

Grammar and Mechanics Review

Immediate Objectives: Students will recognize incongruous grammatical and mechanical problems in their own writing, and will be able to restructure sentences according to contemporary usage patterns.

Long term expected outcomes: Because students will use their own writing to locate and restructure sentences, they will be able to develop a “felt sense” of what kinds of miscues make reading problematic, and therefore become sensitive to the fact that writers who are careful to use acceptable grammar and mechanics rules are simply displaying respect for their readers.

Connection to stated course goals: The goals for the Foundations of Writing classes are as follows. In English 099, students should learn or improve the following skills:

1. the ability to write clear and correct sentences.
2. the ability to focus on a central idea and develop it in a logical, coherent paragraph or in a short essay of a few paragraphs.
3. the ability to plan and write their own assignments.
4. the ability to proofread and revise their own work.

Learning to recognize and repair fractured sentences is necessary to achieve any of the stated goals for 099 English. In addition, this exercise also fulfills the first assumption in the CCCC Position Statement, that “language is always learned and used most effectively in environments where it accomplished something the user wants to

accomplish for particular listeners or readers within that environment” (CCCC 2).

Procedure: (This exercise usually lasts an entire 50 minute class period.) After students have produced the first draft of a paper and are ready for their first peer feedback, I like to discuss the purposes of punctuation and mechanics in order to remind them why their peer editing is important.

Resources: blackboard, overhead projector, scissors, grammar handbook, dictionary, thesauruses.

Mini discussion: (5 or 10 minutes) First, I ask them why we bother to learn punctuation. The answer I hope to finally elicit is that punctuation is not a matter of decoration, and that punctuation is how we show our readers that first, we consider what we are writing important, and we care enough about what we are writing to want them to understand it; second, that we have enough pride to want to present our knowledge in an acceptable format; and third, we care enough about the reader to want to be able to present our knowledge clearly and concisely. Most real world writing is utilitarian and thus expository. We write to persuade someone of something, to show what we know, to solve problems.

Step 1: Preparation: After reading through student papers, I ask them for permission to use some of their sentences as examples for class discussion. I then compile the list of sentences and type them onto a sheet of transparent plastic.

Step 2: I, then, print out a copy of the sentences on paper and cut the sentences apart, and then, assign the sentences randomly to students in groups of no more than three.

Sample sentences: Appendix A.

Step 3: Instruction: (10 min.) Please read your sentence and discuss how you *feel* about it. What *feels* wrong? Where does it begin to feel uncomfortable? In your own words discuss what you think the writer is trying to say. Can you write the idea or ideas in simple sentences? Try to fix the sentence. You may use your text or other resources.

Step 4: As I show the sentence on the overhead, I have each group present its sentence. If the class as a whole is not able to fix the sentence, I will present mini lessons on the particular sentence element that is not familiar to them.

Step 5: I will make a note of the difficulties that the students are consistently having and add review of those elements to future plans.

Types of assessment used:

Formative: The exercise itself is a form of formative assessment. Students discuss and present various problems in group and whole-class discussion, which gives me immediate evaluation to help remediate their problems before they write again. This exercise is ungraded.

Summative: The final draft of their essay that they produce should show that they are editing for the kinds of problems discussed in class.

Evaluation criteria: The only evaluation on this kind of assignment would be to evaluate the level of participation each student displayed. Anchor descriptors would work well if I needed to grade it. If I were to leave this exercise for a substitute, I would prepare a scoring guide for levels of participation, so that the class would have incentive to cooperate.

Theoretical rationale:

Teaching grammar is the fly in the ointment for writing teachers who want to move beyond to the higher plane of process (forgive my mixed metaphors). Everyone seems hesitant to agree that it is important, but few agree on the most efficient way to teach it. I work with basic students who have spotty skills. They may be proficient in subject-verb agreement, but have no idea about fragmented sentences. They do not have the concerns that Sommers' experienced writers have for their readership. They do not "imagine a reader whose existence and whose expectations influence their revision process" (Perl 83). Their reader is "partially a reflection of themselves and functions as a critical productive collaborator." Sommers says that the anticipation of a reader's judgment causes a feeling of dissonance when the writer recognizes incongruities between intention and execution, and requires these writers to make revisions on all levels (83). While I believe that participating in peer review panels can build confidence and skill, basic students do not always have the proficiency to be effective. They do not yet have the "felt sense." (102). Therefore, in order to fulfill our writing program goals, I must spend some time reviewing grammar and mechanics.

I try to avoid traditional drill and practice because so many studies over the last 15 – 20 years have shown that it is ineffective when divorced from the writing process (Cotton 5). I try to have the exercise evolve naturally as a discussion that occurs between drafts that broaches topics that students want to talk about if they are invested in becoming good writers. Holbrook (qtd. in Cotton 5) and others have shown that grammar instruction which relates directly to students' writing can enhance writing achievement. "Grammar instruction that is concrete, relevant to students' own writing, and

focused on the process of writing develops mature writers” (Sealy qtd. in Cotton 5). This exercise fulfills these criteria.

The format of the exercise echoes the process format that many students are now familiar and comfortable with. There is a discussion/prewriting stage that happens before the groups have to respond with a correct answer. This stage recognizes the importance of the social aspect of writing, and gives the group opportunity to test theories within their groups before they are presented to the whole class. “Research seems to show that students who are encouraged to engage in an array of prewriting experiences evidence greater writing achievement” (Parson, et al. qtd. in Cotton 4). There is opportunity for drafting and revising and editing. The group’s product is then publicized to the class. Cotton quotes Sommers and Collins (1984), Smith (1982), and others as claiming that investigators have found that student motivation and achievement are enhanced when student work is “published” for a larger audience than the teacher(5).

Constance Weaver, in an article for the November 1996 English Journal, wrote that what all students need is guidance in understanding and applying those aspects of grammar that are most relevant to writing. Her book Teaching Grammar in Context includes suggestions that “we teach a minimum of grammar for maximum benefits” (Weaver 3). She includes five categories: teaching concepts of subject, verb, sentence, clause, phrase, and related concepts for editing; teaching style through sentence combining and sentence generating; teaching sentence sense and style through manipulation of syntactic elements; teaching the power of dialects and dialects of power; and teaching punctuation and mechanics for convention, clarity, and style. She also states that there are no miracles, that grammatical concepts must be taught and retaught. “I

am convinced," she says, "that one reason our traditional teaching of grammar has little transfer to writing situation is the underlying behaviorist learning theory. we have simply taken for granted the behaviorist idea that practice makes perfect and that skills practiced in isolation will be learned that way and then applied as relevant." She cites Harris and Rowan as saying that a conscious grasp of grammatical concepts requires a depth of understanding that is not often gained through practice exercises alone (5).

Certain aspects of the constructivist theory of learning seem especially relevant for the teaching of grammar. One is that the learner must form hypotheses about concepts in the process of coming to understand them (Weaver 6). This exercise encourages students to form hypotheses about sentences and to test those hypotheses in a non-threatening environment. "Errors are probably necessary in the process of formulating more sophisticated hypotheses"(Shaughnessy qtd. in Weaver 6).

John Schafer in his article for the December 1988 English Journal, "Punctuation and Process: A Matter of Emphasis," makes several practical suggestions for teaching punctuation. He credits Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations (1977, NY: Oxford UP) with many of his suggestions. Among others, he says that punctuation should be taught as a means to achieve larger goals. By using this exercise during the drafting and before the peer editing segments of the writing process, I can help students to see the larger goals. Schafer says one way is to respond first to the meaning of student papers and then, move to punctuation problems and show how improved punctuation would convey the message more effectively. He goes on to suggest relating instruction in punctuation to the students' own writing. Here he echoes the research Cotton cited in her meta-

analysis. He also believes that teachers should teach punctuation as a process of making, not simply marking, sentences. In my exercise, students learn to de-compose unwieldy sentences into simple ones and then to re-compose them by combining these sentences in appropriate forms (Schafer 47).

Erika Lindemann suggests that older students sometimes attempt such extraordinarily complicated sentences that the syntax gets twisted. "They may be writing to please teachers who implicitly praise 'long' sentences; nevertheless, they develop a style that obscures ideas in hopelessly convoluted syntax" (162). (See my examples above and in Appendix A). She recommends the two step de-combining and recombining procedure that I use to untangle, tighten, and rewrite sentences too complex for a reader to follow (164).

Typically, this procedure reduces the incidence of the errors that the class tackles in these cram sessions in subsequent papers. I usually find new kinds of errors with each paper, but I only address the most common and consistent ones with the whole class. I plan to include more sentence combining and group analysis in my classes.

I agree with Bob Reising who finds that motivation is key in forming good writers. "Unless a writer senses a purpose in what she or he is undertaking," he says, "neither good writings nor good writing habits will be formed. A writing teacher...has no more important task than to prove that communication and education work, that they are the avenues leading to success and fulfillment in the contemporary world" (Reising 2). Once I get students to realize the larger goal of effective communication, then they are not reluctant to take the sometimes tedious avenues to get there.

Works Cited

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Appendix A

These samples of sentences taken from my students' papers represent different kinds of common errors I encounter.

1. New friends I had that I did not know existed.
2. One of the largest reasons that going to school out of state is beneficial, but it is a stage of growing older.
3. I made all the decisions. What time I went to bed, if I had class in the morning , I choose whether to go or not.
4. A big change, responsibility, how I learned it the hard way.
5. Sleeping in and missing my nine o'clock, because I did not go to sleep until six.
6. The time I spent away from home.
7. I seriously believe movie stars have the right idea I love being chauffeured around.
8. I'm so embarrassed when I'm riding with my sister's when they take me places, because everybody's like look he's riding with his sister's how sweet.
9. Some people like living in a city because they have lived there for there whole life.
10. There is more recreational facilities for your families.
11. Meeting new people can be very interesting by knowing what type of music they may listen to.
12. Me and my kids would play from dawn to dusk.
13. I wish I would have known that I was marrying into such a family, I would have ran the other way.

14. A girlfriend is also someone I can share my feelings with instead of bothering my friends all of the time I will have someone there that I can tell.
15. I do not get to spend hardly any time with my friends, because I am always with her.
16. The long term financial loss.
17. Although there are some advantages to commuting also.
18. Even if commuting causes me to waste gas when I can be living at school or when living with parents when I could have to chance of having a bad roommate.
20. By my mom seeing how well I took on the responsibilities while she was gone I thought with Caleb and I being so close in age we would get to do the same things, but we don't, my parents are a lot more lenient on him then they ever were on me.