

Making Grammar Great Again

Warm up activity: Write answers to the questions below.

1. Do you feel that good grammar is important in student writing? Do you believe that good grammar is important in any writing? Explain.

2. Do you teach grammar?

If so, why? How would you describe your approach to teaching grammar?

If you do not teach grammar, why not?

Definition of Grammar:

Grammar focuses on writing at the sentence level:

“. . . within traditional grammar, I restrict the term to mean the set of categories, functions, and rules . . . that teachers commonly employ to describe a sentence and its parts.”
(Noguchi, 1991, page 2)

More important than knowing the rules is knowing how to use language effectively:

“What *is* grammar? The grammar of a language is its structure, which enables us to communicate whether or not we or anybody else consciously understands that structure.”
(Weaver, 2008, page 1)

Assumptions about teaching grammar:

The goal of grammar instruction is to enable students to produce effective writing. It is *not* the goal of grammar instruction to turn students into grammarians.

“Empower students to draw on those aspects of grammar that will enrich and enhance their writing. In other words, we encourage teachers to focus on writing and, in the process, guide students in using whatever grammatical options and features will make their writing more interesting and more appreciated by their audience.” (Weaver, 2008, page 3)

Grammar instruction should not be all about error correction. Rather it should be about editing and producing skillful writing.

Noguchi argues that teachers of writing should not focus excessively on errors, nor should they ignore them:

“What is needed are not extreme positions but rather a middle ground where students can learn about the detection, consequences, and elimination of unconventional features without diminishing the desire to write and improve” (Noguchi, 1991, page 14)

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) recommends de-emphasizing error correction, and focusing on grammar knowledge that enables writers to write well:

“People associate grammar with errors and correctness. But *knowing about* grammar also helps us understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and interesting and precise.” (NCTE, 2002)

1. Skills-Based Approach to Teaching Grammar

☞ **What it is:**

- Students learn to identify parts of speech, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, phrases, clauses.
- Students learn to identify different sentence types (i.e.: simple, compound, complex) and parts of sentences, such as phrases or clauses (i.e.: dependent vs. independent clauses), as well as the usage of different kinds of punctuation (i.e.: periods, commas, apostrophes).
- Students are taught about errors, such as run-on sentences, fragments, or dangling modifiers, how to recognize and correct these.
- Students are given definitions of grammar terms and examples, and asked to identify parts of speech, sentence types, or sentences errors in sample sentences or paragraphs.

☞ **Why teach it:**

- Teaching grammar and mechanics will enable students to understand how language works, how to write more effectively and correctly, and reduce the number of errors in their own writing.
- Explicit teaching of the rules of grammar helps students identify errors and correct these, or avoid errors in the first place.
- Knowing grammatical terms provides a common language for teachers and their students to discuss sentences and errors so as to improve the quality of writing.

☞ **What it looks like:**

Pronouns That Function as Subjects							
Personal Pronouns That Can Be Subjects				Indefinite Pronouns That Can Be Subjects			
	Singular	Plural		Singular			
1 st person	I	We		Anyone	everyone	no one	Someone
2 nd person	You	You		Anybody	everybody	Nobody	Somebody
3 rd person	He	They		Anything	everything	Nothing	Something
	She			Each	another	either (of)	neither (of)
	It			one (of)	much	such (a)	
Relative Pronouns That Can Be Subjects				Plural			
who what				both	few	Many	Several
Demonstrative Pronouns That Can Be Subjects				Singular or plural depending on meaning			
this these				All	more	None	Some
that those				Any	most		

GENERALIZATION (4) Noun or pronoun subjects in a sentence can be modified by adjectives.

An **adjective** is a word that modifies (describes and limits) a noun or pronoun. Adjectives usually come directly in front of the nouns they modify, But they can also appear later in the sentence and refer back to the noun or pronoun.

↘ ↙
Young Avon He is *young*.

PRACTICE Underline the adjectives in each of the following sentences. Then draw an arrow to the noun each adjective modifies.

1. The swimmer was confident.
2. Her long and strenuous workouts would soon pay off.
3. Several meters remained to reach the finish line.
4. Suddenly, she felt a terrible cramp in one leg.
5. A disappointing defeat would be the result.

From *Writer's Workplace with Readings* 2nd edition, by Scarry and Scarry, Cengage Learning

☞ What research says

A skills-based approach is not effective if the goal is to help students be better writers:

"In their 1963 review of research in written composition, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer make this now-famous pronouncement: 'The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing' (pp. 37-38)." Hillocks (1986) in his review of research in written composition done from 1963 to 1982 makes an equally strong statement:

School boards, administrators, and teachers who impose the systematic study of traditional grammar on their students over lengthy periods of time in the name of teaching writing do them a gross disservice which should not be tolerated by anyone concerned with the effective teaching of good writing. (p. 248)

Hillocks bases his conclusion on his narrative review (with Smith) of studies (1986), "14 of which involved grammar as either the experimental or control treatment." (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 596).

Students do not enjoy grammar instruction:

"Hillocks (1971) surveyed attitudes toward English of over 3000 high school students in three predominately blue-collar suburban communities. He reports that students rated the study of TSG [Traditional School Grammar] and mechanics as the least interesting part of their English programs . . . the generative grammar group 'showed predominately negative attitudes, especially on such dimensions as 'useless,' 'unimaginative,' 'repetitive,' 'passive,' 'complicated,' and 'unpleasant.' . . . In short, there is little to suggest that students either learn grammar or enjoy it" (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 596).

Bottom line:

". . . the grammar sections of a textbook should be treated as a reference tool that might provide some insight into conventions of mechanics and usages. It should *not* be treated as a course of study to improve the quality of writing" (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 600).

2. Sentence Combining Approach to Teaching Grammar

☞ What it is:

- Students learn how to combine sets of sentences into increasingly complex structures.

☞ Why teach it:

- Manipulating sentence parts will enable students to create sophisticated and varied sentences.
- Sentence combining incorporates grammar instruction into understanding sentences and writing.

☞ What it looks like:

EXERCISE ONE | On Tour with the Band

From each pair of sentences below, you can create one sentence by joining the verbs (with *and* or *or*) and eliminating repeated words

EXAMPLE: The rock band travels around the United States. The rock band plays concerts.

SOLUTION: The rock band travels around the United States and plays concerts.

1. The lead singer sings.
The lead singer talks to the audience.
2. Some of the people cheer.
Some of the people clap.
3. Others in the crowd stage dive.
Others dance in the audience.
4. The security staff watches.
The security staff worries about the crowd.
5. The band finishes their concert.
The band runs to their tour bus.

From *Sentence-Combining Workbook, Fourth Edition* (2014)
by Pam Altman, Mari Caro, Lisa Metge-Egan, and Leslie Roberts

☞ What research says

Sentence combining improves syntactical fluency and improves writing quality:

“Cooper (1975) argues that ‘no other single teaching approach has ever consistently been shown to have a beneficial effect on syntactic maturity and writing quality’ (p. 72).” (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 598).

“Crowhurst (1983) . . . notes that the increase in writing quality [due to sentence combining] may be the result of

1. Increased practice in writing sentences,
2. Greater facility in constructing sentences, and

3. An increased attention to other aspects of composing as a consequence of students' facility in constructing sentences." (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 599).

Not clear whether sentence combining reduces students' errors in writing or increases their reading comprehension:

"Clearly these findings [about sentence combining and error reduction] produce mixed results. Perhaps that is to be expected. If instruction results in students' experimenting with more complex sentence structures, errors are bound to result. On the other hand, if SC [sentence combining] practice focuses on producing specific structures and learning how to punctuate [sic] those structures, it is likely to prove effective" (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 600).

"Kerek, Daiker, and Morenberg (1980) state that 'after 10 years of prolific research and in spite of some promising results, Mellon's earlier remark that sentence combining practice 'may contribute to the development of reading ability' (1969, p. 75) still remains more a reasonable possibility than an unassailable fact' (p. 1072)" (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 600).

What kinds of grammar exercises help students write not just correct sentences but better, more expressive ones?

"Two methods have yielded good results. One is sentence combining: students start with simple exercises in inserting phrases and combining sentences and progress towards exercises in embedding one clause in another. Another approach is for students to imitate model sentences; when students read a model passage and then write their version of it, imitating its grammatical features, they integrate reading skill, writing practice, and grammatical understanding." (NCTE 2002)

3. Modeling Approach to Teaching Grammar

☞ What it is:

- Positive modeling that demonstrates to students what they *should* or *could* do in their writing
- Examining examples from professional readings or student writing helps students understand effective sentence patterns and punctuation usage that skillful writers employ
- Providing useful examples--sentences students can use in their own writing--to encourage students to expand their writing repertoire
- Practicing allows students to experiment with and play with new syntax or punctuation

☞ Why Teach it:

- “Grammar” is about making meaning: the goal of writing is to communicate ideas to readers, so students need to examine effective grammar and usage in the context of writing
- Understanding the strategic use of syntax and punctuation can help writers emphasize or de-emphasize ideas, conform to the expectations of academic writing, and effectively communicate their ideas to their intended audience
- Understanding how, why, and when writers use certain sentence patterns or punctuation can help students become better readers

☞ What it looks like

3A. SENTENCE MODELING:

Overview

- Identify a sentence type you want students to use--because it is a common move in academic writing, because students do not have that sentence pattern in their repertoire, because it will improve students’ abilities to effectively express their ideas, or because they are using that sentence type incorrectly in their own writing
- Find examples of that sentence type in the class readings
- Analyze *why* the writer uses that sentence type
- Examine *how* the sentence functions—as a sentence and in the larger context of the reading
- Have students imitate and practice the sentence type in a way they might use in their own writing
- Praise students for using the sentence in their writing

EXAMPLE: Appositives

More than 40 years ago, Walter Mischel, PhD, a psychologist now at Columbia University, explored self-control in children with a simple but effective test.

- Opening sentence from “Delaying Gratification” (APA)

Recently, B.J. Casey, PhD, of Weill Cornell Medical College, along with Mischel, Yuichi Shoda, PhD, of the University of Washington, and other colleagues tracked down 59 subjects, now in their 40’s, who had participated in the marshmallow experiments as children.

- Sentence about halfway in “Delaying Gratification” (APA)

“Our results definitely temper the popular perception that marshmallow-like tasks are very powerful diagnostics for self-control capacity,” Celeste Kidd, a doctoral candidate in brain and cognitive sciences at the University of Rochester and the study’s lead author, said in a statement.

- Sentence about halfway in “The Marshmallow Test Gets More Complicated”

Questions for students:

- Why did the author include the underlined information about these people in these sentences? What’s the purpose of this information?
- How did the writer include the information? How does it fit (grammatically) into the sentence?
- When did the writer include this information in the reading?
- How often did the writer include information like this?

- Why might you, as a writer, include similar information when you write your essay about the Marshmallow test readings? How would you do that?

Practice: Write 2 sentences using appositives. Write about the researchers who conducted or questioned the Marshmallow test.

1. _____

2. _____

EXAMPLE: Introductory Phrases that Acknowledge Sources

When you quote or summarize information from a reading, you must let readers know the source of that information. You can do this by using an introductory phrase that names the author and/or the title of the reading before the summarized or quoted information.

Examples:

According to Carol Dweck, the best way to motivate students is to praise them for their diligence.

(phrase with author’s name)

In her article “Brainology,” Carol Dweck argues that people today “worship talent” rather than hard work.

(phrase with title of reading)

As Carol Dweck states in her article “Brainology,” students with growth mindsets embrace challenges.

(phrase with author’s name and title of reading)

Activity

Write two different sentences that use an introductory phrase to identify the author and/or the title of the reading and that summarize or quote an important idea from the reading.

1. _____

2. _____

What experts say**Modeling integrates reading, writing, and grammar:**

“Another approach is for students to imitate model sentences; when students read a model passage and then write their version of it, imitating its grammatical features, they integrate reading skill, writing practice, and grammatical understanding.” (NCTE Position Statement)

Modeling is a first step in growth:

“Copy and imitation, time-honored ways of teaching writing, will help the less advanced students feel the rhythm and movement that a long but clear sentence demands.”
(Williams, 1989, Preface)

EXCERPTS FROM STUDENT ESSAYS: USE OF APPOSITIVES AND INTRODUCTORY PHRASES

- Sonja Lyubomirsky, psychology professor at the University of California Riverside, found “very close evidence that in just about every country around the world, rich people are happier than poor people.” (C.M.)
- Hunter S. Thompson, an American author and journalist, once said, “There are many harsh lessons to be learned from the gambling experience, but the harshest one of all is the difference between having fun and being smart.” (T.T.)
- In a tragic story from the book “The Power of Habit” by Charles Duhigg, Angie Bachmann, a typical wife and mother of three, found herself extremely bored everyday while her husband and kids were gone. (J.H.)
- Ferris Jabr, associate editor at Scientific American explains in his article that 80 percent of gamblers never seek treatment, and of the 20 percent of those who were treated, 5 percent stopped gambling. (M.A.)
- However, in the Podcast “Blackjack” on “This American Life”, when asking Gary Loveman, the CEO and President of Caesars Entertainment, he admits “We do not wish to be in business of serving addicted gamblers.” (T.L.N.)
- According to the article, “How the Brain Gets Addicted to Gambling,” Mark Lefkowitz, one of the members of the California Council on Problem Gambling, persuades casinos to give gamblers a choice to ban themselves on their behalf. (S.J.S.)
- She moved the family to the Bronx when Westley Moore, her husband and Wes’ father, died. (R.P.)
- Joy, Wes Moore’s mother, tries her best to groom her son into the best man he can be. (C.G.)
- Wes Moore, the Rhodes Scholar and decorated veteran, became more successful than the other Wes Moore, who is serving a life sentence, due to the influences of his family, education, and environment he was surrounded by. (M.F.)

3B. PUNCTUATION MODELING

Overview

- Identify punctuation that students are using incorrectly in their writing (such as commas), or that they are not using at all (such as colons or semicolons)
- Find examples of that punctuation in the class readings
- Analyze *why* the writer uses that punctuation
- Examine *how* the sentence functions—as a sentence and in the larger context of the reading
- Have students imitate and practice writing sentences using that punctuation in a way they might use in their own writing
- Praise students for using the punctuation in their writing

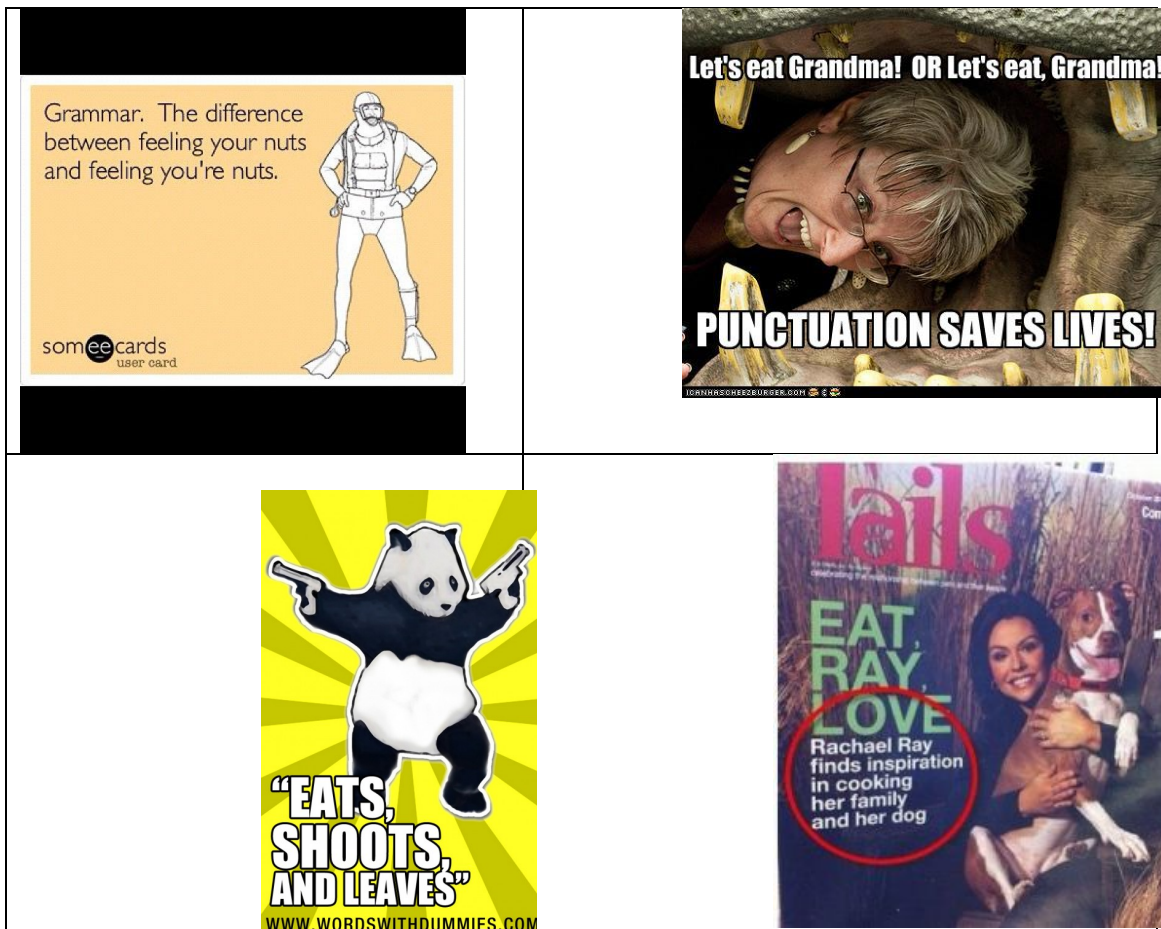
Emphasize that Punctuation makes meaning:

A professor gives his students a sentence and instructs them to punctuate it correctly:

Woman without her man is nothing

The men in the class write: Woman, without her man, is nothing.

The women in the class write: Woman! Without her, man is nothing.



EXAMPLE: Colons: A few rules and examples

Use a colon, following a complete sentence, to introduce an idea that explains, defines, or gives examples of what was just stated.

Example:

“The bitter riots were sparked by King’s assassination, but the fuels that kept them burning were the preexisting conditions: illegal but strictly enforced racial segregation, economic contraction, and an unresponsive political system” (Moore 18-19).

Use a colon, following a complete sentence, to introduce an idea that explains, defines, or gives examples of what was just stated.

Example:

“This is the story of two boys living in Baltimore with similar histories and an identical name: Wes Moore” (Moore xi)

Use a colon, following a complete sentence, to introduce an idea that explains, defines, or gives examples of what was just stated.

Example:

“I checked out his gear: black jeans, white tank top, and a black backpack.”
(Moore 79)

Use a colon to introduce a quote, when a complete sentence appears before the colon.

Example:

When Colonel Batt got to me, he came close to my face and whispered in my ear with his fast-talking, raspy voice: “Moore, after you are done with chow, go over to Company F and ask to see the company commander.” (Moore 97)

Activity: Writing Sentences with colons

1. Write two sentences using colons following the guidelines below

- Write a sentence using a colon to introduce an idea that explains, defines, or gives examples of what was just stated.

Example:

The other Wes Moore lives by his brother’s motto: “send a message” if someone disrespects you (33).

- Use a colon to introduce a quote, when a complete sentence appears before the colon.

Example:

When Colonel Batt got to me, he came close to my face and whispered in my ear with his fast-talking, raspy voice: “Moore, after you are done with chow, go over to Company F and ask to see the company commander.” (Moore 97)

2. Share your sentences in your peer group. Select two good sentences, one in which a colon introduces an explanation, definition, or example and one in which a colon introduces a quote and write these on the board.

3.C: MODELING FOR READING COMPREHENSION

Overview

- Focus on an aspect of the author's writing style that may make reading challenging for students.
- Analyze the author's style: how sentences are shaped and why.
- Ask students to imitate the author's writing style to get a feel for the writing and to understand how the sentences work.

EXAMPLE: Parsing long sentences

Ask students:

- Why do writers write long sentences?
- How do writers help readers get through long sentences?

Compared to the Inuit and all previous hunter-gatherer societies in Greenland, the Norse enjoyed the big advantage of an additional food source: livestock. In effect, the sole use that Native American hunters could make of the biological productivity of Greenland's land plant communities was by hunting the caribou (plus hares, as a minor food item) that fed on the plants. The Norse also ate caribou and hares, but in addition they allowed their cows, sheep, and goats to convert plants into milk and meat. In that respect the Norse potentially had a much broader food base, and a better chance of surviving than any previous occupants of Greenland. If only the Norse, besides eating many of the wild foods used by Native American societies in Greenland (especially caribou, migratory seals, and harbor seals), had also taken advantage of the other wild foods that Native Americans used but that the Norse did not (especially fish, ringed seals, and whales other than beached whales), the Norse might have survived. That they did not hunt the ringed seals, fish, and whales which they must have seen the Inuit hunting was their own decision. The Norse starved in the presence of abundant utilized food resources. Why did they make that decision, which from our perspective of hindsight seems suicidal?

From *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* by Jared Diamond

Class Activity: Imitating the author's style

Question: Diamond claims that the collapse of Norse Greenland's society fits his five-point framework. Recall each of the five points and explain, according to Diamond, how each factor contributed to the demise of the Norse in Greenland. Write your answer in ONE sentence.

Student Answer: Diamond explains that the collapse of Norse society in Greenland fulfills his five point framework because the Norse inadvertently inflicted irreparable damage on their environment and depleted the natural resources (by cutting trees, stripping turf, overgrazing the land, and causing soil erosion); they lived through a period of climate change (from relatively mild when they first arrived to a cold period during which they perished); their trade with Norway declined (so they were deprived of essential goods, such as iron and timber); their encounters with hostile neighbors weakened their population (the Inuit killed several Norse settlers); and their own inability to adapt to the changes in their environment (the Norse stubbornly raised cows rather than fish, and imported luxury goods for the church rather than items essential to survival) led to their demise.

☞ Teaching tips:

- Introduce new syntax, word choice, or punctuation in class
- Provide models from course readings or sample sentences students have written or might write in their essays
- Give students time to practice in class: individually, in small groups, on the board, or on posters
- Assign homework, such as weekly writing practice of sentences, or in paragraphs
- Review students' work by collecting and sharing good examples from homework and in class practice; correct, evaluate, and keep working on skills as needed
- Suggestion for teaching progression:
 1. simple sentences
 2. simple sentences with introductory elements
 3. appositives
 Variable → depends on students' writing & depends on readings
 4. coordination
 5. subordination
 6. quote integration
 7. parallelism
 8. semicolons and colons
 9. dashes and parenthesis

☞ Possible advantages over other approaches to teaching grammar

- Flexible approach: Can be modified to fit the course readings and students' own writing needs
- Integrates reading and writing in an authentic way: Helps students focus on how style supports content
- Minimal grammar instruction: No need to teach students lots of grammar terms
- Efficient lessons: Sentence modeling or punctuation practice benefits most students as they generate original sentences they can use in their essays
- Creates opportunities to reread the text: Students see the author's writing again as they use it for models for their own writing
- Helps students edit their writing: Students learn to carefully examine sentences and punctuation, both in professional writing and in their own writing
- Positive approach: Focus becomes how to improve writing and develop skills, not just error correction

☞ Possible disadvantages over other approaches to teaching grammar

- Not systematic: Sentence or punctuation activities may not progress in a logical order
- More time intensive: Teacher needs to create sentence and punctuation lessons from the class texts
- May not provide enough examples and practice: Some students need to see the sample sentences or examples of punctuation many times and practice often before they master the skill
- Examples from readings may be complicated or messy: Readings don't always provide good models for beginning writers

References

Bacon, N. (2013). *The well-crafted sentence: A writer's guide to style* (2nd ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Summary: Written for college students by a college professor, this book teaches writers how to examine sentences and craft effective prose. Chapters include exercises on active vs. passive voice, specific vs. abstract subjects, coordination, parallel structure, modification, adjective clauses, verbal phrases, appositives, and sentence variety.

Hillocks, G., Jr., & Smith, M. W. (1991). Grammar and usage. In J. Flood, J. M. Jensen, D. Lapp, & J. R. Squire (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching the English language arts* (pp. 591-603). New York: Macmillan.

Summary: Hillocks and Smith's meta-analysis of grammar research is a major and much cited study of the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching grammar.

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). (2002). *Some Questions and Answers about Grammar*. <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/qandaaboutgrammar>.

Noguchi, Rei. (1991). *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*. National Council of Teachers of English.

Summary: For many students, Noguchi believes, formal study of grammar seems far removed from the daily use of language. He emphasizes that grammar can help students--but only with style, not with content or organization--and suggests presenting students with a "writer's grammar" that specifically addresses the most common or stigmatizing errors.

Weaver, Constance. (2008). *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*. Heinemann.

Summary: Constance Weaver advocates de-emphasizing mistakes in writing and isolated grammar drills in favor of showing students how grammar can make writing more varied, rich, and interesting.

Williams, Joseph. (1989). *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. Harper Collins.

Summary: Williams presents ten concepts, ranging from the grammar of clarity (using specific nouns and active verbs) and the grammar of cohesion (connecting old information to new) to tips on punctuation, that will help writers generate clear, emphatic prose.