11-2017

Student-Centered Approaches to Teaching Grammar and Writing

Lindsay J. Jeffers

Western Michigan University, lindsay.j.jeffers@wmich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Part of the [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jeffers, Lindsay J. (2018) "Student-Centered Approaches to Teaching Grammar and Writing," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 33: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2172>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

METHODS

Student-Centered Approaches to Teaching Grammar and Writing

LINDSAY JEFFERS

The Case of the Prepositions Test and Other Traditional Approaches

March 2016: In a southwest Michigan middle school, seventh-grade students quiz each other as they work with a partner to memorize a list of forty nine prepositions. The prepositions test is a significant portion of their third-quarter grade in English Language Arts. The students are preparing for their summative assessment, a blank piece of paper numbered 1-49. A final question asked students to write one sentence beginning with a prepositional phrase. It is the only question that required students to think beyond rote recitation.

At this middle school, English Language Arts teachers provided a handout for students with a list titled, “the 49 most common prepositions.” The handout included the following justification for memorization:

Why are prepositions so important?

1. It is improper to end a sentence with a preposition.
2. The subject of a sentence is never in a prepositional phrase (once you know this, you should eliminate fragments from your writing).

Unfortunately, these justifications are both flawed. Many traditional grammar rules, such as “never end a sentence with a preposition” have long been considered irrelevant to modern English. Mignon Fogarty, technical writer and creator of *Grammar Girl*, named this rule number one of her top ten grammar myths, because, “many people believe it’s true, but most grammarians disagree” (Fogarty, 2011). According to Catherine Sloane, a teacher, lexicographer, and blogger for the Oxford Dictionary, the rule has roots in Latin, a language no longer spoken. She noted that many English constructions sound “very stilted” and some sentences would be impossible if prepositions were moved to their “supposed correct positions” (Sloane, 2011). She concluded that placing prepositions at the end of a sentence was, “perfectly natural and part of standard English” (Sloane, 2011).

The teachers’ second justification is equally misguided.

There are decades of research to show that the memorization of parts of speech, the diagramming of sentences, the drilling of grammar rules, and the correcting of grammar mistakes on worksheets does not result in improved writing. Thus, memorizing prepositions and identifying sentence components is very unlikely to eliminate fragments in middle-school students’ writing.

In her 2014 blog post for *Writers Who Care*, Patricia Dunn discussed important research by Findlay McQuade (1980), George Hillocks (1987), and, more recently, Steve Graham and Dolores Perin (2007). McQuade opened his 1980 *English Journal* article by admitting that he continued to teach grammar despite professional literature claiming it did little good. He named his reasons: tradition; pressures from parents, administrators, and foreign language teachers; the arrogant belief that he could teach grammar better than all of those studies; and guilt--“If I do not teach grammar--good Lord, what will become of my forsaken students?” (p. 26). McQuade hoped to prove that traditional methods of teaching grammar would have a positive impact on students, improving their writing and scores on standardized tests, including the school’s Cooperative English Test, the SAT, and the College Board’s Achievement in Composition test. According to McQuade and his students, the course was a great success, and students felt that they had learned a lot. But McQuade was dismayed at the evidence of pre- and post-tests. The students had not improved their editorial skills, nor had they improved their writing. Instead of focusing on meaning, content, and fluency in writing, the students focused on avoiding errors, simplifying their sentences and treating writing as a set of editorial rules. But even with the students’ focus on avoiding errors, McQuade wrote, “the number of errors involving the more complex skills of grammar and general punctuation was not reduced at all, no matter how hard the students had tried at no matter what cost to their writing” (McQuade, 1980, p. 30).

In a more comprehensive study, George Hillocks also found that student writing deteriorated after traditional grammar instruction (1987). Thirty years later, after a 2007 meta-analysis of studies on writing instruction, Steve Graham and

Dolores Perin also recommended against isolated grammar drills. As instructional practices, they found that sentence-combining, prewriting, process-oriented work, and student inquiry all resulted in improvement of student writing. As part of their analysis, the authors evaluated grammar instruction that focused on parts of speech and sentence structure. They concluded that their findings, “raise serious questions about some educators’ enthusiasm for traditional grammar instruction as a focus of writing instruction for adolescents” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 21). The authors explained that the negative effect of grammar instruction on student writing was small, but statistically significant, “indicating that traditional grammar instruction is unlikely to help improve the quality of students’ writing” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 21). To summarize, multiple studies from 1980 to 2007 arrived at the same conclusion: traditional approaches to teaching grammar, through diagramming and the memorization of grammar rules, has a detrimental effect on student writing.

What’s Changed in Fifty Years?

This *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* issue celebrates the summer of 1966 and the conscious movement toward process writing and student-centered instruction. In some ways, we have made great gains. Writing workshop is a common term in English Language Arts instruction. Teachers value the writing process in classrooms, dedicating instructional time to drafting, response groups, and revision. The National Writing Project began in 1974, and teachers were encouraged to identify themselves as writers. Summer institutes flourished as teacher-writers worked together to improve writing instruction for students of all ages. And yet, traditional approaches to the teaching of grammar (memorization, worksheets, sentence correcting) are still part of many English classes.

Despite overwhelming research to its ineffectiveness, good teachers are still relying on traditional methods at all levels of instruction. In the spring of 2016, I interviewed some of the most highly-regarded English teachers at a large, local high school for research about the preparation of student teachers. Most of the teachers I interviewed stated that preservice teachers were unprepared to teach writing and basic rules of grammar, and they advocated for a traditional grammar course to be offered at the university as a requirement for future teachers. One teacher especially emphasized the need for “systemic teaching of grammar,” at all grade levels, insisting that the diagramming of sentences could

help students understand structure and correctness. She explained, “even simple diagramming of sentences would help them [students] understand where the placement of a subject or a verb goes so that students would have a framework of semantics with which a teacher could discuss grammar.” She added, “grammar needs to be taught systemically in a composition class again” (author, 2017).

Why are seventh-graders spending precious classroom hours memorizing prepositions and false rules about writing? Why are high-school students still diagramming sentences and completing grammar worksheets in English classes? Middle-school teacher Gwen Flaskamp likened the “deep-seated loyalty to tradition” to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery.” In a 2015 blog post, she admitted that despite our commitment to learning, educators, “would prefer to die at the stake in support of certain traditional classroom practices rather than admit that some of the activities we have been devoting energy to instructionally won’t ever produce the results we want to see in our students” (Flaskamp, 2015). A 2014 article posted in *The Atlantic* by associate professor Michelle Navarre Cleary discussed the “high cost” of traditional grammar methods for the students at an urban community college where she taught composition. They mistakenly believed that they needed to learn grammar rules before they could begin writing, and their obsession over not making errors precluded them from actually writing. Cleary blamed this on developmental writing classes in the community college system. The students who tested into these classes spent a year focused on traditional grammar instruction instead of writing. She concluded, “These students are victims of the mistaken belief that grammar lessons must come before writing, rather than grammar being something that is best learned through writing” (Cleary 2014).

Along with tendencies to teach as we were taught, educators are also under pressure from parents and administrators who assume that traditional methods are most effective. Teachers may be questioned for alternative approaches if parents believe that traditional grammar instruction is a necessary component of English classes. Parents and administrators may expect worksheets and grammar tests as part of a good education. Our nation’s current devotion to standardized testing is also to blame. When schools focus on standardized test scores as indicators of learning, writing time is replaced with test preparation, and multiple-choice tests are preferred because they provide easy data. Students may be asked to choose grammatically correct sentences over incorrect options on standardized tests, and those grammar

questions may account for a significant portion of a student's writing score. Finally, when teachers are overwhelmed by large classes and little planning time, grammar worksheets are an easy and straightforward instructional strategy. For all of these reasons, traditional approaches to grammar instruction still have a place in our classrooms.

A Constructivist, Student-Centered Approach

Memorization and recitation as assessment of student learning is a decades (likely centuries) old method of teaching. In her article, "Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing" (1996), Constance Weaver noted that we tend to think of teaching with a behaviorist approach. She wrote, "We have simply taken for granted the behaviorist ideas that practice makes perfect and that skills practiced in isolation will be learned that way and then applied as relevant. We have assumed that this is the way teaching and learning should work, despite the overwhelming evidence that it doesn't." Indeed, students completing isolated grammar drills or listing prepositions are not thinking about writing. When they do write, an intense focus on lists of prepositions or the diagramming of each sentence is not helpful.

Instead, a more constructivist approach operates on the idea that learning is flexible and individual, and errors are necessary as students learn, hypothesize, and grow. Weaver also felt that our expectations of students may be misguided. Students do not learn a rule once and never repeat the error again. Weaver wrote, "There are no miracles here. That is, teaching grammar in the context of writing will not automatically mean that once taught, the concepts will be learned and applied forever after. On the contrary, grammatical concepts must often be taught and retaught...There is no quick fix."

How can we help students improve their writing while also helping them to understand how language works? What does a process-writing, student-centered approach to teaching grammar look like? In my own experience, I can agree with Weaver that there is no "quick fix" for a student struggling with punctuation, or subject-verb agreement, or spelling errors. This is true for my students, and it's true for me. How many times have I looked up the usage of lay vs. lie? Too many! I also frequently look up the rules for APA and MLA citation styles despite using them extensively in my own writing.

While I hope that this article will deter new teachers from ineffective traditional approaches, and perhaps even persuade believers of "systemic grammar instruction" that

their efforts are misguided, I also hope to offer student-centered, process-based practices that have been useful and effective in my freshman composition courses. The students do not write grammatically-perfect papers, and many are still struggling to apply basic rules of punctuation and usage. But I also know that comma drills are a waste of their time and tuition dollars, and what they learn about style and language through this mode of instruction is significant.

Modeling: Teaching Grammar in the Context of Student Writing

In the classes I teach, I constantly hunt for well-written sentences. I pluck them from student papers, sometimes just one sentence, sometimes more. I'm on the lookout for well-written sentences whenever I read. In class, we look at 12-15 examples together, spending class time discussing why these sentences are effective. The writers are not identified, but by using the students' work, I've acknowledged that these are techniques that student writers (not just published authors) can use. Here are some examples from a recent first-year writing class:

The movie ended. The credits rolled. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

This group of short sentences led to a discussion about punctuation and the way commas, semicolons, and periods affect readers. I asked, "how would this sentence read differently if the writer had used commas or semicolons instead of periods?" We also talked about repetition and rhythm for effect. I walked right out with my ice cold cup of Vernors and a grin from ear to ear.

This sentence led our class to talk about detail and concrete language (a term we had been using in class) and the juxtaposition of "an ice cold cup of Vernors and a grin from ear to ear." The students noted the way the sentence effectively conveys the author's happiness through specific details and "show, don't tell."

If I was afraid I would be more careful, I would be more watchful, and I would be more diligent.

With a lot of people and their luggage going through securities, talking to the clerks at the service desk, and rushing to wherever they needed to be, the scenario was all new to me.

With these two sentences, I taught the term "parallel structure." The students pointed out that both sentences included a grouping of three similar phrases or structures. We also discussed the use of the present participle form of the

verb in the second example. I pointed out that the use of the -ing form indicates ongoing action. If the writer had used the past participled endings instead, readers wouldn't "see" the action because the sentence would read as if the actions had been completed. Though I didn't use the terms present and past participle in our discussion, the students clearly recognized that -ing verbs were used for actions in progress, and -ed endings were used for past tense. A writer could decide which form of the verb to use and think about whether to put the reader in the present or the past tense. The student examples led us into a deeper conversation about writing, including the use of punctuation and grammatical structures. Although my students were unable to name those structures, they effectively used and recognized them.

Although these conversations took place in a college classroom, students can use sentence models at any level. Jeff Anderson, a middle-school writing instructor and author of *Mechanically Inclined* (2005), also emphasized teaching writing through models. His middle-school students chose model sentences themselves and pasted them into their writing notebooks. Once they found these sentences, they used simplified grammatical terminology to create rules that they could use to improve their own writing, imitating the grammatical structures of the model sentence. Anderson also chose model sentences from the books students were reading in class. After analyzing the opening sentence of Robert Peck's *The Teacher's Funeral: A Comedy in Three Parts*, Anderson's students created this simplified grammar rule:

Opener, Sentence (Use a comma after a long introduction)

Imitating this structure, one of Anderson's students wrote, "When I opened her diaper, it wasn't what I expected." (Anderson, 2005, 20). Another wrote, "If you won't say it, then I will" (Anderson, 2005, 20). These students applied the rule to their own writing and effectively used an opener joined to an independent clause by a comma.

Harry Noden employed a similar approach to grammar in *Image Grammar* (1999), presenting writing as an art where students use words to "breathe life" into their writing. As an example, Noden described, "painting with participles," adding ing forms of verbs to sentences to "evoke action." In Noden's class, "The diamond-scaled snakes attacked their prey," became, "Hissing, slithering, and snarling, the diamond-scaled snakes attacked their prey." (Noden, 1999, 4) Students imitated these structures, choosing sentences from their own drafts of writing and adding participles to enhance their original sentences with movement and life.

In modeling, students see language being used in sentences that are incredibly effective. They practice writing well by imitating great sentences instead of fixing poorly-written, grammatically-incorrect sentences. In addition, they learn to see writing as an art instead of a set of rules to be memorized. They also see themselves as controlling the language instead of feeling intimidated by it. Perhaps most importantly, students are engaged in their own writing instead of using class time to write lists of prepositions.

Inquiry: A Student-Centered Approach to Editing

Ten years ago, as a new teacher, I started teacher research in my twelfth-grade English classroom because I was discouraged by issues of correctness in my college-prep seniors' writing. I wrote that I was, "impressed by the depth of understanding evident in student writing, yet distracted by the elementary mistakes made by seniors" (author, 2006). I was also worried about my students, concerned that their future college professors would not see past the grammatical mistakes. There is a genuine need for students to edit their writing, as part of the writing process, in order to present themselves effectively to their readers. As we work to find authentic purposes and audiences for our students' writing, we also endeavor to help our students communicate with those audiences, and correctness does impact communication. Though we can agree that correct writing is not the same as good writing, we can likely also agree that time spent helping students to edit their work and understand the mechanics of writing is important.

When I embarked on my classroom research with high-school seniors in 2006, I asked students, anonymously, to self-assess their writing abilities. When surveyed, less than 20% of my seniors felt "very prepared" for writing in college. When asked the open question, "What do you most want to improve in your writing?," 50% of students responded with concerns about mechanics, specifically spelling and grammar. Along with strategies that would teach students about sentence combining and encourage them to imitate successful models and structures, I wanted a teaching strategy that would give students the confidence to address their uncertainties as they edited.

Of course, concerns about mechanics and correctness have a place in the writing process, and that place is after students have worked on content, organization, and style. When students were ready to edit, I used to do mini-lessons

on punctuation, apostrophe usage, or subject-verb agreement. This was effective for some students, but I wanted students to be more involved in figuring out the mechanics of usage themselves. I wanted them to have confidence that they could figure out conventions without an English teacher and a notes page. I needed an inquiry-based strategy.

Instead of the traditional mini-lesson, I began bringing copies of a short piece of text, usually a paragraph or a page of writing. In order to also entice their interest in the novels on my bookshelves, I often used a passage from a favorite writer. This paragraph from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987, 5) has been effective for student inquiry on apostrophe usage. I talked very briefly about the novel, giving students some background about the conversation between Baby Suggs and Sethe, then asked them to look at the ways Morrison used apostrophes.

"What'd be the point?" asked Baby Suggs. "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil." Baby Suggs rubbed her eyebrows. "My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember."

In small groups, I asked students to look at each use of an apostrophe and discuss why the apostrophe was used. After they had talked through all of the apostrophe-usage examples, I asked each group to come up with some guidelines for themselves to help them remember how apostrophes were used. As the groups talked, I walked around the room, listening to conversations and, sometimes, helping to clarify. Later, as a large group, we examined the use of apostrophes to replace letters (sometimes one letter, sometimes many letters) in contractions. It isn't a perfect science, since that's and don't are clear examples where the apostrophe replaces a letter, but ain't is a little less clear. But students get the idea of how an apostrophe can work, and we also have an opportunity to talk about authentic dialogue. Why does Morrison write "what'd" instead of "what would" when Baby Suggs is talking? What does "real" dialogue sound like and how do writers convey that? Why are contractions used in writing?

We also addressed possessives. In this passage, an apostrophe was used with "dead Negro's grief," "husband's spirit"

and "somebody's house." An apostrophe was not used with yours, which a couple of groups noticed. To wrap it up, I wrote two simplified rules on the board.

1. Use an apostrophe to replace missing letters in a contraction
2. Use an apostrophe to show possession.

These rules don't cover everything, but I didn't want to overwhelm students with a long list of exceptions and rules about possessives (its vs. it's, apostrophe placement with words ending in s, the lack of an apostrophe with possessives like yours, hers, his...). When students ran into a question while editing their own writing, I recommended *Grammar Girl* and *Purdue's Online Writing Lab* (OWL) as good sources for specific questions, like when to use its and it's. After all, those are the resources I still use to double-check my own usage questions. (In fact, I should probably bookmark *Grammar Girl's* explanation of lay vs. lie.) After a few of these editing inquiry sessions, I felt that students were more likely to look up usage questions on their own. I liked that they were empowered to find the answers to their usage questions instead of relying on an English teacher to fix mistakes.

How Students Learn to Write: Challenging Traditions and Changing Assumptions

Students learn to read and write by reading and writing. It is where they discover the thrill of a great sentence. In her 2014 blog post, Patricia Dunn concluded, "Grammar, it goes without saying, is important. We use it every time we speak or write. However, for students' writing to improve, they need to write, not fill in blanks or fixate on error. They need to be engaged in authentic writing in real genres, for real audiences, and for real purposes."

Great painters study their masters, imitating strokes and mastering techniques by painting. Students must immerse themselves in good writing, practicing the strokes and imitating the structures, to make the writing their own. They need time, encouragement, and appreciation for the art of writing. Simply stated, time spent on the memorization of prepositions, the correction of poorly-written sentences, and the diagramming of sentences is time taken away from the art of writing. Those traditional approaches to the teaching of grammar have no place in our English classes, and we cannot afford to waste time and resources on ineffective instruction. When our goal is to improve writing, we must draw attention to decades of research about effective instruction.

Parents, administrators, and teachers must be informed

about research in the teaching of writing in order to support student writers and their teachers. A great starting point is the National Council of Teachers of English, whose 1985 resolution clearly stated that grammar exercises hinder the development of student writing, and, “class time at all levels must be devoted to opportunities for meaningful listening, speaking, reading, and writing.” NCTE’s 2002 guidelines included suggestions for appropriate ways to teach language structures as students read and write. NCTE’s resources are easy to share with colleagues, students, and parents, and links can be shared on classroom webpages.

We have made so much progress in the teaching of writing in the past fifty years. The abandonment of diagramming, sentence-correcting, memorization, and other behaviorist approaches must be replaced by student-centered approaches to grammar, language, and usage. It’s a worthy goal for the future.

References

- Anderson, J. (2005). *Mechanically Inclined*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Steenbergen, L. (2006). Common errors, slips, blunders, and oversights of high-school seniors. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 22(1), 55-58.
- Jeffers, L. (2017). Preparing teachers in English Language Arts: Mentor teachers speak. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Western Michigan University.
- Cleary, M.N. (2014). The wrong way to teach grammar. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education>.
- Dunn, P. A. (2014). Does bad “grammar” instruction make writing worse? Teachers, Parents, Profs: Writers Who Care. Retrieved from <https://writerswhocare.wordpress.com>.
- Flaskamp, G. (2015). Circling the verb, underlining the preposition, and beating the dead horse: moving beyond archaic grammar instruction. Retrieved from <http://d96literacylink.blogspot.com>.
- Fogarty, M. (2011). Ending a sentence with a preposition. *Grammar Girl Quick and Dirty Tips*. Retrieved from <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education>.
- Graham, S. & Perin, D. (2007). Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools. New York: Carnegie Corporation, 2007. Retrieved from <http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2006/10/WritingNext.pdf>.
- Gray, J. (2000). Teachers at the Center: A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Writing Project.
- Hillocks, G. (1987). Synthesis of Research on Teaching Writing. *Educational Leadership*, 71-82.
- McQuade, F. (1980). Examining a grammar course: the rationale and the result. *English Journal*, 69 (7), 26-30.
- Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (1985). Resolution on grammar exercises to teach speaking and writing. NCTE Position Statement. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/grammarexercises>.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2002). Guideline on some questions and answers about grammar. (2002). Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org>.
- Noden, H. (1999). *Image Grammar*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Shaughnessy, M. (1977). *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Soanes, C. (2011). Can you end a sentence with a preposition?. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com>.
- Weaver, C. (1996). Teaching grammar in the context of writing. *English Journal*, 85(7). 15-24.

Lindsay Jeffers is a former high-school English and Spanish teacher with a Ph.D. in English Education. She works with the Third Coast Writing Project at Western Michigan University and teaches composition at Grand Valley State University.

Be Amazing

with English at NMU

A vibrant community of leaders, learners,
teachers and writers.

Undergraduate Programs

English > English Graduate Bound >
Secondary Education > Writing

Master of Arts - English

literature > pedagogy > theatre > writing

Master of Fine Arts - Creative Writing

creative nonfiction > fiction > poetry

Upper Peninsula Writing Project

Thirty-seven full-time professors

Northern Michigan University

College of Arts and Sciences > Dean Michael Broadway

In beautiful Marquette, Michigan > nmu.edu/english

an equal opportunity institution