
3 Teaching the Language of Grammar

The previous chapter focused on raising students' awareness of grammar as language structure. It explained two general approaches for helping students discover grammar: contrasting two types of language with the same or similar content and using authentic texts to observe the grammatical aspects of actual written English. This chapter focuses on an aspect of grammar mentioned in the last section but one that is obviously a topic of its own: grammatical terminology. As grammar goal B explains, one goal of teaching grammar is to give students the terminology for naming the words and word groups that make up sentences—in other words, the parts of speech and the language of phrases and clauses.

In some ways, this goal is the most controversial aspect of teaching grammar. Some teachers sorely resent the time they are required to spend teaching grammatical analysis. They don't see any connection between teaching students to identify the parts of speech and preparing them to communicate effectively in the real world. They are even more resentful when standardized tests require them to cover this material and narrow their already limited classroom time. And, worst of all, they report that their students don't like grammar at all.

But for other teachers, the key to teaching grammatical terminology is making the activity meaningful, and the way to make it meaningful is to connect it with student writing and with their reading as well. Knowing grammatical terminology is not an end in itself but a means toward greater awareness of how language and literature work. The high-stakes tests don't make matters any easier, because they often require grammatical knowledge in its rawest form. But teachers do find ways to make the terms of grammar meaningful for students.

The first part of this chapter introduces you to linguistics-based ways of defining the basic parts of speech; the discussion of the parts of speech continues more fully in Chapter 8, "An Overview of Linguistic Grammar." The second part of this chapter introduces classroom approaches for applying and practicing grammatical terminology. If you need some extra clarification about the grammar terms in this section as you read along, check out the grammar glossary at the end of the book.

Form, Frame, and Function

We have long explained to our students that a noun names a person, place, or thing; a verb describes an action; and so forth. Such definitions might serve as starting points, but there are other easier and more accurate ways to identify the word classes: forms, frames, and functions.

Form. We know that a noun is a noun not only because of its meaning but also because we can change its form in certain ways: nearly all nouns can take endings that show plurality and possession. We recognize *dog*, *dog's*, and *dogs* as nouns both because of meaning and because of the endings, the forms of the word.

Frame. We also know that a word that stands alone after a determiner such as *the*, *a*, *my*, or *this* is a noun: *the dog*, *a dog*, *my dog*, *this dog*. The use of word “frames” helps clarify the part of speech in many cases that we might be hesitant about; *rich* and *poor* are usually adjectives, but they are nouns in *The rich and the poor*.

Function. When a word is used in a sentence, it takes on another vital characteristic: its function. Nouns, for example, function commonly as the subjects, direct objects, indirect objects, and subject complements in sentences. But nouns function not only in “nouny”—or nominal—ways; they function adjectivally and adverbially as well. In the phrase *the school cafeteria*, *school* is a noun (it’s a word that has both plural and possessive forms) even as it performs an adjective’s job of telling us about the cafeteria. The noun here functions adjectivally.

So you can encourage students to apply four different tests to words in order to understand the word class they belong to. These tests also help students understand the nature of the words and sentences themselves. In classroom practice with authentic texts, you and the students can be flexible with the tests. You may not need all four to identify every word, and some tests work more reliably or clearly in certain cases than others. We outline them here using nouns as examples. You will find a discussion of the forms and functions of other parts of speech in the section on word classes that opens Chapter 8 as well as in the grammar glossary.

1. Meaning: what a word means (*dog* and *school* name things)
2. Form: what a word looks like, the endings that can be added to it (for nouns, the plural *s* and the possessive *'s*; *dogs*, *dog's*, *schools*, *school's*)
3. Frame: the words that form a setting in which a word or type of word can fit (most nouns can stand alone after *the* and *a/an*; *the dog*, *a school*)

4. Function: what a word does in the sentence (nouns function in many ways, including as the sentence subject [*The dog ran home*], as the direct object [*He brushed the dog*], and adjectivally [*The store carries dog collars*]).

Beyond individual words and the roles they play, there are phrases and clauses to consider. Phrases and clauses are *forms*—forms of word groups—and they too serve different *functions*. The phrase is defined as a group of words (or single word in some cases) that acts as a unit or building block in a sentence but is not a clause. The term *phrase* is more important in modern linguistic grammar than you may remember it being in traditional grammar, where it was limited to only a few word groups such as prepositional phrases (*by the door, on the door, under the door, etc.*). In current grammar, the phrase is one of the two building blocks (the other is the clause) of the sentence. It is helpful to remember that phrases in linguistic grammar can be very short or very long. Thus, in the sentence *Dogs come in all sizes*, *dogs* by itself is considered a noun phrase, the subject of the sentence. In the sentence *The big brown dog that lives across the street is very friendly*, the first nine words also form one long noun phrase (with the noun *dog* as the headword), again as the sentence subject.

A clause can be distinguished from a phrase by its subject-predicate structure. The term *clause* in modern linguistic grammar is more consistent with what you may know already from traditional grammar than the term *phrase* is. *Dogs comes in all sizes* is an independent clause. In the sentence *The dog that lives across the street is friendly, that lives across the street* is an adjectival or relative clause in which the pronoun *that* functions as the clause's subject, and *lives across the street* is the predicate. Phrases and clauses are discussed in more detail under Sentence Constituents in Chapter 8.

Last, beyond the phrase and the clause, we have the sentence itself. The sentence is the unit in which all the other grammatical units—words, phrases, and subordinate clauses—play a role. Generally, for linguists the major type of sentence (there are exceptions and minor sentence types) is independent and includes a finite verb, which is a verb that changes to show tense and thus anchors an event to the speaker's time. Thus, *Karen made the call* includes the finite verb *made* that places the event in the speaker's past. *Karen making the call*, although it indicates the same action, does not stand clearly in a time frame; it could be in the past, as in *I was concerned about Karen making the call*, or the present, as in *What we are hearing now is Karen making the call*.

But beyond such generalizations, the sentence is not the straightforward unit that teachers and textbooks usually tell their students it is. The traditional definition of a sentence as a complete thought is true of many sentences, but it is obviously a problem with a sentence such as *This is it*. What is a complete thought to the student may not sound complete to the teacher, and vice versa. Even a seemingly self-evident sentence such as *The girl left yesterday*, which instantly sounds complete to the teacher who hears the subject and verb, may sound incomplete and puzzling to the child or young adult who wonders who the girl is, where she left from, and when. Finally, since nearly all written texts consist of sentences, we might expect spoken language to consist of sentences as well, but it is certainly not easy and sometimes not even possible for a listener to hear when one sentence ends and another begins during a conversation.

You can engage students at any grade level in these questions by giving them a selection of sentences from advertising, poetry, prose, and conversation and then asking them to create a workable definition of the sentence. This is a useful exercise in thinking skills and in understanding the limits of definitions. Students will find not only exceptions but also different standards of independence and acceptability in different contexts.

Sentences themselves, of course, are countless in number. But the number of sentence *patterns* in English is much smaller. In fact, there are only seven. And the structure of sentences is even simpler than that in the sense that the patterns are really differences just in the types of verbs and the different arrangements of complements that follow them. The sentence subjects that precede the verbs are steady and predictable: they are usually noun phrases, nouns plus modifiers, such as *Eight-year-old Hassan, who was born in Saudi Arabia*. But sentence patterns begin to differ from one another when we come to the verb. Verbs take three forms, each of which is associated with an arrangement of objects or other complements and each of which establishes the connection between the subject and the predicate that forms the basic meaning of the sentence. There are linking verbs, verbs that link the following complement back to the subject: *Eight-year-old Hassan, who was born in Saudi Arabia, is a good student*. There are intransitive verbs, verbs without complements (although they can be modified), verbs that seem to “contain” the action or state of the subject in themselves: *Eight-year-old Hassan, who was born in Saudi Arabia, walked to school*. Finally, there are transitive verbs, verbs followed by objects and other complements, the

simplest example of which is the pattern of verb and direct object, as in *Eight-year-old Hassan, who was born in Saudi Arabia, walked his dog.*

You can find examples and detailed discussion of the seven sentence patterns in the Sentence Pattern section of Chapter 8. As tools for helping students see that the arrangements of words within sentences are simpler than they may appear, the patterns can be a useful part of your repertoire for teaching grammar. You might consider as well traditional sentence diagramming, a graphic way to display sentence structure. Sentence diagramming is explained in Chapter 7, along with suggestions for its effective classroom use.

Practicing and Applying the Language of Grammar

Grammar Hunt

A grammar hunt involves finding particular structures in authentic language. On an elementary level, students can go hunting for simple structures such as a noun series (*I need oranges, bananas, and kumquats*) or prepositional phrases (*under the door, on the door, behind the door, etc.*). Older students can look for such structures as parallelism, in which two or more phrases of the same kind are connected for balance and emphasis (*Give me liberty or give me death* [Patrick Henry]; *I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished* [F. D. Roosevelt; examples from Kischner and Wollin 141]). Ask students to try to draw conclusions about why certain structures are used in certain ways: “Why do some sentences begin with prepositional phrases? What effect does parallel phrasing have here? Are we finding more action verbs or more linking verbs (*is, seems*) in the sports article? Why?”

Recipes

Ask students to compose sentences and text with given grammatical structures and combinations. For example: “Write a description of a zoo animal. Use three action verbs (such as *run, eat*), one linking verb (*is, seems*), one compound sentence (*The snakes are pretty gross, but lots of people were watching them*), five prepositional phrases (*in the cage, through the hole*), etc. This method gets the student out of the “simple sentence” rut and raises awareness of grammatical choices.

A variation is to present patterns of various types of sentences and have students supply the content: “Write a sentence with a compound subject, as in *Bill and Ted had a great adventure*. Write a sentence that ends with an adjectival clause, as in *The mouse gobbled the cheese, which had been sitting in the trap for three days and nights.*”

Inventories

As students read, they keep lists of interesting phrases, classified by grammatical form. They note the functions of various types of structures. After reading a sentence such as *Meredith's dog, a silky golden retriever and her faithful companion, slept at her feet*, for example, a student might note that "Appositives are good for fitting a lot of information into a sentence when there isn't much space."

Playing with Meaning

When we think about grammar, we think of the structure of language, but meaning and structure (semantics and syntax) are the two sides of one coin. Without the patterns of grammar, language would be a jumble of words, with no clues to tell a reader or listener how to connect the meanings of the words. Grammar supplies those connections. In discussing almost any grammatical topic, you can talk with your students about meaning:

- We teach that words are certain parts of speech, but it is productive fun to look at how the same word can serve as different parts of speech with different meanings. *Down* is a good example: *down the street* (preposition), *the down side* (adjective), *to down the ball* (verb)—as well as *a down pillow* (actually, a different word, and a noun used adjectivally). Another example is *fly*: what does it mean to a biologist, a baseball player, a tailor, a tent maker, a pilot?
- Many adverbs can move around quite freely in sentences, but meaning changes when they do so. Students can describe the difference—and the ambiguity—between, for example, *I just met her yesterday* and *I met just her yesterday*, between *Happily, he didn't die* and *He didn't die happily*.
- You can give students different sentence types and observe changes in tone and emphasis. They can compare the simple declarative *Petra wrote that graffiti* with the cleft (rearranged) versions *It was Petra who wrote that graffiti* and *What Petra wrote was that graffiti*.
- Compare active sentences with passive sentences (*Janice hit the ball* versus *The ball was hit by Janice*). The differences in tone and focus are a good topic for class discussion: "When the person appears at the end of the passive sentence, do you think it puts more emphasis on her, or less?" Use real texts such as reports and similar official documents to let students discover how the passive voice places things rather than people in the position of sentence subject or topic. Often in such texts, the people involved in an action are left out completely, as in *The decision*

was announced yesterday. Then ask students: "Do you think the sentence ought to include who did the action, or isn't it important?" (If you want to read more about how the placement of sentence elements affects readability, Joseph Williams's book *Style: Ten Lessons in Grace and Clarity* is an excellent discussion of sentence arrangement and stylistic effectiveness.)

VIGNETTE: TEACHING THE PASSIVE VOICE

To help students understand sentence structure, some teachers get physical. Here are two ways to dramatize the passive voice. Can you think of others?



I stand at one side of the room and throw my keys on the floor, telling the class to make me a sentence about what I just did and to begin the sentence with my name. I always get "Ms. Van Goor threw her keys on the floor." I smile and write the sentence on the board.

VG: And the subject of the sentence is?

Class: Ms. Van Goor.

VG: Right! And the verb?

Class: Threw.

VG: Right again.

Now I pick up my keys and do the same thing again, but this time I tell them they must begin the sentence with *The keys*. It takes only a few minutes longer for them to get "The keys were thrown on the floor by Ms. Van Goor." I write that sentence on the board also.

VG: And the subject is?

Class: The keys.

VG: Right! And the verb?

Class (This takes longer, several tries, but eventually someone says it): Were thrown.

VG: Right. Now, in the first sentence, was the subject (I underline the subject once) *doing* what the verb (I underline the verb twice) described?

Class: Yes.

VG: Was the subject *active*, doing something?

Class: Yes.

VG: OK, how about the second sentence? Did the subject (I underline it once) *do* what the verb (I underline it twice) described?

Class (*much more slowly!*): No-o-.

VG: Was the subject *active*, doing something?

Class: No-o-.

VG: Or was the subject *passive*, just sitting there letting something else *do something to it*?

Class (*very tentatively*): Passive?

VG: Yeah. The subject didn't *do* anything, but somebody or something did something *to* the subject. I don't know why we call the verb "passive"; it's actually the subject that's sitting there passively letting something happen to it, but that's the way it goes. We say *was thrown* is a *passive* verb.

Another day, I use body diagramming. I call three students up to the front of the room and give them three slips of paper. Written on one is *The new outfielder*; on another, *hit*; and on another, *the ball*. Then I tell these three students to arrange themselves so that they make a sentence and that they must somehow interact with one another in so doing. They do fairly obvious things, the subject usually hitting the verb with enough force to bump the verb into the direct object.

Then I call three more students up, keeping the first three in place. These three get *The ball* and *was hit* and *by the new outfielder*. I give them the same instructions. It takes the students a few minutes, but they usually end up with the subject and verb students out front and the prepositional phrase student a step or two behind them, with a hand holding on to the verb. Then, with both groups of three "acting," I ask the class to tell me the real difference in what's going on up there. Someone will eventually get it: that the action goes to the right in one group and to the left in the other. If I then ask them to look only at the verbs in the two sentences and find a difference, someone will eventually notice that the passive verb has two words. And if that class has by then memorized all the *do*, *be*, and *have* verbs, I'll ask what family the helping verb belongs to and wait until someone recognizes the *be* family.

If time allows, I get other sets of three students up front and ask them to make up their own short sentences with active and passive verbs and rearrange themselves as necessary. We get lots of

laughs—and students find out not only how to shift from one voice to the other but also how such shifts affect the meaning and flow of the sentence and how indispensable the *be* verb and the past participle are.

—Wanda Van Goor

VIGNETTE: TEACHING PRONOUNS WITH LEGOS

It's not easy to help students grasp the relationships between the parts of sentences. Sometimes, though, the frustration leads to inspiration. Here, Amy Benjamin narrates her discovery of LEGOs as a teaching tool, speaking in some paragraphs to us, in others to herself, and in others to her students, always excited. These days, as a teacher of teachers, Mrs. Benjamin brings LEGOs even to her classes for English teachers. In addition to the placement of "red" and "green" pronouns that she discusses here, what else could you demonstrate by using these blocks?



OK, so I'm teaching this ninth-grade Spanish class about pronoun case and I show them the subjective case and the objective case and how the subjective-case pronouns are used as subjects and the objective-case pronouns are used as direct objects and indirect objects and objects of . . . Wait. They don't know what subjects are. OK, so I show them. Now, that means I guess I can assume they don't know what objects are either. . . . Umm, I'm realizing that the students aren't entirely sure what a verb is. I better explain that.

Well, the next thing I know I'm at Wal-Mart hunting through the toy aisles for a set of giant LEGOs. I go home, spread them out on my living room carpet, and start sticking labels on them to color-code the functions: red for subjective, green for objective, white for prepositions, blue for verbs. No, wait, we need two different verb colors—action and linking—and don't forget the auxiliaries. Oh, and we'll need yellow for conjunctions.

(Can everybody see this? Can you see from the back of the room? Great.) Now, this is a sentence. We'll start with a simple sentence and then move on to a compound sentence. If you have a red

pronoun here, it's acting as the subject, and that means that any other pronoun doing the same thing, in the same part of the sentence, is *also* going to be red. Got that? Yes, and the same thing goes for the greens. The objectives. Those go after the verb . . . right. No, no, no. *After* the verb. Well, in that sentence it only *looks* like the green is before a verb because you're looking at the verb later in the sentence, in another clause. Look at each set of subject-verb-objects. It's always a red pronoun before the verb, green ones after. That one? Well, that's green because it's the object of the preposition. The object of the preposition is always going to be green.

Now, here's what you never, never do: You never, never mix these colors, see? If you mix these colors, you could start a fire in the sentence. You never put a red pronoun on the preposition bar. The preposition always takes the green, the objective case. That's why we call it the object of the preposition.

Now don't be thinking that the red pronouns always come first in the sentence. You could have a prepositional phrase coming first in the sentence, like this: I'll just unhook this prepositional phrase and move it over here right in the beginning of the sentence, and now its object is still green. So we have a sentence with a green pronoun near the beginning and a red pronoun, the sentence subject, after that.

Colors and visuals are powerful learning modes. The LEGOs approach allows us to show which parts of the sentence go together and what happens on either side of the verb. The LEGOs help native English speakers see the sentences they speak every day, but they are even more helpful when you are teaching a foreign language. When students are learning a foreign language, they need to know grammatical terminology because their ear is not attuned to the sound of the standards of the new language as it is (albeit imperfectly) to the sound of the standards of English.

The LEGOs approach ought to work with other concepts as well, such as verb endings, suffixes and prefixes, and parts of speech. I'm planning on asking for a LEGOs grant so that students can construct sentences at their seats. I'll let you know how that goes.

—Amy Benjamin

VIGNETTE: TEACHING THE ABSOLUTE PHRASE

This vignette describes a writing exercise for introducing students to a structure that adds details to a sentence in a compact way. The lesson also makes use of an important teaching approach: sentence combining. If you were this teacher, how would you follow up this lesson?



The teacher brings to class a picture of a lone tree on a hill; some leaves on the tree are still green and some have turned orange and red. The teacher asks students to create sentences that describe what they see in the picture, and the teacher then writes the sentences on the board.

Then the teacher asks which of these sentences has the most panoramic view of the tree. After various suggestions, the teacher and class settle on *The tree stands alone on the hill*.

Next the teacher asks the students to choose a sentence on the board that works like a zoom lens that is looking more closely at the tree. The students settle on *The leaves on the tree are turning red and orange*.

“Now,” the teacher says, “We will attach this sentence to the first one by dropping the *are*.” The teacher writes on the board, *The tree stands alone on the hill, the leaves on the tree turning red and orange*.

“Does that sound right?”

“No,” a student answers, “because we already have *tree* in the sentence. We wouldn’t say *leaves on the tree*, but *its leaves*.” So the teacher makes this change: *The tree stands alone on the hill, its leaves turning red and orange*. She explains that *its leaves turning red and orange* is an absolute phrase, a noun phrase plus a modifier following it, relating to the sentence as a whole. The base sentence gives the big picture and the absolute phrase gives details, like a zoom lens.

—Edith Wollin

VIGNETTE: SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT: SLICING THE APPLE

Sometimes, showing students how to edit an error is to open Pandora's box. Students at all levels sometimes need to go back over the basics when confronted by a problem with a sentence. The process may feel discouraging to the teacher, but review gradually strengthens students' language awareness. Here, one teacher about to discuss subject-verb agreement has come prepared. What grammar lessons have left you thinking you needed to review the basics?



It is midsemester, and Dr. Krauthamer's English Composition I students have been given their midterm grades. They are progressing well in essay structure, development, and coherence, but grammar, usage, and mechanics are still troubling areas. Dr. K. decides to focus on one grammar topic each week, and this week it is subject-verb agreement. She writes a sentence on the board from one of their midterm essays: *One year the drought got so bad that the water in these tanks were very low.* She asks the class, "What is the problem with this sentence?"

After a while, a student volunteers an answer, "The *were* should be *was*."

Another student declares, "You can't say 'tanks was.' Isn't that wrong?"

Dr. K. says, "Let's try a little demonstration of subject-verb agreement."

She places an apple, a knife (this is college!), and a cutting board on the desk. Bemused, the students wait for direction. Standing in front of the class, Dr. K. says, "Now watch what happens and then write a single sentence about what you see." Dr. K. then takes the knife, slices the apple on the cutting board, and says to the students, "Okay, write!"

After a few minutes, Dr. K. asks the students to write their sentences on the chalkboard. As they look at the board, she says, "My first question for you is, are these all sentences?" She points to one and reads it aloud: "*A slice of apple on the cutting board.*"

"No, that's not a sentence because there's no verb. A sentence must have a verb," says one student.

"Right! Now, how about this one," says Dr. K, pointing to another, "*A teacher cutting an apple with a knife.*"

"Yes, it's a sentence because the verb is *cutting*, since it shows an action," says one student. "It also has a subject, which is *teacher*."

"It still doesn't feel like a sentence," says another. "Something's missing."

"We have to put in a real verb, like *is*," says one of the students. "It's a sentence if we say, *The teacher is cutting an apple with a knife*."

"What makes *is* a real verb?" asks Dr. K.

No one responds.

"Let's look at some of the other sentences," says Dr. K. "What are the real verbs here?" She turns to the board and says, "Call out the real verbs, and I will double-underline them." The class recites together, laughing as the occasional wrong word is shouted.

"I don't understand," says one student. "I was taught that verbs indicate actions, and to me *slicing* and *cutting* are actions. Why aren't they verbs?"

"They are verb forms," says Dr. K, "but they aren't the *finite verbs*. They don't show whether they are in the past or the present, and they don't change depending on the subjects. When we talk about subject-verb agreement, we are concerned with the finite verb, the verb that will usually change depending on the subject. Let's look now for the subjects of these sentences, and I will single-underline them." Again the class recites together, and again some students call out the wrong words.

"Now I'm really confused. In *The teacher used the knife to cut the apple*, why isn't the subject *the knife*? Isn't the knife doing the cutting?" asks one student. "I thought the subject is what is doing the action."

"Now we're talking about semantic roles," says Dr. K. "The knife is the instrument—the tool used to perform the action; the teacher is the agent—the entity responsible for the action; the apple is the patient—the entity that receives the action; and this action is cutting. You can write many different sentences about this one semantic situation, and any one of those semantic roles can become the grammatical subject. Let's try it. Write sentences about what you just saw and use different subjects." The students come up with a variety of sentences, including:

The *knife* sliced the apple.

The *teacher* cut the apple.

The *apple* was sliced with the knife.

The *board* is what the apple was sliced on.

Cutting an apple is a messy thing to do in a classroom.

The class is amazed at how many sentences they can create from this one action. "So what do we mean by *subject*?" asks Dr. K.

"It's whatever agrees with the finite verb," says one student.

"Good! Now, here's something to watch out for when you're writing," says Dr. K. "A lot of subject-verb agreement errors happen when the subject and verb are so far apart that we don't always see their connection. Let's compose a sentence in which the subject is separated from the verb."

"*The teacher, trying to keep the students entertained, cuts the apple,*" says one student.

"Good! Can we make it even longer than that?"

"*The teacher, trying to keep the students entertained after a very long day at school and with lots of other problems on their minds, cuts apples in class.*"

"Now let's make the subject plural."

"*The teachers, trying to keep the students entertained after a very long day at school and with lots of other problems on their minds, cut apples in class.*"

Dr. K. points back to the original sentence:

"*One year the drought got so bad that the water in these tanks were very low.* We were wondering whether *were* is the right word. Is it a finite verb? Could it change tense? Could it change to agree with a different subject?"

Most students nod.

"Now take your time with the next question and remember what we were saying about the subject and verb being separated. What is the subject of *were*?"

A couple of confident hands: "*Water.*"

"So what is the problem with this sentence?"

"Subject-verb agreement!"

—Helene Krauthamer