

Comp Quickreads

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“Teaching” Grammar and Style

Emphasizing Choice

A rhetorical approach to grammar and style shifts the emphasis from “rules” to “choice” with a writer’s choices determined by considerations such as purpose, audience, and genre. Even grammatical error can be a rhetorical choice, as evidenced by proliferation of sentence fragments in young-adult fiction. A sentence fragment is certainly still a grammatical error, but in certain contexts rhetorical effect trumps grammatical correctness.

The key of course is helping students make informed choices and recognize the consequences of those choices. By making choices instead of following rules, the writer exercises independence but also accepts responsibility.

Grammar in the Classroom

Here are a few of the approaches mentioned by participants:

- Mini-lessons tied to peer review
- “Problem Sentence” handouts, with samples drawn from student essays
- “User tours” of a handbook—help students find help for their specific concerns
- “Read aloud” strategies to call attention to clarity problems and sentence boundary issues
- Another “read aloud” strategy is to have students use a screen reader on their computer to read back their essays to them

The place of grammar instruction in the composition classroom was the topic of our most recent Composition Conversation. One might ask, “Place?” and assume that direct instruction in grammar either has no place or not only has a place, but a central place, in the writing classroom. These perspectives mirror, in fact, the research on grammar and writing instruction which has been vexingly mixed, starting with the 1963 Braddock report frequently cited as the beginning of the revolt against grammar instruction. For the participants, however, the important question was not whether grammar and style should be taught, but how best to teach it. All agreed that the most successful approaches worked directly from the student’s own writing. What also emerged was an emphasis on seeing grammar and style as rhetorical, part of a writer’s ethos, less a question of correctness and more a question of effectiveness.

Virtually all participants incorporated grammar “lessons” in their composition courses. Some instructors provided “grammar reviews” near the beginning of the term, with the emphases of the review drawn from an examination of the students’ writing. Some scheduled “mini-lessons” prior to peer review sessions, instructing peer reviewers to then be on the lookout for specific kinds of grammar or style problems. Most instructors had a ready store of mini-lessons upon which to draw depending on the specific needs of the class. These mini-lessons—comma splices, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and the tense system in English were a few mentioned—worked best when clearly related to the students’ own writing. “Problem sentence” handouts, with one “problem” sentence drawn from each student’s essay, were commonly used

and held to be generally engaging and effective. Some instructors also cautioned about the dangers of too much technical terminology, which tends to confuse students while providing no real benefit. We, the English teachers, might be fascinated with the pleonastic pronoun, but knowing what one is has probably never helped any student become a more effective writer.

Helping students become more effective writers is, of course, the purpose of college composition courses, and that for participants explains the place of grammar and style instruction. Referring to the work of Peter Elbow, one participant noted that “error” is both the least important and the most important aspect of our writing. It is least important in comparison to the global and rhetorical aspects of our writing that really signify its quality. It is most important in that to some readers the presence of error will simply disqualify us from participating in the discourse.

Elbow’s comment places the writer’s choice at the center of writing and connects grammar and style to some of the key rhetorical concepts developed in the composition classroom. As Aristotle noted, correctness and style directly affects our *ethos*—the image of ourselves, our character, our trustworthiness, our qualifications to speak—that we wish to present to readers. Correctness, clarity, appropriateness, and ornament were the qualities of style identified by Cicero, and while we might not focus much on ornament, we certainly focus a great deal on the first three. Finally, if the ultimate aim is to participate in the discourse, then attention to grammar and style will help students make the choices necessary to signal their belonging in an academic discourse community.