

Some Questions and Answers about Grammar



NCTE's Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar

- *Why is grammar important?*

Grammar is important because it is the language that makes it possible for us to talk about language. Grammar names the types of words and word groups that make up sentences not only in English but in any language. As human beings, we can put sentences together even as children -- we can all do grammar. But to be able to talk about how sentences are built, about the types of words and word groups that make up sentences -- that is knowing about grammar. And knowing about grammar offers a window into the human mind and into our amazingly complex mental capacity.

People associate grammar with errors and correctness. But knowing about grammar also helps us understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and interesting and precise. Grammar can be part of literature discussions, when we and our students closely read the sentences in poetry and stories. And knowing about grammar means finding out that all languages and all dialects follow grammatical patterns.

- *Is grammar included in the NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts?*

Four of the twelve standards call on the students' understanding of language and sentence structure:

Standard #3 refers to the range of strategies and abilities students should use to comprehend and appreciate texts, and among these is their understanding of sentence structure.

Standard #4 explains that students should adjust their spoken and written language for different audiences and purposes, and these adjustments include changes in the conventions and style of language.

Standard #6 states that students should "apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation)" to create and critique both print and nonprint texts. (Italics added.)

Standard #9 calls for students to "develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles." (Italics added.) Understanding basic grammar can help students see the patterns of different languages and dialects.

- *I hear that teaching grammar doesn't help students make fewer errors. But students make so many mistakes in their writing. What should I do?*

Some Questions and Answers about Grammar



Teaching grammar will not make writing errors go away. Students make errors in the process of learning, and as they learn about writing, they often make new errors, not necessarily fewer ones. But knowing basic grammatical terminology does provide students with a tool for thinking about and discussing sentences. And lots of discussion of language, along with lots of reading and lots of writing, are the three ingredients for helping students write in accordance with the conventions of standard English*.

- *I try to teach the standard parts of speech and the usual rules for correct writing even though I'm not convinced the students retain the information for very long. What's the best way to approach grammar under these circumstances?*

Two suggestions:

The first is to be selective, to the extent that you can. Students benefit much more from learning a few grammar keys thoroughly than from trying to remember many terms and rules. Experiment with different approaches until you find the ones that work the best for you and your students. Some teachers focus on showing students how phrases add rich detail to sentences. Other teachers find that sentence diagrams help students see the organization of sentences. Some use grammar metaphors (the sentence, for example, as a bicycle, with the subject as the front wheel and the predicate as the back). Some emphasize the verb as the key part of speech, showing students how the sentence is built around it and how vivid verbs create vivid sentences.

The second suggestion is that whatever approach you take to grammar, show students how to apply it not only to their writing but also to their reading and to their other language arts activities. For example, knowing basic grammar can help students when they come across a difficult story or poem. If they know how to find the main verb and the subject, they have a better chance of figuring out a difficult sentence. When they like the way a writer writes, they can identify the sentence structures that the writer uses, and they can experiment with them themselves.

Make good use of the other languages and the various dialects of English in your classroom. Compare the informal private language that students speak around friends and family with public standard English*. Learn a little about the noun and verb patterns in Spanish and African American Vernacular English, for example, so that you can make comparisons when discussing standard English*. Students feel prouder of their home language when they hear even briefly in school about its grammatical patterns.¹

¹ * Many people find the term standard English to be inaccurate and misleading because it creates a false impression that there exists a single variety of English that all educated Americans speak and write. Two alternative labels are edited written English and the Language of Wider Communication. See "Students' Right to Their Own Language," a CCCC position statement, at <http://www.ncte.org/positions/language.shtml>. For a fuller discussion of African American Vernacular English, see the Linguistic Society of America's position statement on Ebonics at <http://www.lsadc.org/web2/resolutionsfr.htm>.

Some Questions and Answers about Grammar



- *Grammar workbook exercises get pretty dull, but they do cover the basics. Are they worthwhile? How should I use them?*

Traditional drill and practice will be the most meaningful to students when they are anchored in the context of writing assignments or the study of literary models. Students find grammar most interesting when they apply it to authentic texts. Try using texts of different kinds, such as newspapers and the students' own writing, as sources for grammar examples and exercises. This approach helps make grammar relevant and alive. It also avoids the artificiality of studying sentences in isolation, a problem with grammar books; in real texts, students can see how sentences connect and contrast to each other through their grammar.

- *What kinds of grammar exercises help students write not just correct sentences but better, more expressive ones?*

Inexperienced writers find it difficult to make changes in the sentences that they have written. Expanding sentences, rearranging the parts of a sentence, combining sentences -- these skills do not come easily. So any exercises that help students acquire sentence flexibility have value. Two methods have yielded good results. One is sentence combining: students start with simple exercises in inserting phrases and combining sentences and progress towards exercises in embedding one clause in another. Another approach is for students to imitate model sentences; when students read a model passage and then write their version of it, imitating its grammatical features, they integrate reading skill, writing practice, and grammatical understanding.

Another type of grammar exercise is for students to practice using certain subordinate constructions that enrich sentences. Participles, -ing and -ed verb forms, can be used by themselves or as phrases, adding detail with a sense of action, drawing the reader into the sentence (as with the two participial phrases that close this sentence). Its purpose being to focus readers' attention, an absolute phrase, like the one that begins this sentence, operates like a zoom lens. An appositive, a noun or noun phrase that renames another noun, adds information quickly (as this sentence illustrates).

- *Grammar is a large, complicated subject, and I'm not very sure about some of it myself. Besides the grammar material that is in the books I teach, what topics in grammar will help my students?*

Here are some recent additions to the traditional study of grammar that you can use in the classroom:

All native speakers of a language have more grammar in their heads than any grammar book will ever contain. Part of our goal as teachers is to help students discover that knowledge. ESL

Some Questions and Answers about Grammar



students can also benefit from the following suggestions, depending on their experience with English. Pass these methods on to your students, who will make good use of them.

1. The traditional definitions of the parts of speech can be difficult to apply. Students recognize the basic parts of speech more reliably and quickly by looking at the form of a word and by using sentence "frames." If a word can be made plural or possessive, or if it fits in the sentence "The _____ went there," it is a noun. If a word can be made past, or can take an -ing ending, it is a verb. Of course the same word form can often serve as more than one part of speech, but you can help students learn to recognize how a particular form is being used in a particular sentence by introducing them to a variety of tests.

2. Is a group of words a whole sentence or a fragment? If it doesn't make sense after an opening such as "I am convinced that," it is a fragment.

Whatever you could do to help my sister.

I am convinced that whatever you could do to help my sister.

This is what you could do to help my sister.

I am convinced that this is what you could do to help my sister.

3. To help students find the verb phrase in a sentence, have them make the sentence negative by inserting did not, don't, or a similar term. The verb phrase is usually next to the word not.

Simon tried to put the bike in the garage.

Simon did not try to put the bike in the garage.

4. To help students find the subject of a sentence, have them add a tag question such as isn't it? or aren't they? The pronoun that ends the appropriate tag question will usually refer to the sentence subject.

Listening to loud music will damage your ears.

Listening to loud music will damage your ears, won't it?

5. Substitute a pronoun for the complete subject. This change shows students where the division between subject and predicate lies; it is also a simple way to check on subject-verb agreement.

The girl with the saxophone is walking home.

She / is walking home.

Some Questions and Answers about Grammar



A paragraph may be confusing or clear, vivid or vague, easy or difficult to read. No matter which it is, the quality of the paragraph depends in part on the grammatical features of the individual sentences. Show your students a few points that will help them both write better paragraphs and better understand the paragraphs in literature. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph Williams is an outstanding resource on these approaches.

1. The grammatical subjects of all the sentences in a paragraph, taken together, tell the reader what the paragraph is about. If the subjects of the sentences are too diverse, the paragraph will usually be difficult to follow. Sentence subjects that are related to each other help make the paragraph coherent. Students can circle the sentence subjects in a published paragraph, observe this pattern at work, and then apply it to their own writing.
2. Another pattern is extremely important in the way groups of sentences flow together to make sense. Most sentences start with information that is already familiar to the reader, such as a pronoun or a subject noun that was mentioned earlier. Sentences then move toward new information that makes the point of the sentence and adds the details. This movement from the familiar to the new in each sentence makes text both interesting and coherent. Students can observe this pattern in literature and apply it to their own writing. They can also see it at work in casual conversation, in asking questions, and in speaking (and writing) in sentence fragments -- all situations when the familiar information becomes detached from the new information.
3. The tendency for the vital information to fall toward the end of most sentences is known as end focus. Because so many sentences use end focus, placing the important words early catches the reader's attention. Key phrases can be moved forward. Cleft structures ("It was Juan who helped me") also move emphasized words forward.

Prepared by Brock Haussamen with Paul Doniger, Pam Dykstra, Martha Kolln, Kathryn Rogers, and Rebecca Wheeler, and with appreciation for the works and discussions of all the members of NCTE's Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar.

This document has been endorsed by the Linguistic Society of America.