

# Exploring Grammar through Texts

This textbook provides an innovative introduction to core areas of grammar: a systematic guide to the structure of English, arranged hierarchically from the word to the sentence to the paragraph level. Using a linguistic framework, activities and exercises, and diverse authentic texts, the book connects grammar knowledge to writing development, strengthening student understanding of language as a tool for text construction. Students of linguistics and English language as well as writing students will develop foundational knowledge about grammar and texts. Aligning with state curricular standards around the world, the book will be particularly useful for students of English Education.

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# **Exploring Grammar through Texts**

Reading and Writing the Structure of  
English

**Cornelia C. Paraskevas**

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# Preface

Is a book on grammar a step backward? Why consciously understand grammar?

Knowing grammar does not help us find mistakes or even avoid making them—though, as a quick internet search reveals, a number of people believe this to be the primary purpose of grammar knowledge ([reddit.com/r/grammar/wiki/whatisgrammar](https://www.reddit.com/r/grammar/wiki/whatisgrammar)). Rather, knowing grammar allows us to choose the best option to express our meaning. In fact, grammar and writing can be seen as two sides of the same coin, a connection evident in style: ‘style represented the choices that an author made from the lexical and syntactical resources of the language ... students must have at least a basic awareness of what the grammatical options are’ (Butler 210).

Some claim that developing conscious understanding of language is unnecessary since every native speaker knows their language—it is acquired naturally and without formal instruction. This is true: however, written language is always acquired formally and is significantly different from spoken language. In fact, ‘as children progress through the school years, they are increasingly expected to read and write texts [with features that] contrast sharply with the informal, interactive language of everyday life with which children are more familiar’ (Fang et al. 249).

Understanding grammar is just as important for reading as it is for writing: ‘readers examine the effects of linguistic choices in order to understand how a text is working’ (Janks 154). In this sense, then, grammar allows readers and writers to become insiders to text production and reception: they understand how each type of text uses language differently, what options were deliberately chosen.

When students write, they face a challenge: they are writing for a community of specialists though they (writers) are not specialists. And since they are writing for a community of specialists, they need to follow the disciplinary conventions and traditions established. In other words, novice academic writers cannot use in writing the same constructions used for spoken texts. For example, we know that spoken texts use more verbs (and adverbs) than the written texts; written texts, on the other hand include more nouns and adjectives. Consciously understanding these differences, then, allows writers to move from outsiders to ‘insiders’ in text production.

Developing conscious understanding of grammar is a social justice issue: it provides access to all students, regardless of their socioeconomic level or home language, to the language of schooling in general and the disciplinary practices of different school subjects.

### **What texts were chosen?**

The title of the book reflects its goal—to explore grammar through its texts instead of through isolated sentences. The texts chosen are authentic ranging from non-academic writing (articles in newspapers and commonly available magazines) to generalized academic writing (texts writing by high school and college-level students); additionally, conversational excerpts are included, when necessary, to highlight the differences between spoken and written language. After all, all modes of language (spoken and written) have texts—‘units of meaning that unfold clause by clause’ (Schleppegrell and Christie 136)—that is, connected stretches of language that form a cohesive whole.

Written texts chosen include magazine and newspaper articles: they are in essence informational texts, providing a combination of narration and description, report or explanation; ‘academic’ texts included are expository texts (similar to magazine and newspaper articles in that they describe, explain, define, inform, or clarify—but do not include narrative) reflection or response to literature. Of course, each of these texts has a different communicative purpose: news and magazine articles provide information that is mixed with background detail; academic texts, on the other hand, especially those written for novices (textbooks, for example), include a lot of detail since the readers are not specialists.

### **What is the theoretical framework used?**

The text does not intend to be a complete description of English from a particular theoretical perspective. Rather, the purpose is to present a pedagogical grammar that connects conscious understanding of language to text production. As such, then, it ‘borrows’ from various theoretical frameworks: for example, the discussion on words (and word parts) reflects, to a large extent, a structural approach; the discussion on auxiliaries, a generative approach; and the discussion on cohesion and paragraph development a systemic-functional approach. In my teaching career, as a linguist and a ‘compositionist,’ I have found that this eclectic approach can be transformative for my students: they comment, for example, on how their writing improved (as judged by the grades they received from instructors) when they understood the importance of using consolidated constructions (using non-finite clauses instead of finite ones) in their academic work. Others comment on the importance of thematic arrangement as a way to improve the organization and structure of their paragraphs: instead of relying on

prescriptive guidelines that specify the number and arrangement of sentences in a paragraph, they now have the conscious understanding of how a paragraph unfolds and the tools to organize their paragraphs.

The excerpts included could be seen as mentor texts—not model texts. In other words, they are not perfect texts to be emulated. Rather, as mentor texts, they allow novice writers to see how others have used language to make meaning for a particular purpose; they show how a text is actually written. This understanding, in turn, makes it possible for writers to envision how to use language in their own texts, thus increasing their sense of competence and self-efficacy.

## **How is the book organized?**

The organization of the book reflects the hierarchical organization of language, from words to whole paragraphs. As such, then, each chapter builds on concepts (and strategies for analysis) introduced in the preceding chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces foundational concepts about language: the chapter presents important concepts in linguistics for readers who have minimal or no background in linguistics. Some concepts, such as the definition of grammar or the discussion on prescriptivism, are presented from an eagle's view—a broad perspective. Others, such as internal structure of words (morphemes) or strategies for word classification, present a view 'from the ground,' providing enough detail on strategies linguists use. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the building blocks of language—its words and the strategies used to classify them into different categories. Words that are important for the structure of language are presented in Chapter 2 while words that carry the core meanings in language (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) are presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 introduces readers to combinations of words (phrases), with particular emphasis on prepositional phrases since they are important for academic writing. Chapter 5 introduces the next level of language—clauses, which are combinations of phrases, both independent and dependent—which can combine into sentences. In Chapter 6, the discussion moves to strategies for consolidation (i.e. tightening writing), which is important for academic writing. Chapter 7 explores the different syntactic structures language users choose for particular purposes. Chapter 8 shifts the discussion from the sentence level to the paragraph level: this chapter provides readers with linguistic tools for creating cohesive, tight paragraphs. Chapter 9 provides yet another shift—to a detailed discussion on punctuation with particular emphasis on stylistic punctuation. The final chapter—the Afterword—provides additional ideas for connecting conscious understanding of language to writing.

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# 1 Foundational understandings about language and writing

This chapter lays the foundation for the remaining chapters: first, it provides some foundational knowledge about language—an eagle’s view of language that is shared by most linguists; second, it provides a more focused, ‘on the ground’ discussion on thinking like a language-scientist.

## Eagle’s View of Language: Key Concepts

### *Grammar: Acquiring the Patterns of Language*

To non-experts, the term ‘**grammar**’ means the rules of spelling, punctuation and ‘proper’ language. While these definitions of the term are not aligned with the experts’ definitions, they are part of the five different definitions of grammar that Patrick Hartwell postulated in 1985: the formal (internalized) patterns of language speakers unconsciously know; description of the patterns of language; linguistic etiquette (which is ‘usage’); common school grammar; stylistic grammar. These five meanings distribute along two groups: the first two are the meanings non-experts use while the three remaining meanings are the ones experts use. The term ‘grammar,’ then, for our purposes, will involve the unconscious knowledge of the language patterns as well as a description of this knowledge. These patterns, which describe what is possible in a language, involve the whole system of spoken language—from sounds to whole sentences—and are learned unconsciously, before the age of five. Any construction that conforms to these patterns is **grammatical**; grammaticality, in other words, is not a subjective judgement. For example, non-experts might judge the following sentences—both of which appear in conversation—as ungrammatical (which is frequently used as a synonym for ‘wrong’) or as uneducated:

It happens when he don’t get to eat on time.

(Davies)

The walls are paper thin but I didn’t hear nothing.

(Davies)

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There is nothing ungrammatical or wrong about these sentences; though they definitely do not conform to the practices of standardized written English, they are fairly common in conversation and are examples of the social variation in language, a topic discussed later in this chapter.

### *The Nature of Rules: Prescriptive vs. Descriptive Approaches*

Discussions about grammar, rules, and grammaticality inevitably bring forth another important issue—the nature of the rules themselves. For experts, rules simply refer to the patterns that are observed in spoken and written language and are acquired as we are immersed in language. For example, based on the following constructions,

I want my tapioca  
I want some noodles  
Two fine big ones  
That bread

(<https://childes.talkbank.org/browser/index.php?url=Eng-NA/Brown/Eve/020200b.cha>)

we can describe the pattern about the order of determiners (words like ‘my,’ ‘that,’ ‘two,’ or ‘some’) and nouns that Eve, a two-year-old has figured out: determiners (underlined) precede nouns:

*my* tapioca, *some* noodles, *two* fine big ones, *that* bread

In other words, we can create a **descriptive rule** that simply describes (states) what we observe in the language of Eve: determiners are followed by nouns.

Of course, descriptive rules acknowledge that language changes, and change accordingly. For example, until recently, some would frown upon the sentence ‘A writer should choose their tools for writing,’ because the word ‘their’ is plural whereas the noun it refers to (‘writer’) is singular. Currently, however, such a sentence is hardly worth a discussion.

Beyond descriptive rules, there is another set of rules—**prescriptive rules**—that aim at ‘regulating’ language by either opposing change or by ‘prescribing’ ways of improving it. Ann Curzan distinguishes four types of prescriptivism:

**Standardizing prescriptivism** ... [where rules] promote ‘standard’ usage; **stylistic prescriptivism** ... [where rules promote fine points of style; **restorative prescriptivism** ... [where rules] aim to restore earlier, but not relatively obsolete, usage and/or return to older forms to purify usage; **politically responsive prescriptivism** [where rules] promote inclusive, non-discriminatory, politically correct usage.

(*Fixing English* 24)



Standardizing prescriptivism has resulted in creating fairly uniform spelling and punctuation conventions across English but also in creating and maintaining a privileged dialect (the standard variety). The variety that has been chosen as ‘Standard English’ is not linguistically superior to other varieties: rather, the variety spoken by those who had political and economic power was the one that was chosen in the late 1400s as the standard variety, was codified (that is it was recorded in dictionaries and grammar books) and, finally, used in multiple literary, political and judicial domains. There is no doubt that standardization has been important for widespread literacy, which has been achieved primarily through mass production of texts; however, we need to remember that standardization suppresses variation and results in a ‘high-level idealization where uniformity or invariance [of a language] is valued above all things’ (Milroy 26). Standardizing prescriptive rules stigmatize a range of constructions used by some native speakers: pronunciations such as ‘acrossed’ (for ‘across’) or making the words ‘picture’ and ‘pitcher’ homophonous (i.e. pronounced the same way); words like ‘irregardless’; phrases such as ‘between you and I.’ These rules are ‘the traffic laws’ of language (Reaser et al. 115).

**Stylistic prescriptivism** provides users with a set of options within the standard variety; these rules, then, are about ‘stylistic niceties ... [similar to] table manners’ (Curzan, *Fixing English* 36). This particular type of prescriptivism is based on personal likes and dislikes and is the one students refer to as ‘rules of English.’ Stylistic prescriptivism rules include statements against beginning sentences with ‘there,’ ‘but’ or ‘and’ (often extended to stigmatizing the use of ‘because’ in the beginning of a sentence), using adverbials or passive voice (both of which, by the way, are typical in academic texts).

**Restorative prescriptivism** rules reinforce the misguided idea that language change is language decay so they ‘[honor] past usage’ (Curzan, *Fixing English* 36). The current use of the word ‘dilemma’ is an example of restorative prescriptivism. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the original meaning of the word ‘dilemma’ is ‘a form of argument involving an adversary in the choice of two (or, *loosely*, more) alternatives, either of which is (or appears) equally unfavourable to him.’ (The Greek affix ‘di-’ which means ‘two’ explains the original meaning involving a choice of two options.) As the *American Heritage Dictionary* notes, however, ‘[the term can be used] for choices among three or more options.’ Similarly, the controversy surrounding the expressions ‘could care less’ is an example of restorative prescriptivism; speakers who condemn this usage look at the meaning of each word and claim that if ‘caring less’ means that there is still ‘care’—just at a lesser degree. Current usage, however, shows that ‘could care less’ is gaining acceptance, being used with the same meaning as the original expression ‘couldn’t care less.’

**Politically responsive prescriptivism** ‘[aims at promoting] inclusive, nondiscriminatory, and /or politically correct or expedient usage’ (Curzan,

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*Fixing English* 38). It is this type of prescriptivism that established the plural pronoun ‘they’ as the gender-neutral singular pronoun and the one that replaced gendered terms like ‘policeman’ or ‘chairman’ with ‘police officer’ and ‘chair,’ respectively.

Most language experts reject any attempt at regulating language through prescriptive rules; however, most agree on the value of politically responsive prescriptivism since it encourages ‘political sensitivity’ (Curzan, *Fixing English* 39) instead of correctness.

#### ***Spoken and Written Language***

We often think that written language is simply the ‘transcribed’ version of spoken language; in other words, we think that we can write the way we talk. This thinking, however, is inaccurate: there are significant differences between spoken and written language due to their mode of production. Understanding these differences can help strengthen our writing.

The most important difference between speech and writing involves their production: in spoken language, speaker and hearer share time, space and background knowledge. As a result of this shared context, their conversation is co-constructed, with both participants contributing to the development of the text. In addition, because speech is produced in real time, it is characterized by false starts, interruptions, pauses, repetition, redundancy, backchannelling markers and incomplete constructions such as fragments. Writing, on the other hand, is carefully produced and can be revised to eliminate false starts, redundancy and fragments. Of course, fragments can appear in writing—but they need to be a deliberate choice, used because the writer wants to emphasize a particular point.

The following excerpt shows some of the typical features of speech:

KELLY: Where did they go.

DANA: They went out to dinner with Arianna’s parents.

[Question/Answer pair develops text]

KELLY: Arianna’s parents. Yeah. That was her grandma on the phone.

[Repetition and confirmation through the backchanneling marker ‘yeah’]

DANA: They left at like quarter of eight

[Use of discourse marker ‘like’]

KELLY: Mm. Maybe they went shopping first and then went to dinner.

DANA: I think they’re hanging out with the Callahans. Gotta have some of my sister’s bread. It is so good.

[Shared knowledge—‘Callahans’; switch of topic—‘have bread’]

KELLY: What is it like regular bread—or is it

[Incomplete construction—‘is it’; use of ‘like’]

DANA: No. Molasses.[Fragment]

(DuBois et al.)

In addition, speech is characterized by the use of paralinguistic markers (such as body language and tone) to complement and clarify the meaning; in writing, on the other hand, meaning is conveyed through the arrangement of words and punctuation. As a result, writers need to be much more detailed and explicit in their texts than speakers.

### *Variation in Language*

Language is an abstract system realized through its variation. Some variation is based on groups of speakers; this is the variation we refer to as **dialects**—regional and social. All speakers of a language use a variety of the language—because every speaker belongs to a particular region and social group; the dialect used is part of the speaker’s identity. In addition to variation due to the speakers (regional, social), there is another type of variation due to globalization: this variation is labelled **Global Englishes**, with the plural form indicating that there are multiple varieties based on historical reasons. Finally, there is yet another type of variation which is due to context or situation; this type of variation is called **register**.

#### *Regional Variation*

All languages show **regional variation**, which is most evident in pronunciation, word choice, or order of words. For example, in the Northwest, the words ‘cot’ and ‘caught’ are homophones (i.e. they sound the same), whereas in the Midwest there is a clear pronunciation difference between these two words. In some parts of the United States, food is fried in skillets—in the Northwest, it is fried in pans. And, finally, in some areas of the country speakers use the construction ‘might could’:

They might could tell why he is biting and what to do about it.

(Davies)

However, this is not typically heard in the Northwest.

#### *Social Variation*

While regional variation evokes in most language users feelings of ‘quaintness,’ **social variation** frequently generate heated (albeit invalid)

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discussion about language. Social dialects—which are mainly evident in speech rather than in writing—can be placed along a continuum, from standard to non-standard. Some non-linguists define ‘**standard**’ English as ‘proper/correct/educated’ English; linguists, however, define it as a language variety that does not include any stigmatized forms; it is ‘the prestige social dialect in a speech community’ (Curzan, ‘Teaching the Politics of Standard English’ 342).

A point worth reiterating is that both standard and non-standard varieties are systematic and rule-governed; that means they all varieties have patterns (called ‘rules’); any construction that follows the patterns of a variety is **grammatical**. For example, in African American Vernacular English, the following construction that uses the ‘invariant be’ (i.e. forms of the ‘be’ verb that do not change) is grammatical:

When I be crying crazy like that, all these strange noises be coming out my mouth, they be coming from deep inside me from a place I don’t even know.

(Davies)

The use of the ‘**invariant be**’ is not random: rather, if a speaker wants to indicate a repeated, habitual event, then they will use the ‘invariant be.’ Varieties, then, differ in the patterns that describe them; in other words, grammaticality is specific to a variety; what is grammatical in one variety is not necessarily grammatical in another variety. We need to bear in mind, however, that this variation is not extensive—the ‘fundamental’ features are consistent across varieties.

### *Global Englishes*

In addition to regional and social variation, we need to acknowledge another type of variation—**global variation**. English has been used in three different contexts: as the native language of speakers (US, Canada, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, for example); as the second, additional language of speakers due to colonization (India, Singapore, Nigeria, etc.); and as a foreign language for a number of speakers, having gained this status as a lingua franca because of economic and political reasons. English as a global language is used by over a billion people (Galloway and Rose 14). To accommodate for this expanding use of English, linguists use the term World Englishes (or New Englishes) and acknowledge that each of these New Englishes have developed norms based on local needs. For example, in some varieties of New English, the plural ending *-s* is omitted: ‘I like to read storybook’ (Galloway and Rose 108). Global English, then, asks us to confront the issue of what variety of English should we consider as appropriate to be taught to international speakers.

*Register Variation*

So far, we have examined variation connected with speakers. There is another type of variation, however, which is connected with the **context of use**. When we use language, we make adjustments based on the situation we find ourselves in: for example, when we are discussing a particular topic with a family member or a close friend, we don't need to be explicit since there is a lot of shared knowledge between us. If we are to write about the same topic and share our writing with a broader audience, however, we need to make our language explicit. This difference between the two is a difference in register. In other words, register variation is 'driven' by contextual parameters such as channel used (spoken or written language), participants and their relationships, topics addressed, and communicative purpose.

### **View from the Ground: Words and Word Parts—the Building Blocks of Language**

Grammar is the description of language: specifically, when we look at the grammar of a language, we examine its building blocks (words and their structure) and the combination of words into larger units. This section examines the structure of words and provides a from-the-ground view of word classes; the next two chapters provide detailed discussion of the classification of words into groups.

*The Structure of Words*

Sentences and Legos have a lot in common: they are built from smaller blocks that combine in specific ways to create a final product. In language, the building blocks that are important for words are the smallest meaningful combinations of sounds (or letters) called **morphemes**. Some of these morphemes can stand alone as words. For example, in the following text, all the words can stand alone as words (this ability shown with spaces around each word)—therefore they are called **free morphemes**.

Research has found that travel can be good medicine for the heart.  
(*Costco Connection*, January 2020, 11)

Let's consider another sentence:

Travelers looking for a slower, quieter, water-based form of travel can just look for where a river runs through it.  
(*Costco Connection*, January 2020, 39)

We notice that words such as 'travelers,' 'looking,' 'slower,' and 'quieter' consist of more than one meaningful unit; for example the 's' in 'travelers' indicates plurality (i.e. more than one) while the -er ending on 'slow' and

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‘quiet’ provides a degree. These meaningful units, however, cannot stand alone; they must be attached to the end of a word. Such meaningful units that cannot stand alone—but must be attached to a word—are called **bound morphemes** or **affixes**.

Some affixes, like plural *-s* or the comparative *-er*, provide grammatical information. Other affixes help us create (derive) new words. For example, the word ‘travelers’ contains two affixes: one that indicates plurality (*-s*) and another one (*-er*) that is used to create a new word (‘traveler’) from the word ‘travel.’ Affixes that provide grammatical information are called **inflectional affixes**; affixes that are used to create a new word—either by changing its meaning or word class—are called **derivational affixes**. English has a limited number of inflectional affixes but numerous derivational affixes. Inflectional affixes (listed in [Table 1.1](#)) attach to the end of a base (noun, verb, or adjective); please note that each word can have only one inflectional affix.

For example, the word ‘realizing’ consists of the base ‘realize’ and the inflectional affix ‘ing.’

The category of derivational affixes includes multiple members; each word can have multiple derivational affixes that can be attached in the beginning or the end of a word. In the following text, for example,

These lands were attractive only to cattlemen; the railroads, however, had difficulty selling them the huge tracts of land.

(Nevius 2)

the underlined words consist of a base and a derivational affix: ‘attract’ + *-ive*’ and ‘difficult’ + *-ty*,’ respectively. Words that include affixes are structurally complex whereas words that do not have affixes (i.e. they are single morphemes) are called simple words. In the sentence above, then, (copied below)

Travelers looking for a slower, quieter, water-based form of travel can just look for where a river runs through it.

the underlined words are all structurally complex since they include affixes:

travel+er+s, slow + er, quiet+er, base+(ed), run+s

Table 1.1 Inflectional Affixes.

<i>Inflectional Affixes for Nouns</i>	<i>Inflectional Affixes for Verbs</i>	<i>Inflectional Affixes for Adjectives</i>
-s plural	-ing (progressive)	-er (comparative)
-s possessive (-’s or -s’)	-ed (past)	-est (superlative)
	-s (present)	