

Mechanically

Inclined

Building Grammar, Usage, and
Style into Writer's Workshop

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Foreword by Vicki Spandel



Contents

<i>Foreword by Vicki Spandel</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi

Part I

The Blueprint: Teaching Grammar and Mechanics in Context	1
Chapter 1 Introduction	3
Chapter 2 Moving from Correct-Alls to Mentor Texts	15
Chapter 3 Weaving Grammar and Mechanics into Writer’s Workshop	27
Chapter 4 Off-the-Wall Grammar and Mechanics Instruction	51

Part II

Constructing Lessons: Background, Mentor Text, and Visual Scaffolds	61
Section 1 The Sentence: A Way of Thinking	63
1.1 Fragments	64
<i>Two-Word Sentence Smack Down</i>	
<i>Two-Word Sentence Search—Powerful Words, Powerful Verbs</i>	

1.2 Run-On Sentences	68
<i>Dependent Vs. Independent—Adding On Without Running On</i>	
1.3 Dangling Modifiers	71
<i>Only You Can Prevent Dangling Modifiers—Playing with Sentence Parts</i>	
1.4 Wrong or Missing Preposition	74
<i>I've Got a Preposition For You</i>	
1.5 Double Negative	77
<i>Register Swap: The Formal and Informal Registers</i>	
1.6 The Absolute.....	79
<i>The Absolute Zoom Lens—A Think- and Look-Aloud</i>	
Section 2 Pause and Effect: Crafting Sentences with Commas	83
2.1 No Comma in a Compound Sentence.....	84
<i>Flipping for the Compound Sentence Pattern</i>	
2.2 Comma Splice.....	87
<i>From Splice to Nice—FANBOYS to the Rescue</i>	
2.3 No Comma After an Introductory Element	90
<i>If There Were an Olympic Contest for Sentence Imitating AAAWWUBBIS—The Subordinating Conjunction Bionic Mnemonic</i>	
2.4 No Comma in a Nonrestrictive Element.....	93
<i>Basket Case—The Essential Nonessential Comma Rule</i>	
<i>An Appositive Imitation Is the Sincerest Form of Flattery . . .</i>	
<i>But Plagiarism Isn't</i>	
2.5 No Comma Setting Off Additions at the End of a Sentence	96
<i>Life Detectives—Paying Attention to Detail and the Cumulative Sentence</i>	
2.6 Lack of Commas in a Series	99
<i>Think-Aloud—Commas, Are You Serial?</i>	
Section 3 Pronouns: The Willing Stand-Ins.....	103
3.1 Vague Pronoun Reference	104
<i>Marking Text—In Reference to Pronouns</i>	
3.2 Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement Error	107
<i>Where Have All the Pronouns Gone? A Kira-Kira Cloze</i>	
3.3 Pronoun Case Error.....	110
<i>The Case of the Pesky Pronoun</i>	
3.4 Possessive Apostrophe Error	113
<i>Apostrophe-thon</i>	

Section 4	The Verb: Are We All in Agreement?	117
4.1	Subject-Verb Agreement	118
	<i>From Past to Present—It’s About Time . . . and Effect</i>	
4.2	Dropped Inflectional Endings	121
	<i>The Verbs—They Are A-Changin’</i>	
4.3	Do and Have Agreement Errors	124
	<i>You Can’t Have It All—If He/She/It Has Anything to Say About It</i>	
	<i>Easy Does It—He/She/It Again</i>	
4.4	Unnecessary Shift in Tense	127
	<i>Who Took the Verbs Out?</i>	
	<i>Verbs Still Making Students Tense?</i>	
Section 5	Adjectives and Adverbs: The Modifier Within	131
5.1	Adjective Strings	132
	<i>The Human Sentence—Adjectives Out of Order</i>	
5.2	Adjective Clauses	135
	<i>Which One? An Adjective Clause Tells All</i>	
5.3	Adverb Clauses	138
	<i>We’re in the Titles</i>	
5.4	Adverbs and Conjunctive Adverbs	140
	<i>Adverbs, Adverbs Everywhere—Strictly Speaking</i>	
Section 6	The Power of Punctuation: The Period Is Mightier Than the Semicolon	143
6.1	Misuse of Quotation Marks	144
	<i>Revealing Character—Tagging Dialogue with Action</i>	
6.2	Overuse of the Exclamation Point	147
	<i>Exclamation Degradation—Reflecting on a Point’s Overuse</i>	
6.3	The Semicolon	150
	<i>The Semicolon—The Lone Separator</i>	
6.4	The Colon	152
	<i>The Colon—The Drum Roll of Punctuation</i>	
6.5	The Dash	154
	<i>Dashing—Simply Dashing!</i>	
6.6	The Hyphen	157
	<i>Hyphen Nation—Some Words Just Belong Together</i>	
Appendix		161

The Sentence: A Way of Thinking	
<i>Sentence Smack Down!</i>	
<i>List of Common Prepositions</i>	
Pause and Effect: Crafting Sentences with Commas	
<i>Compound and Serial Comma Sentence Pattern Scaffolds</i>	
<i>AAAWWUBBIS and More!</i>	
<i>Comma Magnets as Sentence Openers</i>	
<i>Three Basic Complex Sentence Pattern Visual Scaffolds</i>	
<i>Comma Reinforcers: Cut-and-Paste Mini-Handbooks</i>	
<i>for the Writer's Notebook</i>	
Pronouns: The Willing Stand-Ins	
<i>More Than Anyone Wants to Know About Pronouns</i>	
<i>Pronoun Agreement: A Kira-Kira Cloze</i>	
<i>Pronoun Case Chart</i>	
The Verb: Are We All in Agreement?	
<i>Subject-Verb Agreement: In the Present and in the Past</i>	
<i>25 Irregular Verbs to Know</i>	
<i>Subject-Verb Agreement Examples</i>	
<i>Be Verbs: Present and Past</i>	
<i>Do and Have Verbs: Singular and Plural</i>	
<i>Tense Cloze Activity</i>	
Adjectives and Adverbs: The Modifier Within	
<i>Transition Words (Conjunctive Adverbs)</i>	
The Power of Punctuation: The Period Is Mightier Than the Semicolon	
<i>Punctuation's Basic Functions</i>	
<i>Alphabetical Punctuation Guide</i>	
Glossary.....	183
References.....	187

Introduction

C H A P T E R

To those who care about punctuation, a sentence such as “Thank God its Friday” (without the apostrophe) rouses feelings not only of despair but of violence. The confusion of the possessive “its” (no apostrophe) with the contractive “it’s” (with apostrophe) is the unequivocal signal of illiteracy and sets off a simple Pavlovian “kill” response in the average stickler.

Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*

It’s fair to say we don’t often hear an encouraging, tolerant tone toward grammar and mechanics errors in society or in many classrooms. “Grammar and mechanics are to be done correctly or not at all” is more often the underlying message. What about experimentation? Play? Approximation? Grammar and mechanics shape meaning, and as in all language endeavors, we must make mistakes to move toward correctness. Where’s the bridge between getting started and stretching with grammar and mechanics and being wrong?

Let’s get one thing straight. I am not a grammarian, nor am I punctilious about much. I’ve never been a language maven or even a stickler. My desk is piled high and every surface in my room is covered with papers and books. When I was a new teacher, I followed the three cardinal rules of effective writing instruction that I learned from Peter Elbow: write, write, write. Still do. As a new teacher committed to teaching reading and writing workshops, I knew that I wasn’t supposed to use grammar books or worksheets, even though everyone seemed to. Still don’t.

In my humble beginning years ago as a fourth-grade teacher, I thought providing my students with a workshop environment for writing instruction was enough for them to be successful. My classroom environment was carefully designed and my students' test scores were high. I helped teachers at neighboring schools develop literacy workshops, then presented my practices at district, regional, and national levels. But all the while I had a dirty little secret: I didn't know much about grammar and mechanics, and I wasn't exactly sure how to teach them.

Over the past fifteen years, I've come to know a few things about teaching grammar and mechanics to urban middle schoolers. One is the eighteen-inch rule. In Texas, we have a lot of Baptist preachers, and I once heard one say that the difference between heaven and hell is eighteen inches, pointing his finger to his head, then his heart. The heart of good grammar teaching is loving students' errors, loving their approximations. Lev Vygotsky (1986) taught us all about "pseudo-concepts," or budding theories based on initial impressions. Kids have a reason for doing what they do, even if it is flawed. I have found that, by understanding their pseudo-concepts in all realms, I can better teach them grammar and mechanics.

For example, last week I shared a picture of my dog with my sixth-grade student Vanessa. First, I need to tell you my home is my pride and joy—a 1920s Arts-and-Crafts-style home with hardwood floors and meticulous decoration. Imagine my shock when Vanessa asked, "Oh, so you live in a mobile home?" Not exactly a compliment in Texas. After stifling a chuckle, I asked her why she thought I lived in a mobile home. Vanessa pointed to the corner of my leather ottoman in the left side of the picture, "That leather seat is one of those benches on both sides of the dining room table. They have those in mobile homes." She used that one attribute and applied what she knew to come up with a theory about where I lived. Vanessa wasn't correct, but her assumption made sense.

In grammar and mechanics instruction, pseudo-concepts are overgeneralized rules like "Well, I am writing *its collar got stuck on the fence*. If I wrote *dog's collar*, I'd use an apostrophe. So I write, *it's collar*." That pseudo-concept is based on knowledge about a language rule. A mistake like this from a student, and the thinking behind it, shows me where I need to go next in my instruction.

We will save ourselves a lot of frustration if we shift our notion of teaching punctuation and grammar to one of teaching principles instead of rules. Handbooks and English teachers often take a right-wrong stance. I'd rather my students take a thinking stance. Pseudo-concepts are stepping-stones along the way to concept development.

At the same time, I teach students it's important to clean up their errors. In the classic *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy says, errors "demand energy without giving any return in meaning" (1977, p. 12).

Though we know kids will get better at writing by writing every day, we can't ignore grammar and mechanics and expect kids will simply learn them through osmosis alone. High-stakes testing increasingly relies on knowledge of grammar and mechanics. We have to teach more intentionally. Grammar and mechanics are not rules to be mastered as much as tools to serve a writer in creating a text readers will understand.

If you've ever felt that you didn't know everything about grammar you thought you should, don't worry. Throughout the book, I weave in definitions as I use them, because I often became lost in texts that just assumed I immediately knew the difference between subordinating and coordinating conjunctions, appositives and adjective clauses, or the difference between a phrase and a clause—or how much my kids should or could know. Worse, some books used the old cop-out: Check any good handbook. Please! If you ever feel lost, check for a definition in the Glossary included at the back of the book (see pages 183–86).

First, I should define what I mean by grammar and mechanics. *Grammar* includes all the principles that guide the structure of sentences and paragraphs: syntax—the flow of language; usage—how we use words in different situations; and rules—predetermined boundaries and patterns that govern language in a particular society. *Mechanics*, on the other hand, are ways we punctuate whatever we are trying to say in our writing: punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, formatting. Often when teachers discuss the six traits of effective writing, this aspect of language is referred to as conventions. In short, what are the things readers expect a courteous writer to do?

If you told me five years ago I'd write a book on merging grammar and mechanics with craft, I'd have laughed out loud. The man who didn't consistently use *its* correctly until he was twenty-six wasn't a prime candidate for a book on grammar and mechanics. Or was he?

In 1998, I moved from fourth to eighth grade. The new, high-stakes state writing test required students to know grammar and mechanics concepts that didn't emerge and self-correct in the workshop environment without some explicit instruction. In fact, in my inner-city middle school in San Antonio, Texas, my kids were stumbling as they tried to apply many basic conventions of writing. And now I had to teach complex sentences. How do you teach complex sentences? I wondered. I looked in the grammar textbook. It showed how to identify sentences as simple or complex, but that was about it. By this point, I was a voracious reader of professional journals and books, a habit developed during my master's degree work in literacy. None of these professional books about literacy workshop instruction actually said how to teach complex sentences—they just gave admonitions and advice to “teach grammar and mechanics in context.”

What was a nongrammarians to do? Because I wasn't a writer who naturally and unconsciously picked up rules and patterns, my own struggles actu-

ally helped me devise methods for teachers who experienced conflicts about teaching grammar and mechanics. My weaknesses helped me understand how and why students developed pseudo-concepts about language, because I was occasionally confused by a few of those pseudo-concepts as well.

Don't worry. I have learned the rules by now. I am thirty-eight; otherwise, I wouldn't dare to write a book. Or would I? For as much as I knew about writer's workshop and the teaching of writing, I knew little about how to truly integrate the conventions of grammar and mechanics into my daily teaching. It's one thing to learn the rules, and another to figure out how to balance explicit instruction about rules with the daily demands of a writer's workshop.

When I taught fourth grade with twenty-two students, I conferred with students and shared what they needed to know on an individual basis. If a problem popped up all over the class, I taught a mini-lesson. Even then I merely presented concepts rather than teaching them. The instruction was scattershot, but the test scores were high enough that I thought it was enough.

But once I moved to the middle school, I had 150 students I only saw for fifty minutes a day. My advice was random and ineffective: "Make sure all your sentences aren't the same. Make long ones and short ones. Don't have run-ons." I'm sure my kids loved all the advice and admonitions! I was just like all the writing experts, calling out as I walked into my classroom, "Teach grammar and mechanics in context!" The grammar and mechanics I taught one-on-one or in random, whole-class lessons only went so far. I had to do more, and I had to do it systematically.

What's Important?

We do not have time in our classes to teach everything about the rhetoric of a sentence. I believe in island hopping, concentrating on topics where we can produce results and leaving the rest . . . to die on the vine.

Francis Christensen, *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*

No matter how well-intentioned, if I deluge my students with too much of anything, they remember nothing—especially rules and the exceptions to those rules.

This truth gives me pause.

If we were to island hop as Christensen suggests, we should hop on the islands that matter, that give our students the power to write effectively. In terms of writing effectively, what really matters? What should we spend our time on? I can't spend the same amount of time on *who* versus *whom* as I do on *it's* versus *its*.