ENGAGING GRAMMAR

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR *Real* CLASSROOMS

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Preface to the Second Edition

This book is meant to invigorate the way you teach grammar, to give you insights about its value to your students, and to make grammar instruction interesting for all involved. I hope to accomplish these goals by encouraging you to see that grammar instruction is closely related to language play and to the natural interest about language that humans have. I'd like to see you and your students take risks, ask questions of one another, wrestle with uncertainties, argue over changing rules, splash around in the fun of language. I'd like to see you blow the cobwebs off the chandelier of the dusty old grammar that was full of "Don't do this!" and "Never do that!" This book explains how you can teach grammar using rhythm and patterns of authentic literature, games, and conversation rather than through drill. You will learn how to teach grammar by analyzing and modeling well-written sentences created by both professionals and novices rather than finding and correcting errors in controlled sentences found in "exercises." I will help you give students the tools and terminology they need to understand how language works. By doing so, we empower students with choices, choices that match the speaker/writer to the hearer/reader and the purpose of the message.

You should use this book sequentially, moving from part to part as you teach throughout the course of one year. Each of the chapters takes you one level higher in your understanding of grammar and how to integrate it into the teaching you already do in literature and language. You need not reach for workbooks from which to assign practice exercises. All you will need is the fine literature you already teach and the rich speaking and writing opportunities you already offer. You will be integrating grammar into your existing reading and writing instruction.

The first thing you'll need to do is to realize the extraordinary amount you (and your students) already know about grammar. You (and they) already know this extraordinary amount *not* because you are an English teacher, or an elementary school teacher, but because you are a human being. Regardless of the particular native language we speak, we humans have a remarkable capacity to understand how words are put together to make sense. You already understand

how word order affects meaning and how words change their forms to suit the sentences in which they find themselves. Right after you give yourself credit for being a natural expert in grammar, let your students know about *their* expertise—and please include our English language learners (ELLs) in that statement. Our ELLs come to us with natural expertise in their native languages, which they will apply as they transition into English. I say much more about teaching English grammar to ELLs throughout the book.

If there's one thing students come to us knowing a lot about, it's grammar, even though they aren't consciously aware of it. If there's one thing they have fun with and are interested in, it's language.

You may have a background in and experience with traditional grammar. If you don't, that's fine; I'll hold your hand. But if you do, you'll need to understand how the system of grammar that I'm talking about in this book differs a bit from a traditional system of describing English grammar—essentially, how *linguistic grammar*, the term I use throughout this book, differs from traditional grammar. Others use different terms, such as *structural grammar*, *structural linguistics*, *phrase-structure grammar*, *cognitive grammar*, *modern grammar*, or *contextual grammar* (I made that last one up, but I actually do like it). Linguistic grammarians study language as a changing, fluid social contract; their categories and definitions are flexible, and in some cases their designations are more refined than those of the traditionalists. Traditional grammarians believe firmly (too firmly) in the paradigm of eight parts of speech. They concentrate on formal rules and regulations of what they consider "Standard" English. As a result, many people are put off by the very idea of grammar instruction. It has the air of condescension, privilege born of social class, exclusivity, institutionalized snobbery. On the other hand, linguistic grammarians love language in all of its quirky manifestations and because of the wild and crazy things we can get it to do. I am a member of this club. I want to share my love for the varieties of the English language with teachers and students *while at the same time teaching them the ways of the Standard English dialect.*

Let me be clear: Standard English is a dialect—not an ideal form. It is the dialect that is expected in formal discourse, even as the rules of formal discourse change right before our eyes.

Standard English is the dialect associated with education, seriousness, professionalism, legal documents, and ritual. When laypeople and educators speak of "learning grammar," it is Standard English to which they refer. Tests (such as the SAT) that seek to sort individuals into "acceptable" and "unacceptable" bins do their sorting in large part on the basis of whether the student demonstrates proficiency in Standard English. Our good intentions to teach students to function in Standard English should not attempt to steal away or beat down a

student's own home dialect, any more than teaching someone to cook a Thanksgiving dinner would do so at the expense of that person's ability to prepare a delicious (and equally complex) meal for folks who don't celebrate Thanksgiving. In fact, just as we savor the cuisine of ethnicities other than our own, we must educate our students' linguistic palates to help them broaden their knowledge about the exuberant variety of the English language. Standard English and regional, ethnic dialects are by no means mutually exclusive, any more than a penchant for candlelit dinners would preclude one's enjoyment of a great backyard barbecue. Everything depends on the social expectations of the occasion. Standard English serves the need for uniformity, when uniformity is called for. Think of it this way: If you were on the dinner committee for an organization consisting of people from a variety of regions and ethnicities, you wouldn't select a niche cuisine; you'd go for something that would seem familiar to *most* folks.

Part I of this book, Chapters 1–4, gives you the background you'll need to understand linguistic grammar principles and to appreciate how students can use their internal grammar knowledge to advantage as they come to understand how their language works. Unfortunately, many people think of grammar in terms of right and wrong, even good and bad, concerned only with avoiding or correcting errors. As a result, both teachers and students often flinch at the idea of grammar instruction. However, rest assured that you don't need to be a "grammarian" to help your students recognize their own natural expertise in grammar.

In Chapter 2, you will learn how to view grammatical information as a body of knowledge that students can use to generate interesting, accurate language, rather than just as a body of knowledge that helps you avoid or correct "mistakes." Chapter 3 gives you a road map to the elements of linguistic grammar, i.e., an updated paradigm based more on how the English language actually works than on the "old" way of understanding English grammar, which was based on Latin and which therefore was not the proper model for English. Hence, all those exceptions to language "rules"!

Chapter 4 explains why, if taught in accordance with the principles of engaging pedagogy, grammar is easy to learn. In fact, your students already know it. They just need to name what they already know so that you can have an informed and detailed conversation about language.

Part II begins with Chapter 5, which addresses errors in usage and mechanics in formal and informal English. I explore formal and informal registers and how educated people toggle between the two, based on the intended audience and message. Then I offer some practical advice about how to address common errors that we find in student writing.

Chapter 6 takes you through the kinds of information your students need for high-stakes standardized tests. These tests usually include an "editing" section in which the test-taker has to demonstrate competence in the surface features of Standard Written English (SWE). Because these tests are gatekeepers for colleges and some careers, it's imperative that their secrets—tips and tricks as well as more significant knowledge—be revealed to everyone, not just those who can afford private tutors and courses.

Chapter 7 explains rhetorical grammar—in other words, how grammatical choices affect clarity. Rhetorical grammar shifts the paradigm from error correction to applying grammatical principles to elevate style with awareness and control.

In Chapter 8, I lay out a scope and sequence for a coherent K–11 grammar curriculum. This chapter includes age-appropriate ways to name grammatical terms as well as ideas for effective pedagogy.

Introduction

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"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 terminology is so confusing. Do they really have to learn all the formal names for things?"

I hear comments like these all the time from teachers 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 (NCTE) 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, diverse, 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 and clearly express what we know about* 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. In Chapter 7, "Rhetorical Grammar," you can explore this idea of using grammatical patterns as a creative toolbox to help your students compose sophisticated sentences with all kinds of flourishes. Used intentionally, some of the grammatical patterns that are used to elevate writing (inverted adjectives or appositives, for example) meld right into the list of stylistic techniques that we consider rhetorical devices.

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, social, and highly engaging. And, best of all, they are based on an astonishing amount of prior knowledge. That prior knowledge—the students' internal grammar exper-

tise—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? 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 explain and analyze 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.

We need scope and sequence. Terminology is powerful, so 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 (a noun's job can be as a subject, object, or complement). 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, linguistic 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 linguistic grammar, because, like your 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 and as we work through a writing piece. 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 by reading and internalized by writing.

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 their 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 authentic 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 wood-chuck. (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.

◎ Practical Advice for Real Classrooms

Let's go back to those teacher comments I referred to at the beginning of this chapter. Let's see how we can turn negatives into positives.

> **"I know I should be teaching more grammar,**
> **but I just can't make it interesting."**

Admittedly, people are interested in different things, and it's hard to find something that interests everyone. That said, active learning is interesting and memorable. Active learning happens when we play, create, discover, hear and tell stories, and solve problems. People are interested in themselves, and in human nature. Taught in ways that I recommend in this book, grammar is about both of these things: self and others. I, along with folks who know a lot more about linguistics than I do, argue that humans have not only an inborn capacity to learn how to create meaning out of words (which is what grammar is), but also an inborn love for doing it.

In his guidebook for teachers, *Doing Grammar*, Max Morenberg likens how humans naturally feel about grammar to how cats feel about stalking prey and dolphins feel about swimming: "We are born to love language and everything associated with it—rhythm, rhyme, word meanings, grammar" (v). What we don't love is the way grammar is usually taught—as a bunch of stuffy rules, useless terminology, grouchy admonitions, and hard tests, eliciting frowns, grimaces, rolled eyes, or just that checked-out, let-me-out-of-here expressions of pure boredom.

None of that pain, anguish, and tedium to learn grammar is necessary. We can and should teach grammar from the premise that acquiring language—sensing its patterns, enjoying its possibilities, playing with its impossibilities— is fun and satisfying. The practical advice for real classrooms you will find in this book is fun and satisfying because it is sociable and open-ended, inviting the students to play. There's everything right about reinforcing knowledge of parts of speech with Mad Libs, everything right about creating nonsense sentences that make sense grammatically but not semantically, everything right about devising nonapproved words by verbing nouns and nouning verbs.

You'll know that you are teaching grammar engagingly when the questions get interesting: *Who decides what the rules are? Why does language change? Why don't all languages put words in the same order? Why does my baby cousin put words together the way she does?*

Play: We think of games as being fun and engaging. They are, but only if players have confidence that they can win, or come close to winning, without humiliation. Steer clear of so-called grammar games that are really just fill-in-the-blank with the correct part of speech as a competition. Steer clear of games that are just races. Dive into grammar games that result in deeper familiarity with word order patterns, humor, wordplay, morphology, original or nonsense word-making and sentence-making. Dive into creative dramatics. Every chapter in this book offers ways to learn grammar through thoughtful play.

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

This concern reflects the habit of teaching grammar as an isolated topic, one that uses a series of unrelated sentences that conform to a given principle. In the classroom practice chapters, I describe ways of teaching grammar that are centered in quality literature and student writing.

In a text-centered grammar class, students look carefully at the writing of professionals as well as at their own writing (and that of their peers) and, guided by well-informed teachers, they notice, name, and apply the skills of successful

(and novice) writers. They then work at emulating techniques of the best writers. To accomplish this, students do learn the proper terminology for discussing word functions and sentence parts, but they learn these terms "on the job," while discussing and emulating authentic text, not in isolation.

To teach grammar in a text-centered way, you have students use inductive reasoning (the scientific method) to figure out the rules and patterns of English. Rather than using a separate grammar book that lays out definitions, rules, examples, and drills, text-centered grammar employs the authentic language of quality literature that students are already reading for meaning.

Teaching grammar through a text-centered approach begins in the simplest way possible: find a sentence that you like because of the word choice (diction) and how the words are put together. No exercises. No error-finding. No answer key. Just you, the students, and a well-written text or work in progress. This is sophisticated teaching because it is organic: when the students put forth a sentence they like, which they can do as individuals, in pairs, or in small groups, you have to be ready and willing to teach grammatical principles based on that sentence. At first you will probably have to do homework to learn what to teach about that sentence. Over time, you will build capacity to the point where you can teach something valuable about any sentence on the spot. I suggest that you collect three or four sentences and then winnow them down to the one that you feel has the most potential, given your level of knowledge.

"The students in my district have never learned grammar.
I wouldn't know where to begin."

Teachers tell me that they just can't rely on their students having a base of common grammatical knowledge at any grade level. Formal, coherent grammar instruction may have been sidelined, deferred, intermittent, ineffective, or just abandoned on the belief that grammar is "caught, not taught." But it's irrelevant *why* students don't know much beyond memorized (not understood) definitions of a few parts of speech and some scattered, half-formed beliefs about punctuation. You have students sitting in front of you who need to learn grammar, and you need to start somewhere.

Use this approach: "I know you may have learned or heard of this before, but we're going to learn it in a new way to help you learn more or remember what you forgot. If you do remember this information, I'm going to help you use it to be better readers and writers."

My advice: begin where you think the information will be most useful. For example, rather than teaching, yet again, that a noun is a word that names a person, place, or thing, think about teaching nouns because of how this knowledge can be applied: to create a good mix of generalities and specifics by using

the right combination of common, proper, and abstract nouns and to notice how excellent writers do this with their nouns. Rather than having students underline the subject once and the predicate twice, teach them to create readable, fast-moving text by following the principle of keeping the subject as short as possible, getting to the verb quickly. Rather than just telling them to "elaborate," teach them to add detail by expanding noun phrases by adding modifiers (adjectives, prepositional phrases, adjective phrases, adjective clauses) both before and after a noun. Teach them that nouns and their modifiers create imagery, can be moved for effect within a sentence, function as a unit that is replaceable by the word *it*, if singular, and *they*, if plural. Teach them that creating appositives is a great way to be less wordy.

When it comes to correcting surface errors, it's good to have a focus, rather than just saying, "Reread your draft and correct any errors that you find." You can use grammatical terminology to create a lens: capitalize your proper nouns, achieve subject-verb agreement and pronoun-antecedent agreement.

I know that at first it will seem as though you can't just jump in to application without reteaching definitions. The problems with doing this are (1) you would just be doing again what hasn't worked before, and (2) you will have spent time that you can't afford, and then you will feel that now you don't have time for the application. Trust that grammatical terms must be learned and are learned best (most durably) when put to immediate use.

"All the research shows that teaching grammar doesn't do any good. So why teach it?"

In 2002 NCTE issued a position statement titled "Some Questions and Answers about Grammar." This position statement was written by members of NCTE's Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) and approved by the general membership at its annual convention. The statement begins with a justification, not for teaching grammar, but for knowing it:

> Grammar is important because it is the language that makes it possible for us to talk about language. Grammar names the types of words and word groups that make up sentences not only in English but in any language. As human beings, we can put sentences together even as children—we can all *do* grammar.

The ability to "*do* grammar" does not require explicit instruction, at least not for native speakers, and arguably not for nonnative speakers of English either. But while we acquire the rules of grammar unconsciously through natural language acquisition, we need to be taught what to call words and word groups that can

be expanded upon, moved around, deleted, emphasized, or de-emphasized in a sentence that we are writing or reading.

It's not that "all the research shows that teaching grammar does no good." Rather, what NCTE's research shows is that grammar lessons are forgettable when they are irrelevant to authentic language experiences. In the field, I daresay that much of the thinking that grammar need not—*should* not— be taught arises from NCTE's 1985 position statement titled "Resolution on Grammar Exercises to Teach Speaking and Writing" in which this sentence is prominently and emphatically featured:

> Resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English affirm the position that the use of isolated grammar and use exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing, and that, in order to improve both of these, class time at all levels must be devoted to opportunities for meaningful listening, speaking, reading, and writing and that NCTE urge the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction.

To resolve the seeming contradictions between these two NCTE position statements, let's just say that "all the research" does not inveigh against *any* teaching of grammar. Rather, a limited, carefully chosen amount of grammar instruction should be taught using sound pedagogy, and principles should clearly and proximally connect to authentic language modes: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

"I'm very nervous about teaching grammar. I never learned it myself."

Understandable. But the answer to what should we do when we are unsure of the very content we are expected to teach is not to abjure teaching it at all. The answer is not to resort to an answer key to the kind of exercises we know to be ineffective. The answer is to consider yourself on a learning curve, begin where you are comfortable, and build from there. But don't pretend to your students that you know more than you do. If we want our students to be lifelong learners, teaching what you are newly learning is a chance to let them see what that looks like. Model yourself as a learner.

If you do have a substantial background in traditional or linguistic grammar, you may need to preassess your students to gauge where to begin with them. But don't be surprised to find disparities from student to student, reflecting the disparities in instruction from classroom to classroom. Try not to cling to the canard that "I learned it fine this way. Why can't they?" The fact is, even if you

were taught grammar in a traditional way and you did learn it, you have to admit that most people, including a large number of certified English teachers, don't have a firm grasp of what an adverb is and does (beyond the *ly* suffix), how to identify, let alone punctuate, clausal boundaries, or what the three kinds of verbals are and how they function.

I've provided professional development on grammar instruction to thousands of elementary and secondary teachers, and I've found them to fall into three categories: First, there are those who are excited to learn that there's a better way than drill-and-kill. These folks approach learning the grammar that was missing in their own education with enthusiasm. Then there's the intimidated group. Their goal for the day with me is to escape without their lack of knowledge exposed. They ask no questions and hope they are invisible. Then there's that third group, the resisters. They believe that if they don't know something, they don't have to know it, or that knowing it would somehow be bad for them. The fact that you are reading this book puts you in the first category—which means you are a learner.

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

Nope. The problem with this way of thinking is self-evident, yet many teachers still default to it. Paradoxically, when this ineffective method turns out to be ineffective, some teachers are not willing to give it up. It is to these teachers that NCTE's 1985 "detrimental effect" position statement was written, and it is as true today as it ever was.

"The terminology is so confusing. Do they really have to learn all these formal names for things?"

As English teachers, we should not be squeamish around, of all things, words. Terminology makes concepts easier to understand, not harder. It is likely the teachers who are uneasy around the terminology (because they don't know it), not the students. Our colleagues in the science department are not looking for another word to replace *photosynthesis.* Math teachers are not shying away from calling a parallelogram a parallelogram. Knowing a word allows us to file a concept away in our brains, hyperlinking it to related concepts and making it concrete and retrievable. The human brain is like a filing cabinet, and you can't file without labeling.

Okay, but aren't grammar terms more difficult than those of other disciplines, and why do we have to name gerunds if we are fully competent in using them, named or not? After all, don't toddlers use all of the parts of speech and sentence functions without knowing the names for them? Yes, but toddlers

aren't expected to talk *about* their language, as students of language are.

Now I'll stop making like I don't know what the problem is: The problem (one of them) with grammatical terminology is that many of the terms—*predicate*, *participle*, *gerund*—are not used in any other context. Learners cannot break them down into familiar parts that allow them to associate the parts with known words. That so many grammatical terms begin with the letter *p* doesn't help. And then there's the puzzlement that some grammatical terms—*perfect*, *clause*—are familiar in nongrammatical contexts that do not align comfortably with their grammatical meaning. In its grammatical context, the word *perfect* refers to the time frame (tense) of how a verb is used, having nothing to do with flawlessness. When we speak of a *clause* in a contract, we are referring to a section of the contract, not the grammatical structure of subject + predicate. An *absolute phrase* has nothing to do with the common meaning of the word *absolute*. A *particle*, grammatically speaking, is not a small piece of something, but a word that acts adverbially to create a phrasal verb such as *put up*, *turn down*, *fill in*, etc. A *nominal*, grammatically, is a group of words doing the function of a noun, and not an adjective meaning "in name only." We can add compound terms such as *present participle*, *prepositional phrase*, *adverbial clause* to the confusion. So, yes, grammatical terminology is confusing to the novice.

And it will remain confusing and off-putting if all we do is memorize the terms in order to identify one from another in a grammar exercise. The terms are useful and memorable only when repeated in a purposeful context and applied to making language more comprehensible and interesting.

But there's another approach, not used nearly enough, to making grammatical terminology memorable. Etymology illuminates meaning. The term *preposition*, for example, resists definition but clarifies itself through analysis. A *preposition* may be defined as a word that expresses the relationship between a noun or a pronoun, which is its object, and another part of the sentence. Clear? No. But let's break it down: *pre* (before) and *position*. Same with *appositive*, which is clearer when we understand that it has to do with placement (position).

When it comes to grammatical terms, think of 4*E*s: *examples*, *etymology*, *experience*, *exposure*. These, taken together and applied to authentic language, supplement definitions and lead to durable learning.

The chapters that follow will help you understand modern concepts of what English grammar is all about. These concepts differ somewhat from traditional grammar, which you and your students may or may not have learned. Effective grammar instruction is proficiency based, and the practical advice for real classrooms included in each chapter is designed to improve functionality and to encourage interest in the fascinating subject of human language in its forms, uses, and meaning.

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

Although she doesn't 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.

Amy Benjamin is a nationally recognized consultant specializing in improving student performance through language acquisition, grammar, literacy, and classroom conversation.