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Constance Weaver

Grammar an “Inch Wide and a Mile Deep”: Approaching Common Core Standards

In educator-activist Marion Brady’s recent “Education Reform: An Order-of-Magnitude Improvement,” he comments on the “common core standards” being implemented by more than forty states. He points out the unexamined assumptions that are part of the reason why this effort will fail. One assumption, of course, is that all students can—and, another assumption, will choose to—master the common core standards if only the teachers teach right (<http://www.truth-out.org/education-reform-magnitude-improvement/1327433628>, January 12, 2012). We teachers know better.

Brady writes:

What’s wrong with “the core”? For its content to be processed, stored in memory, retrieved and combined in novel ways to create new knowledge, it would have to be well organized and integrated. It isn’t. It’s a confusing, random, overwhelming, intellectually unmanageable assortment of facts, specialized vocabularies, disconnected conceptual frameworks, and abstractions—the whole too far removed from life as the young live it for them to care about it.

So they don’t.

Since the machinery to impose these standards upon teachers and students is well under way, with some schools beginning to implement in 2011-2012 under Race to the Top and other states gearing up for the imposition by or before 2014, what are we teachers to do?

I fear that one of the first things many English language arts teachers will do is look at the relatively simplistic standards for grammar and begin scrounging online for clever

There are all too many resources that can give us the illusion that our students have learned grammar.

resources to “teach” grammar, hunt for cheap grammar texts that they can use in classrooms, and perhaps furtively, latch onto grammar hand-

books they can obtain online or in local bookstores, to cram for the tests required of their students. This, it is easy to think, is something we can teach, or at least have students do: activities that often require just imitation of a model, with no teaching that helps them apply the model. The profession tried that in the 1970s, badgered by the demand for simplistic behavioral objectives and publishers’ eagerness to supply texts, exemplified by the consumable grammar texts that followed. Students looked at models, filled in blanks,

checked their answers in the back, and promptly forgot what they allegedly had learned.

Are we heading for another round of fake teaching and mimic learning? There are all too many resources that can give us the illusion that our students have learned grammar. After all, the grammar exercises are a lot like the tests—and deliberately so. Hey, we hardly even need teachers for this kind of “learning”—which is exactly what the corporations that produce such materials hope, and the politicians who support them.

In addition, what we’re missing with the isolated grammar approach are the rich opportunities to help our student readers and writers gain appreciation for and command over grammatical options and editing conventions from the texts we hope they’ll

still be allowed to read (see Kelly Gallagher’s *Readicide*, 2008). Recognizing that wide reading—free voluntary reading (Krashen, 2004)—is most important in helping our students develop a

sense of style, there is still much that we can do, including helping our students analyze deeply a writer’s style. In this context, we can teach grammar “an inch wide and a mile deep,” as expressed by Theresa Reagan-Donk, of Hudsonville, Michigan public schools.

From the common core standards document on English language arts, there’s a list of eighteen standards, eighteen “Language Progressive Skills” the authors suggest are “particularly likely to require continued attention in higher grades as they are applied to increasingly sophisticated writing and speaking” (Common Core Standards . . . , p. 30; see Figure 1). I choose not to include the suggested grades but rather to appeal to your experience with your own students’ writing. Which of these standards might your students, many or most of them, find in their zone of proximal development, something they can learn if you collaborate with them?

Figure 1. Language Progressive Skills from the Common Core Standards

- L.3.1f Ensure subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement.
- L.3.3a Choose words and phrases for effect.

- L.4.1f Produce complete sentences, recognizing and correcting inappropriate fragments and run-ons.
- L.4.1g Correctly use frequently confused words (e.g., to/too; there/their).
- L.4.3a Choose words and phrases to convey ideas precisely.
- L.4.3b Choose punctuation for effect.
- L.5.1d Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb tense.
- L.5.2a Use punctuation to separate items in a series.
- L.6.1c Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in pronoun number and person.
- L.6.1d Recognize and correct vague pronouns (i.e., ones with unclear or ambiguous antecedents).
- L.6.1e Recognize variations from Standard English in their own and others' writing and speaking, and identify and use strategies to improve expression in conventional language.
- L.6.2a Use punctuation (commas, parentheses, dashes) to set off nonrestrictive/parenthetical elements.
- L.6.3a Vary sentence patterns for meaning, reader/listener interest, and style.
- L.6.3b Maintain consistency in style and tone.
- L.7.1c Place phrases and clauses within a sentence, recognizing and correcting misplaced and dangling modifiers.
- L.7.3a Choose language that expresses ideas precisely and concisely, recognizing and eliminating wordiness and redundancy.
- L.8.1d Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb voice and mood.
- L.9-10.1 Use parallel structure.

We need first to examine our students' writing to see what they can and can't yet do. Of course we all know that there's great variation, but what patterns of mastery and need seem to characterize the majority of our students? That's at least a place to start.

And then a further question: Which features in the standards do most of your students handle well? Which can your students begin to use in their writing, at first with your scaffolding and then with increasing independence? Which ones could be taught before students write, by examining and yes, initially imitating, examples from literary and informational texts? Which of these language features—maybe all?—would need to be retaught, perhaps repeatedly, during the revision process?

Let's take, as an example, the following sentence from Annie Dillard's piece "Living Like Weasels," in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982):

He [the weasel] was ten inches long, thin as a curve, a muscled ribbon, brown as fruitwood, soft-furred, alert.

Here, we have a series of descriptors after the pronoun "He" that they modify. These occur as "predicate adjectives," but that's hardly relevant to a reader or writer: What's relevant

is the effectiveness of the list in portraying the weasel. So which language skills might we naturally address in discussing such an example? In deciding to focus on this sentence, I could address a variety of standards:

- grammatical parallelism (not exact, but these are all adjectival in function), standard L.9-10.1a
- punctuation to separate items in a series, standard 5.2A
- effective words and phrases, standard L.3.3a
- language that expresses ideas precisely and concisely . . . , standard L.7.3a

Noticing what they find effective, students would probably mention the list of modifiers and some of the particularly effective words. I could point out the name for a series of this sort, parallelism, and the use of commas to separate items.

The essay "Living Like Weasels" opens with the following paragraph, exemplifying a few of the wealth of language skills Annie Dillard commands so effortlessly. See what language features of the passage you might focus on, then correlate as many as you can with the list of language skills that need repeated teaching over the grades:

A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks? He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose. Sometimes he lives in his den for two days without leaving. Outside, he stalks rabbits, mice, muskrats, and birds, killing more bodies than he can eat warm, and often dragging the carcasses home. Obedient to instinct, he bites his prey at the neck, either splitting the jugular vein at the throat or crunching the brain at the base of the skull, and he does not let go. One naturalist refused to kill a weasel who was socketed into his hand deeply as a rattlesnake. The man could in no way pry the tiny weasel off, and he had to walk half a mile to water, the weasel dangling from his palm, and soak him off like a stubborn label.

With this passage, and depending upon the grade level, I might focus on varying "sentence patterns for meaning, reader/listener interest, and style" (standard L.6.3a). I might focus on the placement of phrases, part of standard L.7.1c, emphasizing the importance of putting adverbial modifiers at the beginning of a sentence when appropriate, thus either ending the sentence with the main subject-verb clause or inviting more modifiers to be added, typically one or more that describe the subject of the sentence. The following is a case in point:

Outside, he stalks rabbits, mice, muskrats, and birds, killing more bodies than he can eat warm, and often dragging the carcasses home.

The less experienced writer, or simply one who hasn't been sufficiently exposed to the strategy of foregrounding adverbial modifiers when possible, would probably write:

He stalks rabbits, mice, muskrats, and birds outside.

Wouldn't you agree that "outside" is anticlimactic at the end? Better to indicate the location at the beginning of the sentence, setting the stage for the rest, and making it easier—in some cases, if not this—to add modifiers at the end of the sentence. (And why waste our time trying to figure out what the phrases with "killing" and "dragging" modify? Unless it's fun, of course.)

If you are teaching at an appropriate grade level, what aspects of the paragraph or what sentence or sentences might you want your students to imitate as writers? We should remember, of course, that wide reading is surely the best teacher of grammatical fluency, for many students.

But as we teach, just one imitation of a sentence or phrase, even several imitations followed by expansions of a basic sentence, will not be nearly enough. Students will need to imitate more and more models from texts, perhaps write in groups with less direction, and try the features in their own writing. (Some sample grammatical options are included in Figure 2, but ideally sample sentences would derive from, and be discussed within, grammatically and stylistically effective paragraphs.)

Here are some suggested steps (drawn from my model in Weaver with Bush, 2008), which I offer fully aware that we can't often follow most of a sequence of this nature, but also remembering that those language skills in the common core standards are to be taught repeatedly through several grades:

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- The diagram shows two arrows pointing to 'from literature (the starting point)' and 'from a previous or current student'. Below these, for step 1, there are two arrows pointing to 'created by the teacher in advance' and 'composed by the teacher on the spot'. For step 2, there are two arrows pointing to 'teacher alone' and 'teacher and students together'.
1. Share a model
 - from literature (the starting point)
 - from a previous or current student
 - created by the teacher in advance
 - composed by the teacher on the spot
 2. Create another model
 - teacher alone
 - teacher and students together
 3. Have students compose (or do a related preparatory activity) in small groups or pairs and share their work. Clarify as needed.
 4. Have students compose a sentence or sentences individually and share their work. Check the work if desired and possible.
 5. Ask students to apply the concept (language skill) in their own writing, whether in previous writing from their portfolio or to writing in progress.
 6. Examine the students' work, individually as well as collectively, to see what scaffolding is needed in the revision process, or processes.

Before step 6 is where we teachers have tended to halt, often bemoaning what we perceive as many students' inability to learn and apply what we've taught, and leaving it at that, with our students just at the cusp of learning.

Revision is the key, but teaching revision at the sentence and paragraph level is too often confined to a few exercises in a grammar text, not taught in the context of students' writing, where it has the

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greatest chance of making a difference. Despite the time it takes, if we want the joy that success brings, we must bring revision to the rescue. We have to scaffold revision, showing the students, guiding them, revealing to them the impact of their writing, and demonstrating that by publishing their writing to a wider audience.

Perhaps we've all tried to help students combine sentences for greater effect—sometimes when even we think it can't be done! I, too, have looked agape at an occasional piece of student writing that seems to offer no place to start revising, something that leaves me shaking my head and promising myself I'll do more pre-teaching of grammatical options "next time."

But sometimes we are lucky, and can show a whole class of students how some sentences can be expanded with modifiers. The following sentences from Julie Nickelson's persuasive piece on school uniforms get adverbial modifiers out of the way at the beginning of the sentence, thus setting the stage for possible modifiers at the end (for more details, see my examples in Weaver with Bush, 2008, where Julie's paper is used with permission in the discussion of revision):

By having uniforms, we would not be distracted by the "showy" clothes that many students currently wear to school.
If we had uniforms, it would help us keep focused in class.

Now what if we engaged Julie and her classmates in brainstorming for details they could add to these sentences? Perhaps we'd need to share examples first, but look at what humorous sentences might be created:

By having uniforms, we would not be distracted by the "showy" clothes that many students currently wear to school, despite the rules we have against low-slung jeans, revealing necklines, tight sweaters, and the like.

If we had uniforms, it would help us keep focus in class, boring as it sometimes might be, for we wouldn't have to worry about fashion—what earrings Joanie is wearing today, whether Barbie's neckline offers a view of her bra, or whether Lionel's jeans are not only low-slung but so loose they're in danger of falling off.

See what I mean? When we and our students have fun with grammar, won't the learning be painless? And more likely to "stick"?

Maybe we can't say the same for editing, but many of the rest of the eighteen-item list of language progressive skills can be most productively addressed while helping students edit, not in grammar exercises.

As Marion Brady claims in that same article from about the mishmash constituting the common core standards,

We make sense by choosing from elaborating options for who, what, when, where and why, and weaving our choices together systemically. As options increase and potential systemic relationships multiply, ever-better sense is made, creativity is stimulated and knowledge expands.

He actually includes a sentence example of increasing grammatical and semantic complexity, but he's talking not just about sentences and sentence structures, but about the whole of knowledge as we learners—teachers, students, everybody—construct our world of thought, language, and experience.

In that context, language skills and skills standards play only a tiny role, but I submit that the value of teaching these in the

If we teach students well, the standardized tests—with only a little review, and using our own students' work whenever possible—will take care of themselves.

tests—with only a little review, and using our own students' work whenever possible—will take care of themselves. Or at least our students will likely do as well or better on them than the students who have been drilled in grammar day after day.

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Appendix

Stylistic options

Exploring Parallelism and Adjectival Modifiers

Many more examples are included in my Grammar Plan Book (2007) and, with Jonathan Bush, Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing (2008).

Parallelism: The One, Two, Three Punch . . . or More

(Sometimes just two items that are grammatically parallel are effective, but "parallelism" usually refers to three grammatically parallel items and sometimes more. The items must have "the same" structure to be parallel, but "the same" may be loosely or tightly defined. Parallel items may be single words, such as verbs in a series, or phrases, clauses, even sentences. The following examples are all phrases "headed" by the grammatically same kind of word, grammatically speaking.)

Or did the eagle eat what he could, gutting the living weasel with his talons before his breast, bending his beak, cleaning the beautiful airborne bones? (Annie Dillard, "Living Like Weasels." All the participial phrases have an object after the -ing form, too.)

He had, it seemed, a taste for the theatre; he began by holding horses at the stage door. Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practicing his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen. (Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. Notice that there are two sets of parallel phrases here, one of verb phrases and the other of participial phrases.)

Adjectives and Adjectival Phrases: Modifiers that Come After

The following examples illustrate various subcategories of adjectival phrases—with the implication that students can learn to use such modifying phrases with good models, through imitation, and without necessarily learning terminology. Individual kinds can be taught if it's deemed necessary, but promoting such fluency by using models may help give confidence initially. The examples are all from "Living Like Weasels," by Annie Dillard.

Brains are private places, muttering through unique and secret tapes.

He was ten inches long, thin as a curve, a muscled ribbon, brown as fruitwood, soft-furred, alert.

I was stunned into stillness, twisted backward on the tree trunk.

There was just a dot of chin, maybe two hairs' worth, and then the pure white fur began that spread down his underside.

He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose.

I waited motionless, my mind suddenly full of data and my spirit with pleadings, but he didn't return.

Present Participial Phrases: Creating Action, Even in the Past

(Present participial, -ing phrases are often “nonessential” modifiers that describe a noun or pronoun. Such modifiers usually occur at the end or beginning of a sentence, set off by a comma; they can occur in the middle of a sentence, too, set off by a pair of commas.)

[Should the entire participial phrase be underlined in the following examples? Actually, what I find works well is to literally underline the entire phrase but put the head word in italics also. I have found that boldfacing usually does not show up well.]

The wind coming off the prairie had been strong all day, sometimes gusting wildly. (Jim Murphy, *The Great Fire*)

Running clumsily across the dirt street, Sullivan made his way directly to the barn. (Murphy)

Recalling the fire, the old woman shuddered. (Murphy)

Doris was sitting alone in the living room, hugging a pillow and rocking back and forth on the edge of a chair. (Cynthia Rylant, *Every Living Thing*).

The puppy stopped in the road, wagging its tail timidly, trembling with shyness and cold. (Rylant)

Remembering my manners, I took nice little lady-like bites off the edges. (Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*)

She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her. (Angelou)

Appositives: Renaming More Specifically

(An appositive is a noun or pronoun word or phrase that further identifies or adds identifying information to a preceding noun or pronoun. The noun heading the following phrases is underlined below.)

He felt he could see a low dark form, a bulk in the darkness, a shadow that lived, but now it moved away, slithering and scraping it moved away and he saw or thought he saw it go out of the door opening. (Gary Paulsen, *Hatchet*)

The smell was one of rot, some musty rot that made him think only of graves with cobwebs and dust and old death. (Paulsen).

Pat Delaney, a saloon keeper who lived a couple of blocks up the street, said that Saint Bernards drool for the best of all possible reasons. (Sterling North, *Rascal*)

My father, a meticulous bookkeeper, used only an abacus, a brush ink, and Chinese ledgers. (Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*)

I transferred to Bret Harte School, a gingerbread two-story building in which there was a notable absence of Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, and the other nationalities of the Lincoln high school. (Galarza, “The New House,” from his *Barrio Boy*).

Absolutes: Zooming In

(An absolute consists of a noun as sort of a “subject,” which is followed by a modifier, often one beginning with an action word ending in -ing. Typically, an absolute is an almost-sentence, which could be made into a full sentence by adding is or are, was or were. Writers use these to “zoom in” on a detail of someone, something, or an action.)

The girl rushed across the stage, her long hair streaming behind her. (based on Gary Soto, *The Concert*)

The poor sat on the fifth tier on painted boxes, bodies leaning in the direction of the music that couldn't arrive fast enough to meet their lives. (Soto)

She sat back down and together, heads touching like lovers, we looked down to the first floor . . . (Soto)

Constance (Connie) Weaver, Professor Emerita of English at Western Michigan University, is currently the Heckert Endowed Professor of Reading and Writing at Miami University in Ohio. She has published several books on the teaching of grammar in context, beginning with the 1979 *Grammar for Teachers* published by the NCTE, continuing through *Grammar in Context* (1996), and most recently *The Grammar Plan Book* (2007) and, with Jonathan Bush, *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing* (2008). She has published several books on reading, including *Reading Process and Practice* (3rd ed., 2002), available as a shorter *Reading Process* (2009). She plans to return to her Kalamazoo, Michigan, home after retiring from Miami. Her interests include mountains and waterfalls, oceans and travel—which, of course, she doesn't get to enjoy often enough!