



Engaging Grammar

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR **REAL** CLASSROOMS

Amy Benjamin with Tom Oliva
Foreword by Martha Kolln

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1 Introduction

“I know I should be teaching more grammar, but I just can’t make it interesting.”

“I became an English teacher because I wanted to teach literature and writing, not grammar.”

“The students in my district have never learned grammar. I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“All the research shows that teaching grammar doesn’t do any good. So why teach it?”

“I’m very nervous about teaching grammar. I never learned it myself.”

“The best way to teach grammar is just drill-and-kill. So I do it for a few weeks and get it over with.”

“The kids need to be taught the same things again and again. There’s no getting grammar instruction to stick.”

I hear comments like these all the time from teachers who are my colleagues or who have signed up for my workshops about grammar instruction. All in all, there’s a great deal of disquietude, if not disgruntlement, about the overall subject of grammar instruction: Why should we teach grammar? If we teach it, what should we teach? When should we teach what? How can we teach it so that it’s interesting, relevant, and empowering?

Why Should We Teach Grammar?

Much controversy exists about whether grammar should be taught at all. In a 1985 position statement, the National Council of Teachers of English used strong language to condemn the teaching of grammar through the use of repetitive, isolated exercises and usage exercises, commonly called “drill”: NCTE urged “the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction.” I don’t disagree that grammar drills are widely considered distasteful to students and teachers alike. I don’t favor teaching grammar that way. There’s a much more interesting, effective, and engaging way to teach grammar, and that is through authentic language, with an emphasis on the living, changing nature of the English language, which, like all languages, changes and varies over time. The pursuit of knowledge about what language is made of, how

it works, and what you can do with it is a pursuit whose value transcends the ability to correct errors. There doesn't have to be a dichotomy between grammar instruction and language arts instruction. The latter can embrace the former.

The ancient Greeks believed this too. That is why they included grammar as one of the seven liberal arts: "The liberal arts denote the seven branches of knowledge that initiate the young into a life of learning" (Joseph 3). To the classicists of the Western world, grammar was one of the three liberal arts called the Trivium: logic, grammar, and rhetoric. The other four, having to do with numbers, were grouped together as the Quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Together, the seven liberal arts were (and still are) considered the "handmaidens of thought."

Thus, as a "handmaiden of thought," grammar knowledge is valuable because it facilitates the *ability to learn* other knowledge. When we think of grammar as the art of inventing and combining sentences, we understand it in an entirely different way from the way in which grammar is usually received today by both laypeople and most professionals. The classic view of grammar in Western civilization is as a liberal art that opens the mind to the infinite possibilities of word combinations. But this view has faded. Since the 1970s, grammar has been viewed as having a place in the writing process only *after* the sentence has been invented and now needs to be smoothed over, made presentable.

If you come to believe in the value of grammar as a liberal art, you won't worry so much about the immediate utilitarian purpose of your instruction. You will trust that learning about language is valuable for its own sake. If you use sound pedagogy, you will see that your students are interested and involved in grammar lessons, maybe even more so than they are in other kinds of lessons in the English classroom. Grammar lessons, when they are informed by what we know about the learning process, are creative, dynamic, socialized, and highly engaging. And, best of all, they are based on an astonishing amount of prior knowledge. That prior knowledge—the students' internal grammar expertise—makes the study of grammar different from every other subject in the curriculum. This book demonstrates how you can preside over grammar lessons in which students ask interesting questions, many of which will get your own wheels turning. You may find yourself saying, "Hmm . . . I never thought of it that way." You may well see students socializing their learning, explaining things to one another. You will probably observe both creative and critical thinking as students use

their existing expertise about grammar in an active process of learning through discovery.

Why should we teach grammar? I believe we should teach grammar because learning grammar makes you think, and thinking makes you smarter.

Why Linguistic Grammar?

Some people find that explanations that come from linguistic grammar are easier to understand than those of traditional grammar. Linguistic grammarians describe the English language in its own terms, rather than in terms of Latin.

Why would traditional notions about English grammar be out of sync with the way English is actually spoken? The answer is rooted in the history of England, its Anglo-Saxon language and culture, and the lowly status of the English language compared to Latin. In the Middle Ages, in order to gain even a modicum of scholarly status, English had to define itself along Latin lines, proving that the plucky English language did indeed “have a grammar.” Then, in the late eighteenth century, Lindley Murray wrote the first English grammar book to be used in schools, and that book became the stamp from which all other grammar books were pressed for more than two hundred years. But when the field of modern linguistics was born, led by Noam Chomsky, Leonard Bloomfield, and C. C. Fries, the English language began to be looked at empirically (in terms of how a language is actually organized) rather than prescriptively (how a language “should be” presented). Accordingly, Fries reclassified and reconsidered the Latinate “eight parts of speech” into a more fluid system of “word classes” that must be considered in terms of form and function. This system, still known as “new grammar,” is described in Chapter 3.

What Should We Teach?

Many educators believe that we should teach only what students need to know to edit a writing piece they’ve already composed. They believe that grammar instruction should be doled out in the smallest portions possible, that no extra knowledge about grammar should spill over unused.

Of course, I disagree. First of all, if a student brings you a rough draft in which comma splices abound, how are you going to explain to that student in a conference or a mini-lesson that we need a stronger

mark than a comma to join two independent clauses? What's an independent clause? What's a dependent clause? What's a clause? What's a phrase? Some real learning must take place, learning that deserves time and care. We shouldn't relegate grammar instruction to the margins or reduce it to little tricks and mnemonics. Doing so, we teach grammar in a piecemeal fashion that never allows our students to develop deep understandings about how language works as a system and how to master its rhetorical possibilities.

So I believe in scope and sequence. And I believe that terminology is powerful, that students should understand the terms found in the glossary of this book, as well as the basic sentence patterns and how to diagram them with a few modifiers and compound elements. We should teach the information that is laid out in Chapter 3. We should teach word classes and how they have a form, which is recognizable by certain characteristics (e.g., *noun*: "a word that can be made plural and/or possessive"), as well as a function, or a job to perform in a sentence. We should teach that word classes fall into form and structure classes, with noun determiners as members of the latter. And the whole system will fall into place when we teach sentence patterns. As you will see as you read this book, new grammar makes better use of students' natural expertise in grammar than traditional grammar does. You'll also see that it is not that difficult to transition what you already know about traditional grammar (if you do know anything about it) into new grammar, because, like the students, you also have an innate, unconscious knowledge of the rules of language.

I'm optimistic about the value of grammar instruction because I've observed positive results in my own classroom and because my colleagues and the teachers in my workshops have had positive results as well.

How Should We Teach Grammar?

When I was a child, my mother had a friend named Sylvia. Sylvia was gifted at the craft of sewing. She could put together beautiful clothing of her own design, as well as draperies, decorative pillows, and upholstery. She had both the eye and the hand for it. When we went shopping with Sylvia, she'd examine the details of anything that was put together with fabric and thread. Then she'd go home and create something based on what she'd seen. She could do this because she looked at clothing differently than the average consumer does. She had a trained eye. And when she looked, she had language for all kinds of structures

in the piece. If Sylvia had been a writer, she'd have known her grammar. She'd have noticed that some noun phrases have within them adjectives that are placed out of their expected order, and that such placement sets up an interesting effect. She'd have noticed how participles are used, how all kinds of rhetorical devices operate. And then she'd have tried them herself.

I have had success teaching grammar in this way. I teach my students to become educated observers of text, especially text they are attracted to. I simply invite analysis by saying, "Find a sentence that you like." This way, we don't "stop what we are doing and do grammar." Rather, we "do grammar" as we read literature. The analysis and enjoyment of literature is infused with observations about how language is used; this experience, in turn, informs the writing process. Going from reading to writing is a recursive process in which grammar is the craft to be discovered in the former and practiced in the latter.

Notice, Name, Apply

I first discovered the "notice, name, apply" technique in Katie Wood Ray's *Wondrous Words*. In Chapter 2, "The Craft of Writing," she talks about how she teaches students to develop the insight of noticing syntactical patterns in text. Just as the artist's trained eye sees the use of geometrical shapes in a painting, the writer's eye can be trained to notice writerly shapes. Once patterns emerge for us, we name them. Then we apply them. The procedure of notice, name, and apply is recursive. The reader picks up ideas from literature, tosses them into a mental shopping bag, and then goes home and uses them in her own writing.

Ray speaks of the relationship between pattern-finding in text and how knowing grammatical terminology can help writers harvest what they find. "Once you begin to study the craft of writing you will find that the more you know, the more you see. . . . Being able to connect various crafting techniques that you see to other texts you know is one of the most significant understandings about learning to write from writers" (37). About knowing grammatical names, Ray says: "Most of us were taught about language from the outside in, off a chalkboard instead of from beautiful texts, and unless we've been teaching it for years, we don't remember much about grammatical terms because we just haven't used them enough. . . . And if you are going to reverse tradition and help your students learn about language as insiders, then they need to learn this insider's language from you, naming things for them whenever it makes sense in your reading like writers" (44).

Here's how knowledge of noun phrases can work with the "notice, name, apply" sequence. We'll take a paragraph from *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White:

Templeton moved indoors when winter came. His ratty home under the pig trough was too chilly, so he fixed himself a cozy nest in the barn behind the grain bins. He lined it with bits of dirty newspapers and rags, and whenever he found a trinket or a keepsake he carried it home and stored it there. He continued to visit Wilbur three times a day, exactly at mealtime, and Wilbur kept the promise he had made. Wilbur let the rat eat first. Then, when Templeton couldn't hold another mouthful, Wilbur would eat. As a result of overeating, Templeton grew bigger and fatter than any rat you ever saw. He was gigantic. He was as big as a young woodchuck. (174)

I'd like to explain two concepts of linguistic grammar here: noun phrase and nominal. A *noun phrase* is a noun plus its modifiers. We call the noun that is being modified the headword of the noun phrase. A noun phrase is usually announced by what we call a noun determiner, which is often an article—*a, an, the*—or a possessive pronoun (*my big dog*). A noun phrase can even include prepositional phrases, appositives, and verbal structures and other modifiers coming before or after the headword (*a big dog, a dog with floppy ears and eyes that sparkle*). A *nominal* is *any* structure (single word, phrase, or clause) that functions the way the noun phrase functions. A nominal can be replaced by a pronoun: *it* for singular; *they/them* for plural. All of these terms are explained further in Chapter 3.

Accordingly, one of the ways to teach students to identify nominals is by substituting pronouns. You will see that the process of substituting noun phrases with pronouns allows you to identify the parameters of the subject of the sentence. Below, I've boldfaced the noun phrases in the *Charlotte's Web* extract and followed each by the pronoun that could replace it.

Templeton (he) moved indoors when **winter** (it) came. **His ratty home under the pig trough** (It) was too chilly, so he fixed himself **a cozy nest** (it) in **the barn** (it) behind **the grain bins** (them). He lined it with **bits of dirty newspapers and rags** (them), and whenever he found **a trinket or a keepsake** (it) he carried it home and stored it there. He continued to visit **Wilbur** (him) three times a day, exactly at **mealtime** (it) and **Wilbur** (he) kept **the promise he had made** (it). **Wilbur** (He) let **the rat** (it) eat first. Then, when **Templeton** (he) couldn't hold **another mouthful** (it), **Wilbur** (he) would eat. As **a result of overeating** (it), **Templeton** (he) grew

bigger and fatter than **any rat you ever saw** (it). He was gigantic.
He was as big as a **young woodchuck** (it).

I have seen how, when students know about grammar, many other doors of English language arts open up to them in literature, composition, language history, vocabulary, even spelling. A person who has been taught grammar in an active and enlightened manner is in a position to learn more about academic and social language, to craft and read complicated sentences simply because that person can speak objectively about language. As members of the community of speakers of English, we are entitled to be players in the game of language, a game that allows us to adapt, adjust, even invent. So my purpose in this book is to show you how to infuse grammar instruction into all facets of your English classroom to strengthen your students' entire experience as learners, throughout their days in school, throughout their lives.

Although "notice, name, apply" practice is useful, it needs to be centered in an overall framework of how the English language works. Without that framework, we're back to teaching grammar in a piecemeal fashion, so I refer you again to Chapter 3.

A Teacher's Journal

Meet Tom Oliva. Tom was my younger colleague at Hendrick Hudson High School in Montrose, New York. Tom has a well-deserved reputation as a great English teacher, though he's relatively new to the school. His students love coming to class because Tom's creative ideas enliven the process of learning English. Yet, like so many fine English teachers, Tom had never really integrated grammar into English instruction except as an add-on last step on the to-do list in the writing process. And even then, grammar's only role was to correct pesky errors. I've encouraged Tom to take the risk of letting me help him teach grammar.

Here's how Tom felt about jumping into grammar instruction before he really felt that he knew what he was doing. (Note that throughout this book Tom's journal entries are signaled typographically by a different font.)

It's no secret: Grammar exists. So why did I, an avid reader and writer, so blatantly avoid it? In order to become a better teacher and a better student, I had to acknowledge that grammar is important but that I feel uncomfortable with it, and that without my help, generations of young readers will continue to struggle and feel as I do. Honestly, I feel funny even writing this. What will happen to me when the world finds out I never learned grammar?

Simply mention the word and my spine goes icy. Maybe it's my liberal nature; I don't like things too rigid. Maybe it's an acknowledgment that after years of sidestepping grammar's mazes and manuals with a crafty, personalized bag of tricks, I might have to admit I still have a lot to learn.

My reputation is on the line here. I'm a good teacher. I prepare my students with necessary skills while helping them realize how a better understanding of the English language coincides with a more fulfilling life. With some serious nudging, six years of teaching experience, and an open mind, I decide that it *is* time to face my grammar demons. Here goes.

Grammar, Day 1

I select "Communication Breakdown" by Led Zeppelin to wake up my first-period ninth graders. As its loud, staccato rhythms bounce off the walls and into their tired ears, I'm at the board writing: *Margaret slept*. They look baffled, not an unfamiliar sight, by the coupling of the blaring tune and the stark simplicity of the black phrase on the whiteboard.

They dutifully copy the sentence in a state of rote bliss; if only the entire lesson were notes on the board. . . . But, although this will keep them numb, it isn't how students really learn. I ask for two volunteers. "Who wants to be Margaret?" Jordan, an eager young man decked out in athletic apparel, raises his hand. He hops up and stands, awkwardly bouncing from one foot to the other, underneath the word *Margaret*. After some encouragement, Brittany, bright but subdued, becomes our *slept*. Still lethargic despite my attempt with the song, she puts two desks together and exclaims, "Well, if I'm sleeping, I can lie down, right?" We are on our way.

Tom is on his way to getting grammar instruction into his classroom. He's started by establishing that his students are already experts in grammar: They are human. And they are humans who speak English. So they know that the two-word sentence is about something or someone who does, is, or has something. Tom has animated the process of learning grammar by having students act out its drama, a drama that is set in motion when subject meets verb.

I tell the students that *Margaret slept* is a simple sentence and that by looking closely at its components we will build a foundation for feeling comfortable and confident with more complex sentences. My enthusiasm is muted by uncertainty. I know that the lesson must seem trivial to them and that it has potential for myriad uncertainties. Somewhere in south Jersey, my mother, a lifelong elementary school teacher, is guilt-tripping me

for my disregard of her efforts in that setting.

I ask the rest of the class to divide the sentence into parts. They decide that *Margaret* is the subject, to which I add on the board, “what we are talking about,” and that *slept* is the verb, or predicate, to which I add on the board, “what the subject is doing.” They are thrilled with their amazing talent.

Breaking out a bag of candy, I ask the students to come up with as many ways as possible to change the subject without changing the basic meaning of the sentence. As a reward, and to help maintain their first-period performance, I offer a piece of candy to the student who produces the best result. Walking the room, I notice Jessica has written *She* and is now avoiding eye contact with the entire room while gnawing at the end of her pen. Maybe we’re not rehashing so much after all. Maybe she really can use a refresher course. Penny has a lengthy, meticulously organized list including *she*, *her*, *I*, *the woman*, and *the girl*. Penny gets the candy, but so does everyone else. We are ready for the next step.

Tom didn’t make the common mistake of announcing something like: “We’re going to start a grammar unit today. Now, I know you’ve had this before, but you guys are still making the same mistakes again and again, and we’re going to learn this once and for all.” Or: “OK, guys, we’re going to start doing some grammar. I know, I know. I don’t like this any more than you do, but the sooner we get through it, the sooner we can get back to the good stuff.” Tom said nothing about learning grammar. He just started right in by inviting the students to play.

The students are upbeat about the activity, seemingly oblivious to its simplicity thanks to the active, independent, and open-ended nature of the tasks. I too am excited by their energy and focus. I explain that every sentence is, in fact, some version of this sentence: Every sentence connects something we are talking about (subject) to what we are saying about it (predicate). In other words, every word falls into the subject camp or the predicate camp.

We review their lists of possible *Margaret* substitutes, writing them over our “subject” model (Jordan), discussing as we go. To add to the conversation, which remains informal and unthreatening, I tell them that by saying “It is true that . . .” in front of a sentence we can always determine whether any group of words *is* a sentence. This leads to an even livelier atmosphere as students offer fragments to test the theory. With things going so well, I know I’m headed for a fall, and soon enough I’m dropping like a rock. Esther realizes that sentences that begin with words like *but* don’t

“sound right.” I have no immediate answer, knowing only that these words are called conjunctions, and graciously accept defeat the only way I have ever known—through honesty. I tell the students that I will consult Mrs. Benjamin for clarification. Surprisingly, they don’t challenge my knowledge base, and for a moment we are intellectual equals, exploring learning together.

Get used to being unable to answer students’ questions. It’s what happens when you are teaching grammar in an interesting way. It means that students are curious, and it means you get the chance to model the thinking and learning process.

A little rattled by the awkwardness I wanted so badly to avoid, I press on to the final activity of the lesson. I ask the students to team up with a partner. Using an excerpt from their own writing folders, students are to choose any sentence and break it into its basic two parts. Invigorated and confident, they get to work. After five minutes, we reconvene to discuss their findings. Each pair writes one sentence on the board and, using a different-colored marker, identifies the division. With the period winding down, we experiment with the two parts using the “It is true that . . .” model. It is clear to them that the subject or predicate alone doesn’t make a sentence.

So my first foray into teaching grammar is a success. I can’t help but wonder if I experienced such lessons in my own school days. How did they seep into my writing and reading skills without leaving any trace in my memory? Nonetheless, I know that my students are on their way up the grammar ladder that has always eluded me. The simplicity of the activity is overshadowed by the students’ confidence and understanding of the concepts, coupled with the firm foundation established.

Establishing that a sentence has two parts, a subject and a predicate, may not seem like much, nor is it likely to be a new idea. What’s different and important here is that Tom has begun to make grammar instruction interesting and accessible. He’s turned it into active, animated learning, building his own confidence along the way.

Grammar, Day 2

I have about twenty minutes to work with today. The second half of the period will have us working on an essay and some questions about bias-free language. But for today’s “sentence-breaking” activity, we have LEGOs!

So again I write *Margaret slept* on the board. I keep one eye on the students' faces, looking for pained expressions. To my surprise, there are none. If anything, students appear pleased to see something comfortable and familiar. I know this is a good sign, but my real excitement is about my soon-to-be-revealed bag of tricks. Leaning down behind my desk, I bring out a colorful bag of LEGOs, on loan from Amy. Immediately, the boys become voluble, barely able to stay in their seats. My own gender bias is soon exposed—the girls act the same way!

I give each student one purple and one yellow LEGO piece. I explain that purple represents the subject and yellow represents the predicate. This point is further illustrated when I hold up the two colors and alternately repeat “Margaret” (holding purple), “subject” (holding purple), “slept” (holding yellow), “predicate” (holding yellow). There is a buzz in the room. Emily and Alice fiddle with the familiar shapes; Tim is crashing them together, imitating his younger self. Everyone is curious about the lesson.

Because grammar is all about components, color-coded manipulatives that fit together make the perfect abstract representational system. Even though Tom's grammar instruction is only two days old, students have forgotten all about exercise books, prescriptions, and things that are “wrong” to say.

I ask the students to write a quick story that includes four to six two-word sentences. I explain that they must use actions verbs for the activity to work. I'm worried that this will spark an uncomfortable conversation about concepts that I can't articulate, but the students are already absorbed in thought and discussions with their peers. On the board, I write, *He shoots. He scores. He celebrates.* My example is clear enough; they scribble in their notebooks, eager to impress with creativity. I give students about five minutes to perfect their stories, continually reminding them to use the LEGOs as a visual.

After five minutes, I don't need to ask for volunteers. They're ready to go. It's a teacher's dream—a sea of hands. Noah, always the gentleman, offers, *He eats. He gags. He pukes. He sleeps.* His peers agree, laughing, that this is a fine example. Most students are right on track, but a few realize that their verbs don't seem to work. Is my blood pressure rising? Will my inadequacies surface? How will I respond when I don't know the answer?

Students are learning an essential concept in grammar: patterns. They will be in position later to learn that a verb that can fulfill the predi-

cate slot in a two-slot pattern is an intransitive verb. Right now, they think they are just having fun, but they're imprinting in their minds a visual that represents a pattern.

Kirby and Nicole, decked out in matching volleyball attire, have been working together. Their story reads: *She smells. She bathes. She is clean.* Wait a second! We all realize that something is wrong. Besides violating my two-word sentence rule, their story exposes some interesting issues. We review linking verbs and sense verbs, openly discussing how these verbs differ from action verbs. I don't have all the answers, but we reach logical conclusions and the students let me stay.

This is a typical example of how teachers have to trust that the students are going to trust them when the pattern goes out of control a bit. Patterns are strong. Whether or not we can name things, we can recognize when something is outside the pattern. Right now, Tom's students don't know how to name patterns and slots. But it's interesting that they recognize that the *be* pattern sentence is not the same as the Subject–Intransitive Verb pattern.

Clearing this up is a bit of a battle, but I'm able to regain focus through another related activity: sentence branching. Of course, my lesson on bias-free language is shot, but I'm running with a teachable moment and that is always a good idea.

Time is getting short. I have about ten minutes left in the period, and so I model the final piece of the lesson for the class. I write three sentences on the board:

1. After a night of cramming for a chemistry exam, Margaret slept.
2. Margaret slept, dreaming of her long-lost love.
3. Margaret, the campaign organizer who worked so tirelessly, slept.

I ask students to talk with a partner about each sentence, noting how they are different. Then we review their findings. Surprisingly, students realize that we have simply moved the subject and verb to different locations in the sentence. With time running short, I explain the three ways in which these sentences branch: The first, with the delayed subject, is called left-branching. The second, with its subject-verb up front, is called right-branching. And the third, with its separation between subject and verb, is called mid-branching.

We hold up purple and yellow LEGOs and repeat each sentence, moving the pieces through the air. I also add that a subject and a verb should never be separated by a (single) comma.

For homework, I ask the students to rewrite their stories using sentences that represent the three different ways sentences can branch. They leave, reluctantly relinquishing their LEGOs. I'm feeling pretty good about this lesson, knowing that, if nothing else, students have a new, conscious tool to use in their writing to create varied sentences.

Right here is where the lesson takes the leap into rhetorical grammar instruction. The students, conscious of the two-part nature of the simplest of all possible sentences, are able to manipulate positioning of the subject-verb core in three different ways. Without strong consciousness of this basic grammatical concept, such comprehension of syntax would not have been possible.

Not bad for a beginner, is it? Tom began in the simplest way possible, with the two-word sentence. Using its grammatical structure as a foundation, and relying on his students' unconscious knowledge about sentences, he built up to the sophisticated concept of three ways for sentences to branch based on subject-verb placement and modifiers.

Tom's lesson has implications for reading comprehension as well: The reader has to link subject and verb in order to make sense of the sentence. As readers, we usually do this unconsciously. But there are times, such as when reading long, intricate text, when we need to call forth our ability to get the core of the sentence—its subject and verb—to step forward. Readers who can use this bit of grammatical information consciously have one more strategy to assist them with reading complex text.

Tom, a novice at teaching grammar but an exemplary teacher of English, is on his way to learning what he was never taught about grammar. He's decided to teach grammar despite the gaps in his own knowledge. This is a risk, but I want Tom to understand that many teachers who "learned grammar" as students "learned" it in such a stiff and sterile manner that they are not necessarily in a better position than he is to teach grammar in a way that makes it come alive. Tom has begun to teach grammar despite his discomfort with his own knowledge of it, but at least he doesn't have to *unlearn* the model of traditional pedagogy.

Grammar, Day 3

"Today, we're going to look at the sentence closely, focusing on the subject and predicate." The approach is a little repetitive, but I think the students will like the additional knowledge, especially when they get to test it out. I begin with some notes. On the board, I write: *A subject, together with*

a predicate, is called a *CLAUSE*. If that *CLAUSE* can stand alone as a sentence, we call it an *INDEPENDENT CLAUSE*. Next I write: *Part of a clause is called a PHRASE. A PHRASE does not have both a subject and predicate.* The students already look bored, and I realize that notes and grammar are not the best combination. Jordan and Mark are tapping their pens in some secret rhythm; Alison and Brittany are whispering about something. You can't blame them; it's first period and I'm giving notes on grammar. They need real text!

Time for quick thinking. I throw on a song and run over to my bookshelf. "Hey, Jordan, do you know this clause and phrase stuff?" I ask as I'm thumbing through a copy of *The Hobbit*. "Yea, I got it, Mr. O."

"Alison, you got it too?"

"Yep. Are we having a test?" With this, I'm sure they need examples.

Before they know it, I've got a sentence on the board. It reads, *Thorin had been caught much faster than they had.* It is a little sentence but sure to test their understanding. *The Hobbit* proved a good call. Ashleigh, who had been rather quiet thus far, shouts, "I love that book!"

I ask students to identify and label each clause and phrase of the sentence. They begin to whisper nervously. I repeat: "That was *independently*." They settle in and begin to copy the sentence into their notebooks. Mark, the first to finish, shoots his hand up: "*Thorin had been caught* is a clause because it has a subject and a verb, and the rest is a phrase because it doesn't." Most of the class has the same answer, which of course is fine. But I realize that the simple little sentence has some secrets that these students don't quite grasp. I want them to see that . . . *they had* must be some kind of clause because it has a subject and a verb. So I ask them to identify the nouns and verbs in the sentence. "Pronouns are nouns, right?" asks Brittany.

"Yes. . . . Well, yes and no. Pronouns are words that stand in for nominals." They look a little bewildered. I regroup, realizing that the period is winding down and I haven't even skimmed the surface of my lesson. Grammar lessons have a way of getting away from you.

Yes, they do, but that's when you know you're "doing it right." What's going on in Tom's class is a wonderful discovery process, leading students to ask interesting questions, questions that stump you. Are pronouns nouns? Well, they do function as nouns do, but traditional grammarians don't have it right when they define a pronoun as a word that "takes the place of a noun." In fact, a pronoun takes the place of—stands in for, if you will—not necessarily a noun but a *nominal*. Big difference. A *nominal* is any structure that functions as a noun phrase does,

such as a subject or direct object or object of a preposition: *Flying kites is fun* (a gerund as subject); *I wonder where Joe lives* (a noun clause as direct object). Although traditional grammarians don't use the term *noun phrase* or *nominal*, these are very important terms to start using because nouns tend to appear with other words (modifiers and determiners) that stick, grammatically speaking, together. I think of a noun phrase as a noun with its entourage. The *noun plus entourage* is usually announced by a determiner (articles—*a, an, the*; possessive nouns and pronouns—*Tom's, his, her, its*, etc.; demonstrative pronouns—*this, that, these, those*; indefinite pronouns—*some, every*, all numbers, etc.). A determiner tells you, "You are at the beginning of a noun phrase." That noun phrase is going to be replaceable by *it* or *they/he/him*, etc.

"OK, we've covered a lot of ground today. Let's just try a few more sentences with the clause and phrase concept. We need to remember that grammar has many rules, and they're not all going to come at once. Let's be patient, and we really can grasp each one before moving on."

"Mr. Oliva, are we gonna have tests on this stuff?"

"We might. When we're ready. Now let's pull a few more sentences from *The Hobbit*. Any suggestions?"

Grammar, Day 4

To start class today, I ask the students to recall their knowledge from the last lesson. I give Sam a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* and ask him to pull out any two sentences. This title excites the students; they've either heard of it or read it. Today I want them to understand where nouns and verbs are, relative to each other, in a sentence. On the board I write: *A subject is a noun, noun phrase, or pronoun*. While they copy this down, I scan their faces. Overall, the mood is passive, but some students wear confusion like a scar. "What I'd like to do now is search for some nouns, noun phrases, or pronouns." Searching appeals to them. "Look for *the*. When you see *the*, you're at the beginning of a noun phrase—and will soon see a noun."

Sam offers this sentence: "*The cab I had was a real old one that smelled like someone'd just tossed his cookies in it.*"

Some work with neighboring students, others alone. Corey is the first to raise his hand. "The nouns are *cab* and *cookies*," he says triumphantly. Instantly, other hands go up. I call on Erica. "What about *one*?"

I explain: "Actually, *one* is performing a special task here. It's renaming—completing—the noun *cab*."

“So it’s a noun?”

“Yes, it’s a noun.” She smiles.

“*It* is a pronoun, right?” Alicia asks.

“Yes. Can you tell me what noun or noun phrase *it* is replacing?”

“*the cab.*”

“So then, we can see that *the cab* is a noun phrase.”

Now I can tell them that *the* is a determiner, a word that signals that a noun is about to arrive. “Determiners answer the questions ‘Which one?’ or ‘How many?’ or ‘Whose?’ We use determiners in English to mark nouns.” I write: *We always had the same meal on Saturday nights at Pencey.* Nearly every hand goes up. I call on one of the shy students: “Perry, can you tell me a determiner that is in this sentence?” When he answers with *the*, I ask him what other words might fit into that slot and be a determiner. “Well, you could put *a* there.”

“You could. What else? Remember, ‘Which one?’ ‘How many?’ ‘Whose?’”

I erase *the* from the board and draw a blank line, indicating that a variety of words could fit into that slot and be a determiner.

What Tom is doing here is getting students to begin to understand a key concept: slotting. The English language is a slotted system, wherein certain kinds of words can fit into certain places. Determiners can be articles (*the, a, an*), numbers and ordinals (*seven, seventh*), possessive nouns and possessive pronouns (*Judy’s, her*), and demonstrative pronouns (*this, that, these, those*). The difference between adjectives and determiners, both noun modifiers, is a fuzzy area. However, the important thing to know is that both adjectives and determiners signal nouns.

So far, Tom has been teaching grammar to his “regular” ninth-grade classes. In the following journal entry, he describes teaching a grammar lesson for the first time to his tenth-grade honors students.

I’m standing by my desk after school putting off some grading, instead “planning” by shuffling papers into folders, straightening things up, tidying up my mind, when Jessica, Morgan, and Jill appear at the door. They are zealous tenth-grade honors students and their energy is inspiring, even at this point in the day. They have a youthful glow and waste no time in speaking their collective mind.

Morgan starts: “Mr. Oliva, when are we gonna do grammar?” I’m caught off guard, but I smile. These girls are serious. They want grammar and they want it now!

“We did grammar last year, but we need more,” explains Jessica, one of my brightest students, with a keen sense of literary analysis and a talent for quality writing. “If we’re studying essays, don’t you think we should start at the beginning? I mean really look at the sentences first?” continues Morgan.

That students balk at learning grammar is a myth. Many bright students like those who visit Tom know very well that something in their education is being left out. These are competitive kids who care a great deal about their SAT and ACT test scores and who intend to apply to the nation’s top colleges. They are keenly aware that grammar is important, and they are obviously confident in their ability to learn it. So here they are with their hands out.

Of course, they’re right, albeit a little forward. Why haven’t I integrated grammar instruction into my lessons? What am I waiting for? To be honest, I’m concerned that teaching these students grammar will leave me even more vulnerable to my own limited knowledge base. I picture myself as a dry fish flapping about on the floor in the front of the room—a subject for a head, a predicate for a tail.

“Well, um . . . you know it’s hard to fit everything in what with the state exam in June and the required research paper. But we’ll get to it. We’ll get to it soon.”

That was my impetus to decide to do a grammar lesson every Friday. Right now, I’m teaching a novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, with two classes and essays that stress organizational strategies with the other classes. The students should enjoy a change of pace at the end of the week—I just hope I can keep it interesting. This setup will also allow me to use authentic texts in our grammar study.

Picking out appropriate text passages proves challenging. The writing is more complex than it first appears, and I worry that students will be overwhelmed. At the same time, I see the immediate potential of studying grammar through literature. I’m hoping that doing so will change the way they look at literature. In fact, that’s exactly what happens for me; while planning, I’m seeing the writing in a different way. With a mixture of confidence and trepidation, I dive in, probing the sentences for parts of speech. What I don’t know I find in books or in the expertise of my colleagues. This is called learning.

After a few hours spent identifying the “perfect” passages and getting the ideas typed up, I have an activity sheet for my first Grammar Friday. It looks like this:

English 10 Honors
Grammar

Mr. Oliva

Introduction

Purpose

Grammar begins with realizing that a sentence is made of parts. Before naming these parts, you must develop an awareness of your own knowledge about the basics of grammar. Think of grammar as a Swiss Army knife. You see the different blades and tools. You will learn what each is called, what it can do, and how to use which element in different situations.

Directions

Below are excerpts from *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Divide each sentence into parts that make sense to you. It might help to know the following: A PHRASE is two or more words that stick together. Grammarians define a phrase as two or more words in sequence that form a syntactic unit that is less than a complete sentence. An example of a phrase is *in the doghouse*. A CLAUSE is a group of words that contains a subject and a predicate (verb). A simple sentence is called a simple sentence because it contains one clause. Sentences with more than one clause are called compound or complex (or compound-complex) sentences; we will learn more about these kinds of sentences later.

Passages

1. "You can see what he is thinking. There is the mean little hut on the moors, the hard work on the hearth from morning till night in the heat, the miserable pay, the dirty laborer's clothes" (Remarque 79).
2. "Towards morning, while it is still dark, there is some excitement. Through the entrance rushes in a swarm of fleeing rats that try to storm the walls. Torches light up the confusion. Everyone yells and curses and slaughters. The madness and despair of many hours unloads itself in this outburst. Faces are distorted, arms strike out, and the beasts scream; we just stop in time to avoid attacking one another" (Remarque 108).

In this simple but powerful lesson, students take the first steps toward thinking like linguistic grammarians. As Tom grows more sophisticated in his knowledge about grammar, he will be able to name the different kinds of phrases and clauses in increasingly refined ways. Once we can identify phrases and clauses, we can see how they can be expanded or condensed, moved to change where the reader's focus is going to land, replicated to produce parallel structure, and set apart from other words in the sentence by various marks of punctuation.

As students walk in, grammar gets a mixed reaction. Some students fear this stuff. (Hmmm. . . . I can relate.) Others are eager and confident. Many students immediately relate the terminology to what they've learned in their World Language classes: "Are we gonna do transitive verbs? We did those in Spanish. I know how to do those!"

I hand out the activity sheets and read over the introduction. I take some time to explain the difference between a phrase and a clause, which eases some tension. But Patricia, one of the sharpest thinkers in the room, cries out above the brewing hum: "How are we supposed to divide the sentences if we don't know grammar? I don't get the whole phrase and clause thing!"

I say: "I understand that grammar makes some of us uncomfortable. That's exactly why we're doing it. You're all at different levels, but you know a lot more than you think you do."

The students gather into naturally forming groups. I'm careful to let them find their own way. Most join up with peers on their level and begin working out a system that makes sense to them. Everybody's trying. It's an exciting atmosphere. They're making their own meaning from the task, and they have lots of questions: "Can we break the sentence after the comma?"; "Do we divide the sentence into a subject and a predicate?"; "Do you want the parts to be even?"; "Where do you put *and*?"

I keep telling them: "Just make divisions where you think the sentence breaks into parts. Just form word clusters."

Forming word clusters is a fine way to begin teaching grammar because it gets students thinking syntactically. "Thinking within the sentence" is a substantial habit of mind for the student of grammar. Once you have word clusters written on the board, you can determine which are phrases and which are clauses.

If the clause can stand on its own two feet without any other words and without hitching up to any other clause, then it is an independent clause, aka a complete sentence in its own right. Clauses that

need to be hitched up to another clause are called subordinate or dependent clauses. The next level would be establishing what kinds of clauses we have:

- If a clause gives information that answers the question that adjectives answer (“What kind?”), then it is an adjectival clause.
- If a clause gives information that answers the questions that adverbs answer (“Where? When? Why? To what extent? In what manner?”), then it is an adverbial clause.
- If a clause fills a slot that a noun phrase generally fills, and if it is replaceable by the word *it*, then it is a nominal.

As for phrases, we can categorize them as well. The broadest categories would be noun phrases and verb phrases.

Let’s look at what Tom has accomplished. He’s gotten students to see how grammar instruction is accessible and fun, that it is not about earning membership in an elite club of those who “speak correctly.” He’s overcome his own trepidation by beginning slowly and relying on his students’ innate ability to use what they already know about grammar to bring unconscious knowledge into the conscious level so that they can advance. And he’s established that first step in getting students to think like linguists: “Just form word clusters.”

Once students know that grammar advancement begins with forming word clusters, they will soon be ready to name those clusters. Then they will learn how to expand and compress these clusters, to move them around, and to replicate them.

The next chapter explores the difference between the limited view of grammar instruction as a means to correct error and the wider view of it as a means for creating interesting, precise sentences.

Engaging Grammar

Does grammar instruction have to elicit moans and groans from students and teachers alike? Only when it's taught the old-fashioned way: as a series of rules to follow and errors to "fix" that have little or no connection to practical application or real-world writing.

Teacher, researcher, and consultant Amy Benjamin challenges the idea of "skill and drill" grammar in this lively, engaging, and immensely practical guide. Her enlightened view of grammar is grounded in linguistics and teaches us how to make informed decisions about teaching grammar—how to move beyond fixing surface errors to teaching how grammar can be used as the building blocks of sentences to create meaning.

In addition to Benjamin's sage advice, you'll find the voice of Tom Oliva—an experienced teacher inexperienced in teaching grammar—who writes a teacher's journal chronicling how the concepts in this book can work in a real classroom. The perspectives of Benjamin and Oliva combine to provide a full picture of what grammar instruction *can* be: an exciting and accessible way to take advantage of students' natural exuberance about language.

Although she does not advocate for teaching to the test, Benjamin acknowledges the pressures students face when taking high-stakes tests such as the SAT and ACT. Included is a chapter on how to improve students' editing skills to help prepare them for the short-answer portion of these tests.

By using sentence patterns, mapping, visuals, and manipulatives, Benjamin and Oliva present an approach to grammar instruction that is suitable for a variety of student populations.

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