Teaching Grammar

REALLY WHAT WORKS

An Eye On Education Book

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&
Joan Berger

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To Mitchell, my favorite student
(even if I'm not his favorite teacher).

Amy Benjamin

To all my children, from whom I continue to learn.

Joan Berger

About the Authors

Amy Benjamin is a literacy consultant who works with educators across the United States and Canada. Her work is informed by more than thirty years of teaching experience at the middle and high school levels. She has been recognized for excellence in teaching by the New York State English Council, the State Education Department of New York, Tufts University, and Union College.

As a member of the professional development team for the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and president of its Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, Amy has had a major impact in transforming the paradigm of grammar instruction from fill-in-the-blank worksheets to the kind of active, authentic, discovery-based models presented in this book. This is Amy's eleventh book for Eye on Education.

Joan Berger has developed unique approaches for teaching writing and grammar during her four decades working with high-school and middle-school students. A Golden Apple finalist, Joan has written articles for various National Council of Teachers of English journals, as well as NCTE's teacher sourcebook *Professional Communities at Work: Grammar*. Now a consultant who works with schools and school districts, Joan also speaks frequently at NCTE conferences about writing and grammar. At her workshops, Joan gives teachers fun, easy-to-use strategies that inspire their students to write effectively.

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Introduction

Seeing Grammar with New Eyes

We believe it's possible to teach grammar using contemporary methods that result in durable learning. Such methods are engaging, lively, and social. They include teaching through visuals and hands-on manipulatives, rhythm, creative dramatics, inductive reasoning, problem-solving, word-play, and pattern-finding. We present our ideas in this book as a way of seeing grammar with new eyes. We begin with a look at traditional ways of viewing grammar instruction—or, as we believe, seeing grammar with old eyes—and then look at some new possibilities.

What Do Teachers Say about Teaching Grammar?

We begin our workshops by asking teachers to share what comes to mind when they hear the words "teaching grammar." What we hear is mostly negative.

We hear that teaching grammar is frustrating. It doesn't work. Students seem to need the same lessons over and over. Not only do they forget the grammar that they do learn in school, but they fail to put it to use to create better language, either in writing or in speech. Let's clarify right here that what we mean by "better language" is language that is well-suited to the audience and purpose. Assessments that measure whether students can pick out certain parts of speech or circle the correct choice of singular or plural verb in a premade sentence don't say much about what happens, grammatically speaking, in the real world of the students' language. That real world consists of various audiences for various purposes, informal as well as formal, reflective of the ever-changing nature of all languages. When the grammar that comes from the grammar book differs from the

grammar of real communication, practice in the former does not result in application to the latter. And scarce resources of classroom time get squandered in the effort.

We hear that grammar instruction can't be anything but drill, drill, drill. It's boring. We can liven it up with gimmicks like grammar bees, contests, rewards, and mnemonics, but in the end it's about memorizing rules and deferring to the answer key. According to tradition, critical thinking does not play a part in grammar instruction. Teachers and the general public usually believe that answers to grammatical problems are, like math, either right or wrong in all circumstances.

We hear exasperated teachers complaining that the burden of teaching the basics of grammar shouldn't be "at their level." Students "should have been taught" grammar in the lower grades. In educational circles, this is called the "blame-down." We see it all the time in a spiral of expectations about what students should know and be able to do at given levels. The blame-down is unproductive thinking for teachers under any circumstances, but especially for grammar. Old-fashioned grammar instruction is not going to work very well for most students, no matter how often, or how loudly, it is taught. What teachers need to do, as we show in this book, is find a new way, not a way to introduce ineffective practices earlier.

We hear that grammar instruction takes time away from the study of literature and creative writing. Many teachers believe that the demands of the curriculum, especially in this age of testing, do not allow time for learning about linguistics unless there is a definite and immediate payoff: an observable, measurable improvement in students' writing. "We'd like to teach more grammar," teachers say, "but we have to concentrate on what is on the state test." Most state tests do not include a discrete section that tests for grammatical knowledge explicitly. On the SAT, there is a writing skills section, but it calls for editing only. The test-taker is merely asked to select the correct version of a written sentence. The grammatical logic that leads to the right answer does not have to be explained.

We hear objections to using what many teachers think is formidable terminology. These teachers feel that terms like *participle*, *progressive tense*, *past perfect*, *subordinate clauses*, *subordinating conjunctions*, and *subject complement* will alienate students. Even the terms *phrase* and *clause*, for some, are too much. Teachers sigh and ask: "Can't we just tell students to use a comma when they take a breath? Can't we just tell them to elaborate by adding detail? Do we have to try to teach them all these terms? They'll just get confused and turn off." I even once had a teacher tell me that since students already use adjectives, they shouldn't have to know the definition of an adjective. Granted, some of the definitions are hard to understand because they rely on knowledge of other unfamiliar terms: "An infinitive

phrase consists of an infinitive together with its complements and modifiers" (Warriner, 1988, 436). What can you do with a definition like that? How does it illuminate anything for the student or for the conversation between teacher and student about language?

We hear from teachers who deny any problem at all with grammar instruction that the writing process and a few well-placed minilessons cannot fix. "We deal with problems as they come up," they claim. However, it doesn't take long to discover that the same problems persist and are widespread despite the students' many years of schooling, many experiences with the writing process, many minilessons, and many individual conferences. Core concepts about punctuation and sentence structure go unlearned, and thus the reactive solution of "addressing problems as they come up" fails. Some teachers believe that student writing will improve if only students are given opportunity to write about topics that interest them and about which they actually want to communicate. All they need in terms of grammar and mechanics, the argument goes, is a peer editor and a conference with a teacher who can "address problems as they come up." On the other side stands esteemed literary scholar and educator Stanley Fish, writing in the *New York Times* "Think Again" column that what's needed in writing instruction is actually more attention to linguistic form, a foundation in how sentences are constructed into forms—in other words, grammar. Says Fish, "you [the writer] should be able to describe the relationship between the words and phrases you add and the sentence's core structural logic, a logic your additions and elaborations must honor and preserve" (Fish, 2006).

We hear from teachers who despair of teaching proper grammar in an age when students and adults communicate through the informal, abbreviated means of e-mailing, text messaging, rap music, and rampant slang that has "debased" the English language beyond rehabilitation. "They think it's perfectly fine not to capitalize *I*," one teacher will lament, to which another will add, "And it's not just *I* that they don't capitalize. My students don't believe in capitalizing anything!" Bad role models are everywhere, corrupting our youth! Here's this example of a wrong pronoun uttered by a public figure who should know better! Here's that example of a blatant subject-verb agreement atrocity in an advertisement shown during the Super Bowl for all to see! Here's another sighting of *irregardless*! The English language, bloodied and battered, will never recover from the harsh blows it receives every day from those who don't understand how fragile is the veneer that holds civilization together! Once these litanies of woe get going, there's no stopping the avalanche. But the cause is not advanced. Teachers still need to guide students from the informal register of social communication into the formal register of academic discourse.

We hear from teachers who say that the English language is so "crazy" that there's no sense trying to explain its rules. The rules, they say, have so many exceptions; why bother to teach them? So, again, the hapless student is back to the "need" for rote memorization. From crazy verbs to crazy plurals to crazy rules about compound words versus hyphenated words, is there any way to get the English language to sit still long enough for students and teachers to see what's what? These teachers are trying to find their way through the complexities of the English language. They are trying to chart its changes, even as they notice that many a respectable publication seems to have adapted to common usage without getting the approval of the strict English teacher or college professor they had when they were in school.

We hear from teachers who do teach grammar, but they do so in a perfunctory manner, dutifully "taking out the grammar books and workbooks" and hacking away. "C'mon, kids, I don't like this stuff any more than you do, but we have to get through it, so let's go. Now, the answer to number 12 is B, 13 is D, 14 is B." The procedures followed and the materials and examples used are the same ones that the teachers used as students, the same their parents, even their grandparents, used. Grammar is grammar, the thinking goes. Get it over with. Then there the true believers, who consider themselves on a path to triumph and glory as they blaze through the workbooks. When the students gamely protest, "You're torturing us!" they are undeterred. "You'll thank me someday," they promise. We're not sure.

We also hear from some teachers who *loved* learning grammar. They enjoyed diagramming sentences, the process and the result. For those with a flair for puzzles and mathematics, especially, sentence diagramming offers the satisfaction of "showing where everything goes." And in this age of differentiated instruction, some teachers recognize that traditional grammar instruction, despite its shortcomings, does appeal to some students who, for whatever reason, just happen to take to it. For these students (and Amy was one of them), grammar is the place to shine in an otherwise bewildering school environment.

We see teachers slinking into their seats, wishing to disappear. They are just hoping to get through the day without exposing their own scanty formal education in grammar. "I never learned this. I never learned that," some of these teachers are bold enough to confess at the outset. We like that. It gives us a chance to say out loud that others in the audience feel the same. Elementary teachers and even certified English teachers who feel they never really learned grammar are in good company throughout the profession.

We see others who can barely disguise their contempt for yet another self-proclaimed grammar guru who has ridden into town on staff development day, toting a bagful of tricks. Having seen the fads, furies, and fly-by-nights of education over the many years of their careers, they are

skeptical, if not cynical. "Oh? So now grammar is the flavor of the month? We'll wait this out."

And we see, and have to contend politely with, the peacocks, arguably the worst of the lot. They who know everything about grammar, having learned it from Mrs. Persnickens back in the eighth grade, or from Sister Bernadette, or from parents who "spoke only in complete sentences and demanded the same from us at the dinner table." (That last is weird, by the way.) We get our sentences finished and corrected. We are invited to mediate snarky collegial disputes about which is worse, the split infinitive or the sentence that ends with a preposition.

At the same time, though, we hear teachers acknowledging that although teaching grammar is necessary, they wish their students could learn it from someone else.

Although we don't care much about the sentence-ending preposition, we care about giving students the access to power that a good education in grammar allows. People in the English-speaking world who can't speak and write in the dialect known as Standard English can have certain doors closed to them. People who can control their syntax as they write can get the job done faster, more efficiently, with more consideration for the reader. And people who understand the inner workings of sentences have a tool that can unlock meaning in the complicated texts that they read.

How Can We Get Teachers to See Grammar with New Eyes?

What we've done above is to lay out some of the objections, concerns, and, in fact, misconceptions that prevent many teachers from teaching grammar well or that excuse them from teaching grammar at all. The paradigm we are identifying as "teaching grammar with old eyes" is this familiar three-step process:

> **Step One:** A concept, such as *subject-verb agreement*, or a definition, such as *relative pronoun*, is introduced at the outset. The student feels no connection to this concept and has expressed no curiosity about it.
>
> **Step Two:** Examples are given in the form of unrelated, contrived sentences that have no meaning to the student.
>
> **Step Three:** Given a list of sentences, the student is required to correct an error or recognize words that fit the definition.

So old grammar teaching is all about low-level thinking, based heavily on the skill of identification.

If the old ways of teaching grammar through worksheets, drills, and exercises don't work, and if "addressing the problems as they come up" doesn't seem to be getting the job done either, what are some better ways? What we will do in this book is to counter these negative attitudes and futile methods by explaining how to see grammar with new eyes.

The procedures for teaching grammar that you will read about in this book have worked well for us in our middle school and high school classes, respectively. Students and parents have responded positively. We've seen real growth in our students' writing. (We don't claim to have measured changes in their speech.) Some of our colleagues have followed our lead, and we've introduced these techniques to countless teachers across America. The procedures you will read about in this book are based on sound principles about how humans learn and, in particular, how humans learn about language. As suggested by the table to the right, these principles call upon students to be actively involved and thinking, not just memorizing.

We owe it to our students to see grammar with new eyes. Doing so will require some willingness on our part to learn concepts and terminology we may never have learned in our own schooling. Or it may be time for an upgrade, a cashing in of what we learned long ago for some fresh understandings that describe the English language accurately.

We'll start in the next chapter by upgrading some traditional notions about the parts of speech, how to teach them so they stay learned, and how to put that knowledge to use. Then, we'll talk about a variety of ways to teach students to recognize a complete declarative sentence. After that, we show why understanding syntax through the "slot-and-filler" system is useful. That will complete Part One of this book. In Part Two, we'll outline a month-by-month calendar of grammar lessons that will embed grammar into writing instruction.

	Lesson Descriptions
Use multiple modalities: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile	Verb Territory Common Hitching Devices Verb Toss Owner's Manuals Reading Rods Pronoun Teams Prepositions through Hidden Pictures Keys to Sentence Combining
Get students moving	Grammar on Your Feet Grammar Skits
Socialize the learning process	Morphology Chart Reading Rods
Focus on the patterns of language	My Big Fat Grammar Project: The Basic Sentence Patterns
Use authentic language: student writing and classroom literature	Poetry Lessons
Invite inductive reasoning	Irregular Verb Villages
Embed grammar in writing instruction	Grammar Calendar
Review and reinforce learned concepts and skills	Grammar Calendar

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Part I

The Fundamental Things Apply

Part One explains how you can teach the building blocks of language, starting with recognition of complete sentences in Chapter 1 and moving on to sentence components and the basic patterns of English sentences in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 explains how to teach verbs and their modifiers, adverbs. We want students to start organizing their written language around verbs. We use the metaphor of the map of geographical territory to explain the English verb system. This territory has a railroad track dividing its two sections: the action verbs and the linking verbs, along with the helping verbs. By leading students, region by region, through this map, we can give them a gradual but durable understanding about verbs, the nerve center of all sentences.

English grammar is a two-fisted powerhouse. If one fist is the verb, the other is the noun. In Chapter 4, we explain how nouns can be recognized beyond the "person, place, or thing" definition. Furthermore, we show how nouns act as magnets for their modifiers, forming noun phrases and noun clauses. And single nouns as well as nominal groups (nouns plus their modifiers) get replaced (as we say, "gobbled up") by pronouns. Pronouns, in turn, take their forms (cases) on the basis of their function in the sentence. Chapter 4 also touches on how knowledge about nouns, nominal groups, and pronouns affects reading comprehension.

In Chapter 5, we talk about conjunctions and prepositional phrases, treating both as linking devices.