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English Grammar— Can We Afford Not To Teach It?

Patrick F. Bassett

If you have never taught an English class, the impact of this article may be weakened—but trust that it touches upon a subject that is, or should be, extremely important to every educator. The author presents it clearly and concisely for even the non-English teacher and concludes with several specific suggestions.

AMONG ENGLISH TEACHERS there is an issue of life unlike many issues of life—the notion of grammar: What is it? What effect does it have on writing? Why teach it? Why are we having trouble teaching it? What are sensible approaches to it?

Issue or Non-Issue

The unique aspect of the grammar issue is that it is an issue at all. The demagogues of the profession would have us believe there are two distinct schools of thought: the Ayn Rands of the language, the reactionary pedants who insist upon a purist traditional standard of language propriety; and the Noam Chomskys of the language, the “let’s-be-scientific-and-realistic-about-what-language-(spoken)-really-is” pedants who insist upon a modern linguistic awareness and unbiased acceptance of all variants of the language.

This overriding issue of the English teacher, however, is really a non-issue: the public *expects* the English teacher to teach some conventional principles of language and composition (the highest priority of all secondary school training according to the most recent Gallup Poll of Educational Issues). And, in fact, most English teachers

Patrick F. Bassett is headmaster, Stuart Hall, Staunton, Va. He was previously at Woodberry Forest (Va.) School.

do just that, whether under the heraldry of traditional grammar, transformational grammar, or just plain composition. Although the battle lines are clearly drawn, neither the troops in the trenches nor the public at the homefront knows what the war is about.

What is grammar? Grammar has two elements: a descriptive element which classifies language and a prescriptive element which regulates language. One's choice of weapon, whether traditional Latinate grammar, or structural grammar, or transformational grammar, and one's punctiliousness about the conventions of standard written English determine one's battle colors. The traditional grammarians teach a taxonomy of grammar based upon Latin categories: There are eight parts of speech, three parts of the sentence, five types of phrases, and three types of clauses. In its descriptive mode the traditional grammar asks the student to understand these 19 items. Applying the traditional grammarian's definitions, the student could parse the sentence in the box to discover all 19 elements of the Latinate taxonomy.

(Interj.) Darn!	(Conj.) (Pn.) <u>Because my birthday</u>	(N.) unfortunately	(Adv.) (V.) (Prep.) (Adj.) falls on a school day, my
	(Adv. Clause)		
(Subj.) mother	(Verb) <u>has scheduled</u>	(D.O.) (Prep. Phrase) my birthday party	(Appos. Phr.) <u>for a Saturday, a day that conflicts</u>
			(Adj. Clause)
	(Infin. Phrase) <u>with my plans to begin dancing at Disco Club #59;</u>		(Part. Phrase) <u>knowing that I must</u>
	(Ger. Phrase) <u>postpone my dancing,</u>		(N. Clause) I am distraught.

The acts of heroism and courage that the traditional grammarian stalwartly suffers creating such sentences to awe and intimidate the young recruits in his charge go unappreciated by the structuralists, scientists more interested in linguistic understanding than in verbal bravado. The structural grammarian objects to the arbitrariness of the traditional grammarian's application of Latinate categories and rules; in preference, the structuralist describes the language in terms of the functions of various signals of words and combinations of words.

For example, in the sentence cited in the example, the structuralist would point out that traditional grammar labeled the word *birthday* a noun because it "names a person, place, or thing." Yet the second *birthday* which appears ("birthday party") is not a noun but an adjective. Does that mean that the second *birthday* no longer names a person, place, or thing?

Whereas traditional grammar defines a word's part of speech by its function in a sentence (that function fitting one of the given definitions) and thereby mixed meaning with form in its classification system, structural grammar defines words and combinations of words by their forms and positions in the sentence.

Thus, if a word follows a form that can be inflected to show plural or case (birthday, birthdays, birthday's) and if it fits into a certain position in a sample sentence ("I was thinking of _____"), then it is a noun (Warriner, 1973). Structural grammar argues that if the battle is worth fighting, then at least use modern, accurate weapons.

Not for the Faint of Heart

Transformational grammar takes linguistic theory off the drafting boards and onto the battlefields; this approach presents to students operational plans indicating steps in the process of forming sentences. There are only a few sentence patterns basic to the language: these patterns the transformationalist calls kernel sentences. The transformationalist asks students to write more complicated sentences by taking the kernel sentence and adding to it or by rearranging the words in it to produce a *transformed* sentence (Warriner, 1973).

Thus, the instruction $S \longrightarrow NP + VP$ (Sentence rewrite as noun phrase plus verb phrase) could be followed by writing "I am distraught." The kernel sentence could then be varied through a negative transformation ("I am not distraught"); a question transformation ("Am I distraught?"); an emphatic transformation ("*I* am distraught" or "I *am* distraught" or "I am *distraught*"); or other transformations (Kemp, 1977).

To create the complex sentence, "Knowing that I must postpone my dancing, I am distraught," the traditional grammarian would instruct his students to write a sentence with an introductory participial phrase that includes a noun clause followed by an independent clause. The transformationalist, on the other hand, would give the student three kernel sentences (I know. I must postpone my dancing. I am distraught.) and ask the student to combine them in as many ways as possible. The actual transformational description of the sentence resembles hieroglyphics (see example in box).

	$\emptyset + I + (who + present + know + \emptyset + I + present + must + postpone + \emptyset + I + pos + ing + dance +) present + be + distraught$
T-del	NP + ing + know + \emptyset + etc.
T-sub	NP + ing + know + that + \emptyset + etc.
T-SM	ing + know + etc. + ing + dance + $\emptyset + I + present + be + distraught$
T-af	knowing + that + $\emptyset + I + must + postpone + present + \emptyset + I + pos + dance + ing + \emptyset + I + present + be + distraught$.

Seeing an example of transformational instructions should intimidate the faint of heart. The traditional grammarians might well concede that transformational grammar is both more accurate and precise a descriptive tool of language. The scholar who masters transformational grammar might well understand better than others how language works. It requires a combination of courageousness and foolhardiness, however, to contemplate teaching secondary school students (or even non-linguistic-majors in college) the complete system of transformational grammar. Those who would attempt such a task are usually veterans of the Vietnam War, those who had a tendency to volunteer for point-guard patrol duty in the guerilla-infested jungles.

Given the arsenal of strategic weapons available to the soldiers of language, one would think that there would be a powerful barrage of statistics to verify or to deny the usefulness and practicality of instruction in elements of grammar and their carry-over to instruction in composition. In fact, there is a dearth of reliable research, and the statistics we do have are largely flawed by researcher bias, by inadequate control of testing variables, and by overstatement of conclusions based on findings.

For example, the New Zealand W. B. Elley study of three groups of students studying three distinct English curricula (a traditional grammar and writing program, a transformational grammar and writing program, and a reading and composition program) is widely cited as the definitive research exploding the "myths" about the effectiveness of teaching grammar. The study concludes, "... English grammar, whether traditional or transformational, has virtually no influence on the language growth of typical secondary school students." Yet, in fact, the conclusion grossly exaggerates the study's findings because all three groups performed equally well on the objective reading and writing exercises used to measure the effectiveness of the programs (Newkirk, 1978).

Furthermore, all three groups are taught standard conventions of usage and mechanics through exercises and/or through composition work. Thus, all groups were taught some aspects of the prescriptive element of grammar. In a sense, the troops are forging ahead or retreating from the grammar front without any real sense of where the enemy is or indeed if any enemy exists at all.

Why Grammar, Anyway?

Amid such confusion, why not throw down all arms? Why teach any grammar at all? To an extent the question is moot because although there is dispute over the value of teaching the descriptive elements of grammar, there is near unanimity among English teachers that the prescriptive elements of grammar should be taught. In fact, most English

courses do teach prescriptive “rules” about usage, diction, and mechanics because English teachers, among others, recognize that good writers write grammatically (Goldstein, 1979), and that standard English is not a dialect but the mother-tongue, a language that is infinitely more rich, varied, and precise than any variant or dialect (Clausen, 1978).

Whenever anyone speaks or writes, he projects a message and an image. To avoid the teaching of standard English is to deny the student the flexibility of speaking or writing according to the demands of a given situation.

For example, if some children were assembled around a mud puddle in a playground and one child responded to the question “Who said he could jump over this puddle?” with the standard English reply “It was I,” rather than the colloquial “It was me,” that child should be drowned in the puddle, a murder that would be justifiable homicide because of the child’s scrupulousness and ostentatiousness.

On the other hand, the candidate for a journalism job who greeted his prospective employer with the salutation “Hey baby, what’s happening?” rather than with the salutation “Good afternoon, how are you?” would similarly convey an identical message but an inappropriate image.

A truth of life is that a substantial number of people in our culture still expect communication to be addressed in standard English. Those people are likely to reject whatever message is intended if the image the message carries is inappropriate. Thus, the goal of teaching prescriptive rules of standard English is to give to all students a flexibility to conduct a discourse in whatever terms the specific situation requires.

The traditional grammarians wage the crusade for standard English with *their* descriptive terms for several reasons. If teacher and student both understand the term *dangling modifier*, if both know what is meant by the advice to subordinate one clause to another, then there exists a common terminology to expedite the application of prescriptive rules.

Furthermore, a knowledge of usage rules alone does not necessarily clarify meaning. Although each of the following sentences is correct in terms of standard English, each sentence’s meaning is different; precise understanding of the difference is dependent upon an awareness of the grammatical, syntactical variations of the four words.

I heard him crying.
Crying, I heard him.
I heard his crying.

Finally, an understanding of the descriptive elements of language helps the student see a rationale for some of the prescriptive rules themselves. For example, students (and professors) would avoid abusing the word *hopefully* if they recognized that the word is too often a dangling

modifier: in the sentence "Hopefully, it will rain today" the speaker *means* "I hope it will rain today." One may proceed hopefully, one may listen hopefully, but one may not rain hopefully. In the given example, the word *hopefully* has no other word to modify, and thus it is dangling.

The skirmishes over the teaching of grammar have produced wounds and smoke but no decisive victories, only Pyrrhic ones. Why are we having trouble settling on a strategy for teaching grammar and language? The English teaching profession and establishment have relinquished their command. Bowing to linguistic theory, we have confused the descriptive with the prescriptive, blurring "what is" with "what should be" in language, legitimizing any form of communication whether solecistic, inept, or inelegant.

Composition Checklist

This checklist appears as a title page on each Woodberry Forest School student's weekly composition. The checklist functions as a reminder to students of the criteria upon which their papers will be evaluated and as a standard of evaluation objectives for all English teachers. The division of the checklist indicates, among other things, that the English department considers mastery of conventions of standard English as one of the essential elements of good writing. Thus, the checklist itself confirms the English department's continuous attention to matters of prescriptive grammar yet places that attention in the context of other equally important matters such as a composition's style, organization, and content.

	Mastery	Good	Needs Improvement	Major Problem
A. GRAMMAR				
I. Grammar and Usage: agreement, pronoun case, verb tenses, voice, mood				
II. Syntax: proper subordination, clear reference of pronouns, correct placement of modifiers, no run-ons, parallelism, no frag- ments				
III. Mechanics: capitalization, punctuation				
IV. Spelling:				
B. ORGANIZATION				
I. Provocative, engaging title and introductory paragraph				

The National Council of Teachers of English issued in 1974 the “Students Right to Their Own Language” resolution, a document comparable to Chamberlain’s Munich Agreement in its appeasement of the ruthless barbarians. As John Simon remarked in *Esquire* magazine in an article on the resolution, the NCTE’s position could be restated, “Everyone has a right to his own ignorance.” Simon analogized that when riding a horse, one might successfully be transported from Point A to Point B, desperately clinging to the horse’s mane, but that feat does not make one an equestrian (Simon, 1977).

In its misguided attempt to celebrate the strength of various dialects of the language, the NCTE has lost its resolve to arm the nation’s youth with culture’s most potent weapon—mastery of the spoken and written word. We now allow students to emerge from the secondary school English curriculum with loaded water pistols to face cannons.

	Mastery	Good	Needs Improvement	Major Problem
II. Clear thesis statement which states argument of paper and indicates topic of each successive paragraph III. Clear topic sentence for each paragraph IV. Paragraph unity: each paragraph develops a single topic idea V. Fluid transition between paragraphs VI. Effective conclusion C. STYLE I. Varied sentence structure II. Imaginative use of language: use of appropriate diction; incorporation of new vocabulary; use of dictionary and thesaurus IV. Avoidance of <i>To Be</i> verbs: use of strong, active verbs V. Effective and accurate use of references from texts and quotations; proper footnoting D. CONTENT I. Original and mature thesis II. Adequate support of ideas				
COMMENTS:				

What Must We Do?

Given the Wirtz Commission's CEEB Report paralleling a 14-year decline in S.A.T. verbal aptitudes with a decline of standards in the English classroom; given the National Assessment of Educational Progress' most recent findings that students' writing has continued to deteriorate; how do we recoup our losses? What are sensible positions to defend in the war against illiteracy?

First, the teachers of language must demonstrate their capacity to lead. It is myopic to require an English teacher seeking certification to take health, government, math, and child psychology courses and *not* require him to pass a rigorous examination, objective and written, of his competence with the language.

Second, the great fallacy of the profession, the bias toward teaching only that which is inquiry and discovery-oriented (literature, creative writing, drama production) must be excoriated. The fallacy, a product of the profession's inclination toward the ethereal and the culture's preference for the relevant, must be redressed. We need to understand that some learning in the English classes of the country must be traditional, receptive, and didactic.

Third, we must be realistic and practical about the teaching of grammar and language. Transformational and structural grammar are far too complex to teach youngsters. On the other hand, traditionalists have taught too much grammar too early in the child's educational career, bombarding the student with terms that deaden rather than enlighten.

If the members of a school's English department, however, can agree to teach traditional, prescriptive grammar for 10 weeks at the beginning of the tenth grade, if promotion from the term is dependent upon the student's demonstrated mastery of the language unit, and if students are held accountable to a strict regiment of standard English accuracy in their weekly compositions for successive terms in the English curriculum, then the civil war we are undergoing may be diverted into a purposeful crusade.

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Educational Advice in Newspaper Column

Providing positive information about the schools through a newspaper column is just one of the helpful suggestions found in the *MSTA Media Guide*, published by the Missouri State Teachers Association to give the educator information about the media.

The booklet suggests starting a "From Your Teacher" column which would offer advice from such educational experts as the principal, the librarian, the counselor, and others. A newspaper column might focus on topics such as:

- How To Help a Child Choose a Career
- How To Encourage Reading
- How To Help a Child With Dyslexia
- What a Student Interested in Earning a Scholarship Should Do

A newspaper article would provide valuable publicity to the schools and information to the parents and would also allow teachers to be seen as the trained professionals they are.
