

Grammar Matters

What Research Says About Teaching Grammar

Research strongly suggests that the most beneficial way of helping students improve their command of grammar in writing is to use students' writing as the basis for discussing grammatical concepts. Researchers agree that it is more effective to teach punctuation, sentence variety, and usage in the context of writing than to approach the topic by teaching isolated skills (Calkins, 1980; DiStefano and Killion, 1984; Harris, 1962)

As students revise and edit their writing, teachers can provide grammar instruction that guides students in their attempts to identify and correct problems in sentence structure and usage. For example, a teacher who sees that many students are writing sentences containing misplaced modifiers can present a mini-lesson on this concept, using examples from student writing. The teacher can have students edit their own and one another's drafts for this problem. Integrating grammar instruction into the revising and editing process helps students make immediate applications, thus allowing them to see the relevance of grammar to their own writing.

Sentence combining is the strategy of joining short sentences into longer, more complex sentences. As students engage in sentence-combining activities, they learn how to vary sentence structure in order to change meaning and style. Numerous studies (Mellon, 1969; O'Hare, 1973; Cooper, 1975; Shaughnessy, 1977; Hillocks, 1986; Strong, 1986) show that the use of sentence combining is an effective method for improving students' writing. The value of sentence combining is most evident as students recognize the effect of sentence variety (beginnings, lengths, complexities) in their own writing.

Hillocks (1986) states that "sentence combining practice provides writers with systematic knowledge of syntactic possibilities, the access to which allows them to sort through alternatives in their heads as well as on paper and to choose those which are most apt" (150). Research also shows that sentence combining is more effective than freewriting in enhancing the quality of student writing (Hillocks, 1986).

Hillocks and Smith (1991) show that systematic practice in sentence combining can increase students' knowledge of syntactic structures as well as improve the quality of their sentences, particularly when stylistic effects are discussed as well. Sentence-combining exercises can be either written or oral, structured or unstructured. Structured sentence-combining exercises give students more guidance in ways to create the new sentences; unstructured sentence-combining exercises allow for more variation, but they still require students to create logical, meaningful sentences. Hillocks (1986) reports that in many studies, sentence-combining exercises produce significant increases in students' sentence-writing maturity.

Given Noguchi's (1991) analysis that grammar choices affect writing style, sentence combining is an effective method for helping students develop fluency and variety in their own writing style. Students can explore sentence variety, length, parallelism, and other syntactic devices by comparing their sentences with sentences from other writers. They also discover the decisions writers make in revising for style and effect.

Teachers can design their own sentence-combining activities by using short sentences from student writing or other appropriate sources. For example, teachers who notice many choppy sentences in students' writing can place these sentences on an overhead for all their students to read. Teachers can then ask different students to combine orally the short sentences in a variety of ways.

By participating in oral and written sentence-combining activities, students better understand the ways in which sentence structure, usage, and punctuation affect meaning.

Strategies Teachers Can Use to Teach Grammar in the Context of Writing

- 1. Integrate grammar into the writing process:** After students have written their first drafts and feel comfortable with the ideas and organization of their writing, teachers may wish to employ various strategies to help students see grammatical concepts as language choices that can enhance their writing purpose. Students will soon grow more receptive to revising, editing, and proofreading their writing. In writing conferences, for example, teachers can help students revise for effective word choices. As the teacher and student discuss the real audience(s) for the writing, the teacher can ask the student to consider how formal or informal the writing should be, and remind the student that all people adjust the level of formality in oral conversation, depending on their listeners and the speaking context. The teacher can then help the student identify words in his or her writing that change the level of formality of the writing.
- 2. Read writing aloud:** This helps students revise boring, monotonous sentences. This strategy helps both the partner and the writer to recognize when, for example, too many sentences begin with "It is" or "There are." Both the partner and the writer can discuss ways to vary the sentence beginnings. After the writer revises the sentences, the partner can read the sentences aloud. Then both can discuss the effectiveness of the revision.
- 3. Present a mini-lesson:** Teachers can help students edit from passive voice to active voice by presenting a mini-lesson. In editing groups, students can exchange papers and look for verbs that often signal the passive voice, such as was and been. When students find these verbs, they read the sentence aloud to their partners and discuss whether the voice is passive and, if so, whether an active voice verb might strengthen the sentence. The student writer can then decide which voice is most effective and appropriate for the writing purpose and audience.
- 4. Peer Editing Groups:** Teachers can help students become better proofreaders through peer editing groups. Based on the writing abilities of their students, teachers can assign different proofreading tasks to specific individuals in each group. For example, one person in the group might proofread for spelling errors, another person for agreement errors, another person for fragments and run-ons, and another person for punctuation errors. As students develop increasing skill in proofreading, they become responsible for more proofreading areas. Collaborating with classmates in peer editing groups helps students improve their own grammar skills as well as understand the importance of grammar as a tool for effective communication.
- 5. Use Grammar Terms:** As teachers integrate grammar instruction with writing instruction, they should use the grammar terms that make sense to the students. By incorporating grammar terms naturally into the processes of revising, editing, and proofreading, teachers help students understand and apply grammar purposefully to their own writing. Strategies such as writing conferences, partnership writing, grammar mini-lessons, and peer response groups are all valuable methods for integrating grammar into writing instruction.

Teaching Grammar/Language So It Sticks



Where Do I Start?

1. Begin with assessment:
 - Create a “Grammar Diagnostic Assessment” to assess “Grammar Gaps” that may exist in your student’s prior knowledge of “Conventions of Standard English” and “Knowledge of Language.”
 - Examine your students’ on-demand writing assignments and/or writing pieces holding your standards as a list of criteria next to each sample, to check which standards the your students appear to have control over and which they do not. Examine these three categories:
 - General mastery of a skill with only occasional typos,
 - Awareness of a skill but with misuse and perhaps confusion
 - No apparent awareness of a skill
2. Through the assessment of the three categories, you can devise which areas you need to spend more whole-class instruction on, which areas are more appropriate for small-group or one-on-one instruction, and equally which areas you might spend more days on than others.
3. Teach the language standards in connection with the writing, reading, speaking, and listening work you are already asking students to do. The language standards are too be taught “in tandem” with other areas of ELA, not in a separate category labeled “Grammar.”
4. Know that when students take on new, more challenging work, sometimes the strategies they knew before fall back a bit. For example, do not lose complete faith when your students’ paragraphs dissolve under the weight of a new type of comma usage. Build strength by not jumping into the most challenging work right away.
5. Plan ahead for repetition of skills. As with everything, one time is not enough. All skills take repeated practice, repeated failures, repeated fix ups, and repeated tries even past the point of proficiency to make the skill automatic. Be prepared to repeat grammar instruction of various skills throughout the year.
6. Be current on research on best practices and be prepared to both teach others and defend your practices to those who are trying to sell you something.

(Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012)

References

- Braddock, R., Lloyd-Jones, R., & Schoer, L. (1963). *Research in written composition*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Calkins, L. M. (1980). When children want to punctuate. *Language Arts*, 57, pages 567-573.
- Calkins, L., Ehrenworth, M., & Lehman, C. (2012). *Pathways to the common core: Accelerating achievement*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cooper, C. (1975). "Research roundup: Oral and written composition. *English Journal*, 64 (72).
- DiStefano, P. & Killion, J. (1984). Assessing writing skills through a process approach. *English Education*, 16 (4), pages 203-207.
- Harris, R. J. (1962). *An experimental inquiry into the functions and value of formal grammar in the teaching of written English to children aged twelve to fourteen*. Ph.D. dissertation. University of London.
- Hillocks, G., Jr. (1986). *Research on written composition: New directions for teaching*. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Conference on Research in English.
- Hillocks, G., Jr. & Smith, M. (1991). Grammar and Usage. *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*. New York: Macmillan.
- Mellon, J. C. (1969). Transformational sentence-combining: A method for enhancing the development of syntactic fluency in English composition. *NCTE Research Report No. 10*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association. (1996). *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Noguchi, R. (1991). *Grammar and the teaching of writing: Limits and possibilities*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- O'Hare, F. (1973). *Sentence-combining: Improving student writing without formal grammar instruction*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Shaughnessy, M. P. (1977). *Errors and expectations: A guide for the teacher of basic writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strong, W. (1986). *Creative approaches to sentence combining*. Urbana, IL: ERIC and the National Council of Teachers of English.
- Weaver, C. (1998). *Lessons to share on teaching grammar in context*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.