily be handled by exploiting some descriptive rules of grammar which operate on or interact with subjects. Consider the following declarative sentences and their corresponding tag and yes-no questions:

7. a. Jim and Sue can dance the tango.
   b. Jim and Sue can dance the tango, can't they?
   c. Can Jim and Sue dance the tango?

8. a. The company, which employed many workers and made many different kinds of products, went out of business.
   b. The company, which employed many workers and made many different kinds of products, went out of business, didn't it?
   c. Did the company, which employed many workers and made many different kinds of products, go out of business?

9. a. The cost of the three typewriters and the four clocks will be raised.
   b. The cost of the three typewriters and the four clocks will be raised, won't it?
   c. Will the cost of the three typewriters and the four clocks be raised?

10. a. Tom ate some bad spaghetti and had a stomachache all day.
   b. Tom ate some bad spaghetti and had a stomachache all day, didn't he?
   c. Did Tom eat some bad spaghetti and have a stomachache all day?

11. a. Doing math problems isn't one of Billy's favorite activities.
    b. Doing math problems isn't one of Billy's favorite activities, is it?
    c. Isn't doing math problems one of Billy's favorite activities?

12. a. Whether Sam likes it or not, Janet should telephone David again.
    b. Whether Sam likes it or not, Janet should telephone David again, shouldn't she?
    c. Whether Sam likes it or not, should Janet telephone David again?
Forming the corresponding tag and yes-no questions from the original declarative sentences offers a way of identifying subjects operationally. With tag questions (all the (b) sentences above), the pronoun copied at the end of the tag question refers to the subject of the sentence. Stated more simply, the last word of the tag question stands for the subject. For example, in (7b), the last word they stands for Jim and Sue, the subject of the sentence; in (8b), the last word it stands for the company; in (9b), it stands for the cost; in (11b), it stands for the whole sequence doing math problems (not just math), and, hence, the whole sequence is the subject of the sentence. With yes-no questions (all the (c) sentences above), an auxiliary, or "helping," verb has been moved leftward to occupy a new position. If no auxiliary verb occurs in the original declarative sentence, as in (8a) and (10a), an appropriate form of the do auxiliary verb (do, does, or did) is added instead. The subject of the sentence can be identified relative to the new position of the moved or added auxiliary. More specifically, the (simple) subject is the first noun or noun substitute that stands to the immediate right of the moved or added auxiliary verb. Stated more in everyday English, the subject is the first noun or noun substitute that stands to the nearest right of the moved (or added do) word. Thus, in (7c), the noun phrase Jim and Sue stands to the nearest right of the moved word can and, hence, is the subject of the sentence; in (8c), the noun or noun substitute standing to the nearest right of the moved word did is company; in (9c), the noun or noun substitute standing to the nearest right of the moved word will is cost.

Handling Some Exceptions

As with any method dealing with the complexities of English grammar, real or apparent exceptions may occur. The key is to explain them as clearly as possible. For example, sentences like (13a) and (14a) will yield a proper corresponding tag question but not a proper corresponding yes-no question:

13. a. For Tommy to pass now isn't going to be easy.
   b. For Tommy to pass now isn't going to be easy, is it?
   c. "Isn't for Tommy to pass now going to be easy?"
14. a. That Jane is a genius is obvious to everyone.
   b. That Jane is a genius is obvious to everyone, isn't it?
   c. *Is that Jane is a genius obvious to everyone?
Conversely, a sentence like (15a) will yield a proper corresponding yes-no question but sometimes a noncorresponding (yet proper) tag question:

15. a. I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life.
    b. *I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life, doesn't it? (instead of the syntactically corresponding "I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life, don't I?")
    c. Don't I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life?

The general problem in (13-15) is that the tag question and the yes-no question give conflicting indications of what is the subject of the original sentence. For example, in (13b), the *it* in the tag question refers to or stands for the infinitive phrase *for Tommy to pass now*, and, hence, the whole infinitive phrase is the subject of the sentence. In (13c), however, the yes-no question is corresponding but ungrammatical. To make matters worse, the first noun or noun substitute occurring to the nearest right of the moved word is *Tommy* and, thus, students may incorrectly identify *Tommy*, rather than the whole infinitive phrase *for Tommy to pass now*, as the subject of the sentence.

Rather than merely viewing the results in (13-15) as contradictory or unrevealing, teachers can exploit such situations not only to sharpen but also to expand their students' skills in employing operational definitions. For example, if in (13b) the last word it truly represents a pronominal copy of the subject (i.e., *for Tommy to pass now*), then we ought to be able to substitute *it* for the subject without changing the essential meaning of the sentence. This we can do in both (13a) and (13b) to get *It's not going to be easy* and *It's not going to be easy, is it?*, respectively, thus providing strong evidence that *for Tommy to pass now* is, indeed, the actual subject. Significantly, we can also substitute *it* for the same group of words in the problematic (13c) to get *Isn't it going to be easy?*, again giving strong evidence that *for Tommy to pass now* is the subject of the sentence. (Note that if *Tommy* alone were the subject of the sentence, the corresponding tag question would be the ungrammatical *For Tommy to pass now isn't going to be easy, is he?*). Further analysis, then, shows that the subject of the sentences in (13) is, indeed, the whole infinitive phrase *For Tommy to pass now* rather than just *Tommy* or any other portion of the infinitive phrase.
The same line of argument can also be used to explain the discrepancy in identifying the subject in (14).

The discrepancy in (15) can also be explained in a revealing way for students. In (15c), the moved word in the yes-no question correctly indicates that 1 is the subject of the sentence; in (15b), however, the copied pronoun it in the tag question refers to a good education, and, thus, erroneously indicates that a good education is the subject. The cause of the discrepancy here lies more in the use of tag questions than in their formation. For example, the tag question that syntactically corresponds to I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life is I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life, don't I? (If this is offered as a possible tag question to (15a), most, if not all, students will agree.) However, though this is a syntactically correct tag question, we normally do not utter it for reasons having to do with the semantics (i.e., meaning) and pragmatics (i.e., use) of such questions. In contrast to yes-no questions, which seek from the addressee a neutral yes or no response, tag questions seek a confirmation of whatever the addressee asserts. Put in another way, yes-no questions roughly mean something like, 'My utterance here offers you a free choice. I ask you to indicate the choice with a yes or no.' Tag questions roughly mean something like, 'My utterance here asserts something. I ask you to confirm or deny the assertion.' In the tag question I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life, don't I?, the addresser asserts his or her belief about the importance of a good education in life. However, the meaning of the sentence is strange in that the addresser explicitly affirms his or her own belief (with I believe) and then denies or casts doubt on it (with don't I?). Because of this conflict between self-affirmation and self-doubt, students often prefer the syntactically noncorresponding tag question I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life, doesn't it? We can check this explanation against a comparable tag question, such as Maria believes that a good education makes a big difference in life, doesn't she?, which lacks the conflicting beliefs of the addressee and, hence, is more acceptable than *Maria believes that a good education makes a big difference in life, doesn't it? (Teachers can encourage further exploration of this phenomenon by asking students to substitute other nouns and personal pronouns for the pronoun I.)

The reason that sentences like (15b) sometimes occur as the tag question counterparts for sentences like (15a) then is not that students do not know the syntax of tag questions (they do) but rather that they also know something about the semantics and pragmatics (or the meaning and use) of tag questions.
The Importance of Tag-Question and Yes-No Question Formation

What the preceding examples with tag questions and yes-no questions indicate is that students also unconsciously know a great deal more about the categories of English grammar than teachers realize. The very ability to perform the operations of tag-question formation and yes-no question formation presupposes that students already have an underlying knowledge of not only the concept of "subject" but also those of "auxiliary verb," "negative," and "personal pronoun" (and, as we shall see later, also "sentence" and "presentence modifier"). That students have already acquired the concept of personal pronoun (along with the associated concepts of case, number, and gender) is evident in their ability to add the correct noun-equivalent pronoun (with matching case, number, and gender) at the end of the tag question. That students have already acquired the concept of auxiliary verb is evident in their uncanny ability to select, among numerous possibilities within a sentence, the correct word to copy in the tag part of the tag question or the correct word to move leftward in the yes-no question. (The ability to identify auxiliary verbs is further verified when students insert a form of do in sentences containing no auxiliary verb. How can they tell that a sentence lacks a movable or copiable auxiliary verb unless they know first what constitutes an auxiliary verb?) That students have already acquired the concept of negative is evident in their ability to add and contract not in the tag (or in their ability to negate any positive sentence of English). If students did not possess an underlying knowledge of such categories, they would be unable to produce grammatical tag questions and yes-no questions in everyday conversation.

The Underlying Knowledge of "Main Verb"

The underlying knowledge of native speakers also includes knowledge of the category "main verb." The ability to locate main verbs is important because some highly frequent stylistic errors concern main verbs. These errors involve not only the choice of main verbs (as suggested by the oft-quoted advice, "Write with action verbs") but also their form (incorrect tense, lack of subject-verb agreement, improper tense shifting, nonstandard dialectal forms). Locating the main verb of a sentence, however, is not always easy for students, even when they know the subject of the sentence. Simply asking students, "What is the subject doing?" will not work when, for example, the sentence is passive or the
main verb is some form of be. Students do, nonetheless, have an underlying knowledge of main verbs. After students have learned how to identify both the subject of a declarative sentence and the correct pronominal form of the subject operationally, teachers can tap their underlying knowledge of main verbs by having students work with sentence frames like A and B below. Frame A isolates the predicate of a sentence in the second slot. If that predicate contains the verb be, frame B is then used to separate the linking verb be from the passive be. In fact, frame B works only with passive sentences and serves to isolate the "real" main verb.

A. They somehow got ________to_______.
B. But it wasn't me who did the________________-ing.

To locate main verbs with sentence frames A and B, students start with any (declarative) sentence and then use that sentence to fill in the blanks of A and B. The operational test here requires two basic steps:

(1) Insert in the first slot of A the subject of the (declarative) sentence in appropriate pronoun form and insert in the second slot whatever remains of the sentence.
(2) If (and only if) the second slot in A has be as the first word, try to fill the slot in B with the appropriate word from the original sentence (this word also has to appear in the second slot in A). If this can't be done, don't worry.

To simplify matters here, sentence negatives may be ignored. Although the sentences produced from following the steps above may sometimes be strange, they will, nonetheless, be sentences (keep in mind that, even in real life, people sometimes utter strange but syntactically correct sentences). More important, the resulting sentences will isolate the main verb in the second slot in A or, if the original sentence is passive, the main verb will appear in the slot in B. The previous declarative sentences in (7-12), repeated for convenience below as (16-21) illustrate the isolation of the main verb. The (a) versions are the original sentences, the (b) versions are the results of using frame A, and the (c) versions show the results of using frame B.

16. a. Jim and Sue can dance the tango.
   b. They somehow got them to dance the tango. (Hence, dance is the main verb.)
17. a. The company, which employed many workers and made many different kinds of products, went out of business.
   b. They somehow got it to go out of business. (Go is the main verb.)
18. a. The cost of the three typewriters and the four clocks will be raised.
   b. They somehow got it to be raised.
   c. But it wasn't me who did the raise-ing. (Raise is the main verb.)
19. a. Tom ate some bad spaghetti and had a stomachache all day.
   b. They somehow got him to eat some bad spaghetti and (to) have a stomachache all day. (Two main verbs here: eat and have.)
20. a. Doing math problems isn't one of Billy's favorite activities.
   b. They somehow got it to be one of Billy's favorite activities.
   c. But it wasn't me who did the raise-ing. (Since frame B does not work here, be is the main verb.)
21. a. Whether Sam likes it or not, Janet should telephone David again.
   b. They somehow got her to telephone David again, whether Sam likes it or not. (Telephone is the main verb.)

Even the troublesome declarative sentences in (13-15), repeated here as (22-24), yield their main verbs, as indicated below:

22. a. For Tommy to pass now isn't going to be easy.
   b. They somehow got it to be easy.
   c. But it wasn't me who did the raise-ing. (Hence, be is the main verb.)
23. a. That Jane is a genius is obvious to everyone.
   b. They somehow got it to be obvious to everyone.
   c. But it wasn't me who did the raise-ing. (Hence, be is the main verb.)
24. a. I believe that a good education makes a big difference in life.
   b. They somehow got me to believe that a good education makes a big difference in life. (Believe is the main verb.)

As shown by the examples above, sentence frames A and B work together to isolate main verbs from declarative sentences. Sentence frame A isolates transitive and intransitive main verbs from the sentence, while sentence frame B separates the main verb be from a passivized main verb (i.e., a main verb which occurs in passive form and which occurs after the auxiliary verb be). Working in tandem, sentence frames A and B make the isolation of main verbs considerably easier because they operationally remove distracting auxiliary verbs from consideration as main verbs. For example, the active sentence Bill could have been taking care of his tired feet becomes in sentence frame A, They somehow got him to take care of his tired feet, while
the passive sentence *Mary might have been chosen* becomes in sentence frames A and B, *They somehow got her to be chosen* and *But it wasn't me who did the choosing.*

**The Underlying Knowledge of "Sentence"**

Being able to identify main verbs, main subjects, and auxiliary verbs can, of course, aid students in identifying sentences and defining the all-important notion of "sentence." However, to piece together these elements with others to define a sentence is wasteful of time and effort because native speakers of English already know what a sentence is. That this knowledge already exists, tacit though it may be, is evidenced in the very ability to form grammatical tag questions and yes-no questions. Regardless of the vast numbers of sentences that can be transformed into tag questions or yes-no questions, the key point to keep in mind here is that the operations that form tag questions and yes-no questions work properly only on genuine sentences. While students will have no difficulty in transforming the (a) sentences in (712) into tag questions and yes-no questions, they will find the task impossible with such nonsentences as the following:

25. Enjoyed the baseball game on Saturday.
26. Whatever you could do to help my sister.
27. The wind howling through the trees last night.
28. If you came tomorrow afternoon at one o'clock.
29. In order to find a job he liked.

Try as they may, students will find it impossible to form either the corresponding tag question or the corresponding yes-no question for the sequences in (25-29). If forced to write or utter a "corresponding" tag or yes-no question for the sequence in, say, (25), students might come up with one of these constructions:

30. Didn't he enjoy the baseball game on Saturday?
31. Enjoyed the baseball game on Saturday, didn't you?
32. You enjoyed the baseball game on Saturday, didn't you?

Yet even these forced and noncorresponding questions are highly instructive, for they reveal some of the elements which might be added to (25) to make it into a complete sentence. The yes-no question in (30) reveals that (25) lacks a possible *he* subject; the tag questions in (31) and (32) implicitly and explicitly reveal that (25) lacks a possible you subject. That is, the very attempt to force a tag question or a yes-no question
from a nonsentence offers evidence not only of the existence of a student's underlying knowledge of a (complete) sentence but also the strength of this knowledge.

What ultimately makes tag questions and yes-no questions so useful in differentiating sentences from nonsentences is their ability to mark sentence boundaries. Every sentence, no matter how complex, has two boundaries, one that marks the beginning of the sentence and one that marks its end. (In writing, we can call these two boundaries the left and right boundary, respectively.) Differentiating a sentence from a nonsentence—or, in our terms, defining a sentence operationally—crucially depends upon identifying the two boundaries, since what lies in between them is the sentence. Indeed, one major advantage of using tag-question formation and yes-no question formation as a test for "sentencehood" is that the operations involved visually mark the boundaries of a sentence. Tag-question formation visually marks the right boundary by placing the appropriate tag there (e.g., isn't he, aren't they); the yes-no question formation visually marks the left boundary by moving the auxiliary (or adding a do form) there. If both boundaries cannot be so marked, then the original sequence falls short of being a sentence.

The following sequences help illustrate the marking of boundaries ("//" indicates a sentence or independent clause boundary):

33. a. // It's a great party //
   b. It's a great party // isn't it?
   c. Is // it ______ a great party?

34. a. // Whatever you say will be okay with Mary //
   b. Whatever you say will be okay with Mary // won't it?
   c. Will // whatever you say _______ be okay with Mary?

35. a. // The man and the woman, neither of whom Ted knows, came from a place called Hamburg //
   b. The man and the woman, neither of whom Ted knows, came from a place called Hamburg // didn't they?
   c. Did // the man and the woman, neither of whom Ted knows, come from a place called Hamburg?

With tag questions, the right sentence boundary is marked even if, for semantic and pragmatic reasons, the wrong subject is copied as the pronoun in the tag, as in (36b) and (37b), or even if the auxiliary verb lacks an accepted negative contracted form, as in (38b) and (39b):

36. a. // I think Bob is going to Sally's Halloween party in a Dracula costume //
b. *I think Bob is going to Sally's Halloween party in a Dracula costume // isn't he?  
c. Do // I think Bob is going to Sally's Halloween party in a Dracula costume?  
37. a. // We are certain that Janice and her two friends will not get an A in history //  
b. *We are certain that Janice and her two friends will not get an A in history // will they?  
c. Are // we______ certain that Janice and her two friends will not get an A in history?  
38. a. // Dave might finish the assignment over the weekend //  
b. *Dave might finish the assignment over the weekend // mightn't he? (This one is acceptable in certain dialects.)  
c. Might // Dave______ finish the assignment over the weekend?  
39. a. // I'm just being stubborn //  
b. *I'm just being stubborn // am't/ain't I?  
c. Am // I _____ just being stubborn?  

With yes-no questions, the left boundary is marked even if the moved element creates an awkward or, to some, an ungrammatical sentence, as in (40c) or (41c):

40. a. // That the rock singer may cut his hair could be a problem //  
b. That the rock singer may cut his hair could be a problem // couldn't it?  
c. Could // that the rock singer may cut his hair ______ be a problem?  
41. a. // To be a famous movie star can mean a life without privacy //  
b. To be a famous movie star can mean a life without privacy // can't it?  
c. Can // to be a famous movie star ______ mean a life without privacy?  

As one final verification of sentencehood, teachers might enlist students to try a simple operation that is independent of both tag- and yes-no question formation. As all native speakers of English implicitly know (just as all teachers who have used sentence combining as a teaching device explicitly know), sentences can be embedded, or nested, within another. One such embedding environment, or slot, for declarative sentences occurs in (42):

42. They refused to believe the idea that __________________.
Although many word sequences will properly fit in the above slot, whatever these sequences are, most of them take the form of a (declarative) sentence. Thus, the (a) sentences in (7-12) can be embedded in (42), as the complex sentences in (43-48) below show:

43. They refused to believe the idea that Jim and Sue can dance the tango.
44. They refused to believe the idea that the company, which employed many workers and made many different kinds of products, went out of business.
45. They refused to believe the idea that the cost of the three typewriters and the four clocks will be raised.
46. They refused to believe the idea that Tom ate some bad spaghetti and had a stomachache all day.
47. They refused to believe the idea that doing math problems isn't one of Billy's favorite activities.
48. They refused to believe the idea that, whether Sam likes it or not, Janet should telephone David again.

In contrast, nonsentence sequences, such as those in (25-29), cannot be embedded in the same environment:

49. *They refused to believe the idea that enjoyed the baseball game on Saturday.
50. *They refused to believe the idea that whatever you could do to help my sister.
51. *They refused to believe the idea that the wind howling through the trees last night.
52. *They refused to believe the idea that if you came tomorrow afternoon at one o'clock.
53. *They refused to believe the idea that in order to find a job he liked.

In most cases, the above method proves easy to use because it provides a controlled syntactic context in which to judge sentence completeness.

**The Underlying Knowledge of "Presentence Modifier"**

In addition to marking the left boundary of a sentence, yes-no question formation is helpful in identifying presentence modifiers.
Being able to identify these modifiers proves useful in writing since a comma is sometimes required to set off the presentence modifier from the rest of the sentence. Although appearing in various forms and lengths, all presentence modifiers share two syntactic characteristics: they occur, as the grammatical terminology suggests, at the beginning of the sentence, and they are movable to some other location in the sentence, whether it be the end or somewhere in the middle (the exact position is unimportant here). The basic problem of identifying presentence modifiers, or really separating them from the rest of the sentence, lies in the variety of forms they take. They can be a word, a phrase, or a clause. The value of yes-no question formation lies in its ability to treat them all alike syntactically. If a presentence modifier occurs in a declarative sentence, yes-no question formation will either place the moved auxiliary to its right or displace the modifier to some other location in the sentence. (The displacement of the modifier occurs because of stylistic reasons and is not a part of the yes-no question rule itself.) In either case, the presentence modifier becomes easily identifiable. The presentence modifier is either everything in the sentence that stands to the left of the moved auxiliary verb (or added do form) or everything that moves rightward to some other position in the sentence. The following sentences, containing a variety of presentence modifiers, illustrate the point (the modifiers under consideration are in italics for easy reference):

54. a. *Frankly,* everyone says that my fifth-grade teacher is mean.
   b. *Frankly,* does everyone say that my fifth-grade teacher is mean?
   c. Does everyone say, *frankly,* that my fifth-grade teacher is mean?
55. a. *Consequently,* the whole street was destroyed by the tornado.
   b. *Consequently,* was the whole street destroyed by the tornado?
   c. Was the whole street, *consequently,* destroyed by the tornado?
56. a. *In Los Angeles about this time,* Janine claimed that she saw a flying saucer zoom over her house.
   b. *In Los Angeles about this time,* did Janine claim that she saw a flying saucer zoom over her house?
   c. Did Janine claim that *in Los Angeles about this time* she saw a flying saucer zoom over her house?
57. a. *Things being what they are,* Jerry's mother is very angry at him.
   b. *Things being what they are,* is Jerry's mother very angry at him?
   c. Is Jerry's mother very angry at him, *things being what they are*?
58. a. Although he has never hit a home run in his life, Jeremy still loves to play baseball.
    b. Although he has never hit a home run in his life, does Jeremy still love to play baseball?
    c. Does Jeremy still love to play baseball, although he has never hit a home run in his life?

59. a. When the food arrives, we'll start with the pepperoni pizza first.
    b. When the food arrives, will we start with the pepperoni pizza first?
    c. Will we start with the pepperoni pizza first when the food arrives?

Pedagogically, the main benefit of using the yes-no question to identify presentence modifiers lies in avoiding the laborious and time-consuming chore of presenting all the various types of presentence modifiers. Teachers need not introduce individually such modifiers as adverbial disjuncts, conjunctive adverbs, prepositional phrases, nominative absolutes, and adverbial clauses; nor need teachers differentiate between one-word, phrasal, or clausal modifiers. Syntactically blind to such distinctions, yes-no question formation operationally defines presentence modifiers in one general and easily perceptible way: they either occur to the left of the moved auxiliary or added do form or else they get moved from the presentence position.

**The Applicability of the Basic Categories**

We have now operationally defined a set of basic categories-subject, verb (both main and auxiliary), (presentence) modifier, and sentence (or independent clause). If we take into account other categories that become transparent in tag-question formation, we may supplement the basic set with (personal) pronoun, noun, noun phrase and noun substitute, and negative. While the foregoing categories are by no means all the categories that we might define operationally, they comprise a fundamental set for identifying and correcting many highly frequent and sometimes highly stigmatized kinds of errors. In reducing these errors, some of these categories constitute a starting point; for others, they constitute the crucial category (or categories). The importance and potential utility of these categories become clearer if we distribute them in relation to Connors and Lunsford's (1988) list of the twenty most frequent formal errors:

1. No comma after introductory element (presentence modifier, sentence)
2. Vague pronoun reference (pronoun, noun, noun phrase, noun substitute)
3. No comma in compound sentence (independent clause)
4. Wrong word
5. No comma in nonrestrictive element
6. Wrong/missing inflected endings (verb, noun)
7. Wrong or missing preposition
8. Comma splice (sentence or independent clause)
9. Possessive apostrophe error
10. Tense shift (main verb, auxiliary verb)
11. Unnecessary shift in person (possibly subject or pronoun)
12. Sentence fragment (sentence or independent clause)
13. Wrong tense or verb form (main verb, auxiliary verb)
14. Subject-verb agreement (subject, auxiliary verb, main verb)
15. Lack of comma in series
16. Pronoun agreement error (pronoun, subject, main verb, auxiliary verb)
17. Unnecessary comma with restrictive element
18. Run-on or fused sentence (sentence or independent clause)
19. Dangling or misplaced modifier (presentence modifier, sentence)
20. Its/it's error

The importance and potential utility of these categories also become more apparent when they are placed in relation to Hairston's (1981) "status marking" and "very serious" errors, the two most stigmatized kinds of stylistic errors:

**Status Marking**
nonstandard verb forms in past or past participle (verb) lack of subject-verb agreement: *We was* instead of *We were; Jones don't think it's acceptable* instead of *Jones doesn't think it's acceptable* (subject, main verb, auxiliary verb) double negatives (negative) objective pronoun as subject (pronoun, subject)

**Very Serious**
sentence fragments (sentence or independent clause)
run-on sentences (sentence or independent clause)
noncapitalization of proper nouns (noun)
would of instead of would have (possibly auxiliary verb)
lack of subject-verb agreement, non-status marking (subject, auxiliary verb, main verb)
insertion of comma between the verb and its complement (main verb)
nonparallelism
faulty adverb forms
use of transitive verb set for intransitive sit (verb)

The Practical Benefits

Isolating basic categories of grammar in the manner demonstrated here, then, produces practical benefits. Aside from its relevance to correcting some highly frequent and stigmatized errors, the method reduces significantly the time expended on grammar instruction.4 Teachers need not present to students all the customary grammatical categories, only a small set of them. Second, and as a direct result of the first benefit, it creates more time to devote to other matters of writing. While unconventional features of style need attention at some point in writing instruction, they should not be the sole nor the primary area of attention. Third, because the method demonstrated here relies on a body of already acquired knowledge, it requires less effort to present the basic categories. Teachers present—and students apply—what they already unconsciously know. Fourth, the method ties in nicely with a process approach to writing. Just as students can improve paragraphs and whole essays by learning about and partaking more consciously in the process of writing, so too can they improve their sentence mechanics by learning about and partaking more consciously in the process (i.e., the operations) of sentence formation.

Notes

1. The asterisk here denotes an ungrammatical sentence, that is, one which violates the descriptive rules of English grammar.
2. When working with tag-question formation, instructors will sooner or later encounter word sequences which are genuine sentences but which, on first try, cannot be transformed into grammatical tag questions (at least not in
all regional or social varieties of English). These cases involve sentences containing modal verbs (a subclass of auxiliary verbs) like may, might, ought, and shall, which, if contracted with not, produce in some dialects or styles the unacceptable *mayn't, *mightn't, *oughtn’t, and *shalln’t (shalln’t [or shan’t], for example, being unacceptable in many non-British dialects), or the main or auxiliary verb form am (which, if contracted with not, results in the unacceptable amn’t). Although such verbs may not contract with not to form grammatical tag questions, in some varieties of English they do appear in uncontracted form in tag questions. Thus, for example, He might come tomorrow can be transformed into He might come tomorrow, might he not? (or, possibly, He might come tomorrow, might not he?). Although the resulting tag question is formal in style, it is, nonetheless, in some varieties of English, a grammatical-and corresponding-tag question. To keep matters simple, instructors should, whenever appropriate, inform students that, if the inability to contract the verb is the only problem in forming the proper tag question, then the proper tag question is a formal one (i.e., one with an uncontracted verb in the tag part of the question). One other point needs mentioning. Even though verb forms like may, might, ought, shall, and am may not be contracted with the negative in some varieties of English, so strong is the pattern to have a contracted verb in tag questions (assuming, of course, the original sentence is positive) that native speakers of English will often substitute for an uncontractable verb a contractable one and usually one that's similar in meaning or time reference. Thus, in informal styles, the following changes will occur: may, might → won't; ought → shouldn't; shall → won't; am → aren't, ain't. Teachers and students should view such changes solely as efforts of English speakers to get around the uncontractability problem mentioned above.

3. Some handbooks state that the comma should be inserted only if the introductory phrase or clause is a "long" one, usually set arbitrarily at five or more words; however, students who add a comma even for "short" introductory phrases and clauses can hardly go wrong, given the arbitrariness of what constitutes "long." If students realize that all presentence modifiers are also fragments, then a more general and more acceptable rule is possible: "When a fragment immediately precedes a (genuine) sentence and both are intended to be read as one unit, the fragment is set off from the sentence by a comma." The greatest advantage of this rule is that instructors do not need to define the various kinds of phrases (e.g., prepositional, participial, infinitive) or the various kinds of dependent clauses (e.g., adverbial). When a fragment immediately follows a (genuine) sentence and both are intended to be read as one unit, the fragment is often (not always) set off by a comma.

4. Using the same underlying principles but slightly different operational syntactic tests than the ones outlined in this study, DeBeaugrande (1984a) reports impressive results in getting college students to identify subjects, number-carrying verbs, verb tenses, and fragments. For example, he states that, with respect to identifying subjects and predicates, posttest scores showed an improvement of approximately 500 percent over pretest scores (363); the same study found that forty-five students who had been taught an operational test for identifying number-carrying verbs and verb tenses made less than half as many errors in recognition than before treatment (365).

My own work with the approach based on underlying syntactic knowledge shows less spectacular gains but highly favorable responses from teachers.
who use the approach. In the fall of 1988, I conducted a study which differed significantly from DeBeaugrande's insofar as it contrasted two approaches (i.e., a traditional or conventional approach versus the approach based on underlying syntactic knowledge) and covered a wider range of students with greater variability in writing skills, specifically, one sixth-grade elementary school class, three ninth-grade junior high classes, and two freshman-level and two developmental-writing college classes. As a means of identifying fragments, run-ons, and comma splices, the participating teachers (all of whom taught multiple classes or sections) taught a traditional (usually a traditional grammar) approach to one set of students and the approach based on underlying syntactic knowledge to another set of students. On the basis of pretests and posttests, the experimental groups (i.e., students taught the approach based on underlying syntactic knowledge) showed about the same positive gains in identifying fragments, run-ons, and comma splices as the control groups (i.e., students taught a traditional approach). At the least, the results indicated that students generally do benefit from exposure to some grammar instruction, whether formal or informal, in identifying the three kinds of sentencing errors. In all likelihood, the lack of differentiation in the results of the two approaches lay in two substantial factors: (1) because the experimental and control groups in the study generally could not be equalized with respect to academic ability without severely disrupting the teachers' normal conduct of classes, the higher-achieving class was always assigned as the control group and the lower-achieving class (or classes) as the experimental group, and (2) because most students in the study reported that they had studied traditional grammar for many years, the control groups (both students and teachers) generally had much more exposure and practice with the traditional method than the experimental groups had with the new approach. Yet, despite the probable influence of these two factors, many students in the experimental groups made significant gains, some comparable to those reported by DeBeaugrande. The most impressive findings, however, lay in teachers' responses to the approach based on underlying syntactic knowledge. An attitudinal questionnaire completed by the five teachers who participated in the study and by three other teachers who had also used the approach during the same period generally showed favorable or highly favorable responses with respect to ease of presentation, economy of time, and overall impression. Further, all believed strongly or very strongly that they could get better results with more practice, and all strongly or very strongly indicated that they planned to use the approach in future writing classes (the latter item on the questionnaire, in fact, received the highest positive score of all, with seven out of eight teachers indicating "very strongly"). Lastly and somewhat strangely, a majority of instructors (five out of seven) perceived the experimental method as bringing better results than traditional methods, even though their students, on the average, made about the same gains with the experimental method as with the conventional method. In light of the other responses to the questionnaire, a likely explanation here is that these instructors interpreted "better results" in the questionnaire item "Did the USK [i.e., the Underlying Syntactic Knowledge] method bring better results than the method(s) you normally use?" to mean better results with respect to time and effort spent. (I wish to thank Jeffrie Ahmad, Linda BeauregardVasquez, Pamela Grove, Lynn McDomie, John Peters, Mary Riggs, Ilene Rubenstein, and Anne Lise Schofield for their aid in completing this study.)
Positive responses to the underlying-syntactic-knowledge method also come from students themselves. In a study of developmental writers conducted at Antelope Valley College, Beauregard-Vasquez (1989) found that students who were taught the underlying-syntactic-knowledge method not only made 40.5 percent fewer errors in identifying fragments and 37.9 percent fewer errors in identifying run-ons and comma splices but also, with much less classroom instruction, made greater average gains than a control group taught only traditional grammar. Just as important, students greatly preferred the underlying-syntactic-knowledge method over traditional grammar instruction. On the basis of narrative student evaluations of the method, Beauregard-Vasquez states that students found the underlying-syntactic-knowledge method to be a "fun" and "easy" way to "fix" their papers and that students wished that they had learned the method earlier, or in the words of one student:

I have gone to many English classes all through my years of school, and I have been taught the same type of skills .... But the tag and yes-no question method is by far the most unique and simplified method I have ever been taught .... I like the method because it is something new and exciting. It is far better than anything else they tried to teach me. (16)

Beauregard-Vasquez notes that the method seems to give students a greater sense of confidence and helps reduce the "excessive blame they tend to place on themselves for not already knowing grammar," or as stated by another student:

I'm very excited about this new way of learning grammar. I've always felt that I was the problem when it came to learning; however, I thought that it was a lack of attention or just being unable to soak up the material. But now I know it's not; in fact, it was never me. It was the way the material was presented. (15)