

Thoughts on Grammar

Noted author Ruthanne Lum McCunn shared her thoughts about her personal connection to grammar as both a writer and a teacher in an interview for this project. Recent works by this writer include *The Moon Pearl* and *Sole Survivor: A Story of Record Endurance at Sea*.

Transcript

"Grammar is the bane of my existence. Or at least it used to be the bane of my existence when I was in school. I can remember in school being asked to define an adjective and an adverb and to what the difference was between the two. And in those days, we had to stand to respond. And I had no idea and I was, tears were streaming down my face. And the teacher just badgered me more and more. And I just wept more and more. And, of course, my mind got blanker and blanker.

"And so that's what I think of when I hear the word grammar. And in fact, to graduate from high school then you had to take written exams and part of the English exam was grammar. But there was also an essay portion. And I relied on the essay portion to get me through. Because I didn't know the particulars of grammar, but I knew how to construct the sentence. And how to make grammar work. And to me, that's what it's all about. It doesn't really matter whether you know how to define it or not. It's helpful. It's nice if you do.

"But it's even better if you can actually use it. And actually, I did teach English as a second language for many years and of course you have to use grammar. And my students, their grammar was great when it came to worksheets and so on. But when it came to the oral speaking or the writing, it was really hard. So, I think there's always that balance between the two that we have to maintain, both as teachers, as writers and as students.

"And I mean, you know, when you read a book, very often, for effect, or when I'm writing, very often, for effect, I don't have a complete sentence. And that's deliberate. Now, many a teacher would put a red pencil through that, but it would be inappropriate, I think. Many a copy editor might put a red pencil through it, too.

"But I think um that has to be taken into consideration as the ultimate effect of what you're writing. Because, to me, when I'm writing what I hear, its certain rhythms in my head, and to me, that's what I rely on is grammar, is really the rhythm of the writing in my head. And if the rhythm works, to me, the grammar is right."

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[Responding to a question about what she would say to teachers who feel it is their responsibility to make sure students understand grammar] "I used to be a teacher like that. Despite what I said, I used to be a teacher who felt that I was not living up to my responsibilities if I didn't teach the grammar. And I think you have to make, I think as a teacher, I don't see any way to get around the feeling of obligation that you have to teach it. But I think that there's a difference between teaching and badgering. And I also think that it's important to see, to look at the individual student and to see if, okay, this student doesn't know the definitions, but knows how to use it. So, isn't that enough?"

"But if the student and maybe the student doesn't know the definitions, and doesn't know how to use it, then the question to me would be, how can I show that student how to use it? And, to me, the best way for that is through reading. Because then, and I think that's really how I learned my grammar, is by reading. And picking up how sentences are constructed by other writers. And, so, that's how I would approach it."