

Teaching Grammar

Since at least 1963, when Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer released their findings in *Research in Written Composition*, scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition have agreed that teaching formal grammar has no effect on improving student writing ability. These authors, in an often cited claim, argue that

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: 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 improvements of writing. (37-38)

But while many teachers have come to accept this point of view, some may be less clear about how to respond to student error if correcting student work is also ineffectual.

Constance Weaver, in *Teaching Grammar in Context*, offers twelve guidelines for teaching grammar in the writing class. These guidelines are listed below. While the specific audience for these guidelines may be elementary and secondary teachers, much of it is applicable and integral to college teaching as well. These are good examples of what is possible in the writing class when it comes to helping students write correctly.

Guidelines for Teaching Grammar

- 1. Engage students in writing, writing, and more writing.** Give them plenty of time to write daily, in writing workshops - and see that they write not just during English and language arts, but across the curriculum. Help them reconsider their writing, revise for content and organization, revise again for sentence structure effectiveness, and finally help them edit and proofread their writing for publication or formal sharing of some sort. At levels where students have separate classes in different subjects, writing across the curriculum may require collaboration among teachers, but the results are well worth it.
- 2. Immerse students in good literature, including literature that is particularly interesting or challenging syntactically.** Reading and even listening to well-written literature will promote the acquisition of syntactic structures, for speaking and writing, by both native and non-native speakers of English.
- 3. Across the grades, reserve a thorough study of grammar for elective courses or perhaps units.** Teach to all students only those aspects of grammar that can help them write more effectively.
- 4. Teach these relevant aspects of grammar within the context of students' writing.**
- 5. Introduce only a minimum of terminology,** much of which can be learned sufficiently just through incidental exposure - for example, as we

discuss selected words and structures in the context of literature and writing. For many grammatical terms, receptive competence is all that's needed; that is, students need to understand what the teacher is referring to, but they do not always need enough command of the terms to use such terms themselves.

- 6. Specifically, emphasize (as appropriate to writers' needs) those aspects of grammar that are particularly useful in helping students revise sentences to make them more effective.** These syntactic structures and revision techniques can be taught by example, with terminology used incidentally. Such teaching might include: (1) how to use "new" kinds of syntactic structures that students haven't noticed before; (2) how to reorder and otherwise manipulate sentence elements; (3) how to expand and combine sentences. Teaching such concepts within the context of writing can help students develop more effective writing styles.
- 7. Also emphasize (as appropriate to writers' needs) those aspects of grammar that are particularly useful in helping students edit sentences for conventional mechanics and appropriateness.** Such teaching might include: (1) concepts like subject, verb, and predicate; clause and phrase; grammatical sentences versus run-ons and fragments; (2) usage; (3) grammatical features that differ among the Language of Wider Communication [standard spoken and written dialects in English] and other dialects.
- 8. Teach needed terms, structures, and skills when writers need them, ideally when they are ready to revise at the sentence level or to edit.** Structures and skills that are first practiced during revision and editing may later become sufficiently internalized that they are incorporated into drafting, but at first it is easiest and most effective to deal with them only after a draft has been written and revised for content and organization.
- 9. Explore the grammatical patterns of ethnic and community dialects - through literature, film, and audio-tapes, for example - and contrast these with the corresponding features of the Language of Wider Communication.** Students can make such comparisons by translating a well-known or well-liked text into a particular dialect or by writing original poems, stories, and plays in one or more ethnic and community dialects as well as in the Language of Wider Communication. Such language study and writing can help students appreciate each others' dialects as well as consider which dialects are most appropriate for what kinds of writing and under what circumstances.
- 10. Offer elective courses, units, or activities that allow students to discover the pleasure of investigating questions and making discoveries about language.** A discovery approach to grammar and language will not necessarily involve learning the grammatical elements

and structures from A to Z, but it can involve investigating selected aspects of grammar for the sheer joy of discovering generalizations, appreciating ambiguity, unlocking the mysteries of syntactically challenging poetry and prose, and understanding and employing syntactic alternatives for different rhetorical effects.

- 11. If you teach grammar as inquiry, draw not only upon traditional grammar but upon insights from structural, transformational, and functional linguistics.** Such teaching may involve helping students choose, develop, and collaboratively investigate some questions and problems that will lead them to discover for themselves some of the insights provided by different theoretical approaches to grammar study.

- 12. Become a teacher-researcher to determine the effects of your teaching of selected aspects of grammar or your students' study of grammar as an object of inquiry and discovery.** For example: Are students better able to revise their sentences for greater effectiveness? Better able to edit? More versatile in their use of syntactic alternatives or language variants, such as ethnic and community dialects and the Language of Wider Communication? Better able to explain similarities and differences in grammatical patterns? More interested in revising and editing their writing, or in studying language? Such questions can be investigated by collecting pre-teaching data and, later in the year, comparing such data with data gathered under comparable circumstances. Other questions can be investigated by comparing your data with data from comparable students in classrooms where the teacher uses a different approach. For example: Are your students more or less competent in revising sentences and in editing than are peers in other classes who have simply studied traditional grammar but not had teacher and peer help with revising and editing? Are your students more or less competent in revising and editing than are peers in other classes who have written a lot but not had teacher and peer help in revising and editing? Are any differences in revising and editing skills (or students' growth therein) also reflected in differences in the sections of standardized tests that deal with grammar, punctuation, and usage? In standardized or state-mandated assessment of reading and writing?
(141-46)

Additionally, many teachers have found success in teaching grammar through mini-lessons. Weaver maintains that the mini-lesson, a brief explanation of some skill, rule, routine, or classroom procedure, is one of the best methods for introducing grammatical concepts or reminding students what they may have forgotten. Introduced by Lucy Calkins in her *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Weaver summarizes the characteristics of the mini-lesson below.

Characteristics of Mini-Lessons

1. They are brief, as the term *mini* would suggest. Typically they take no more than five to ten minutes.
2. The teacher explains directly, often without much if any overt interaction with the students. The teacher is simply offering “tips” that he or she thinks will be valuable to students.
3. Mini-lessons can be presented to the whole class when the teacher has reason to believe that several students might profit from the lesson. For instance, if students are using dialogue but not quotation marks, this may prompt the teacher to offer a mini-lesson on the basics of enclosing in quotation marks whatever the speaker has said. When these basics have been mastered by several students, the teacher can teach them additional mini-lessons on the finer points of punctuating direct quotes.
4. When a mini-lesson is presented to the whole class, the teacher does not assume that everyone will or should learn and immediately be able to apply what has been taught; the ideas are simply added “to the class pot,” as Calkins puts it. The teacher knows that he or she will still have to help individual students apply what has been taught, to encourage students to help each other apply it, and possibly to teach similar mini-lessons to the whole class or small groups again, as more students demonstrate a need for the mini-lesson through their writing.
5. Mini-lessons may be taught to the whole class (as explained above), to small groups, or to individuals in one-to-one conferences. Usually mini-lessons are not taught to the whole class unless the teacher has reason to believe that several students might profit immediately.
6. A key feature of mini-lessons is that students are not given follow-up exercises to practice what has been taught. The teacher simply helps them use the information if their writing suggests a need for the skill and they seem ready for it.
7. Both need and readiness are important. For instance, a writer may be presenting a speaker’s exact words without using quotation marks, but if the writer is far from having mastered the conventional use of periods at the ends of sentences, the teacher should realize that the student may not yet be ready to deal with quotation marks.
8. In other words, teachers must be [watching], in order to decide when to teach mini-lessons. (150-51)

Obviously, we can adjust the principles of mini-lessons to fit our own needs in the college classroom. For example, it may be useful to have students briefly practice a new skill like sentence-combining or sentence-extending or thesis statement development after introducing the concept; yet this practice may be more effective if it is performed by the whole class in collaboration with the teacher than by individual

students in silence. Still, mini-lessons acknowledge that just because a concept is taught, it doesn't necessarily follow that it's learned. If our goal is to create a writing class where students are learning to develop as writers, short bursts of relevant information in the form of mini-lessons can be effective tools for promoting that learning. Some mini-lessons are listed in figure 3.

Possible Mini-Lessons

1. The standard essay and reading response format
2. A successful reading response
3. Commonly confused words
4. The writing process
5. Planning an essay
6. Thesis statement
7. Effective introductions
8. Common sentence problems
9. Subject and pronoun agreement
10. Independent clause
11. Joining independent and dependent clauses
12. Sentence-combining and sentence variety
13. Joining independent clauses
14. Using the semi-colon
15. Using the colon
16. Transitions and connectives
17. Using the apostrophe in possessives
18. Using numbers
19. Using quotation marks
20. Referring to titles
21. The punctuation pattern sheet
22. Creating effective titles
23. Connecting a thesis to organization and development
24. Effective paragraphs
25. Writing an impromptu exam
26. Summarizing and paraphrasing
27. Services provided by the academic writing lab
28. What an "A" means
29. The rhetorical situation

Some teachers have also found success in having students create personal handbooks based upon mini-lessons, including strategies for planning, drafting, revising, and editing. For example, when responding to student writing we might ask students to add to their personal handbook a list of words they tend to confuse (like “affect” and “effect”), or particular sentence patterns we’d like them to experiment with, or patterns of punctuation error they’re still struggling with. Similarly, we might ask them to read and summarize a specific section in the handbook on introductions, apostrophes, or the use of numbers, choosing between figures or words.