Here I go one more time. Originally I hesitated to write about what to do with traditional grammar in the writing classroom. After all most teachers have very strong feelings one way or another about textbook grammar, and it is extremely unlikely that one short discussion like this will change anyone’s mind on the subject. Then, too, over the years I have presented countless workshops on grammar and writing, locally and regionally, and I have written on the topic before (Epps, 1990); as a result, I am suffering something like grammatical burnout. Still, wherever I go, teachers, parents, and administrators all have deeply sincere concerns about grammar, and all too seldom is there anyone around to deal with the issues directly and frankly. So it may be time again to shed some light where there is all too much heat.

What is Grammar?
First, what do I mean by grammar? In the most descriptive phrase I have been able to come up with in the last five years or so, grammar as I use the term here means traditional schoolbook grammar with its emphasis upon parsing, sentence diagramming, and the identification of “parts of speech” and “parts of a sentence” according to a system of nomenclature derived ultimately from Latin grammars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. What I explicitly exclude from grammar in this sense are standards and levels of usage (“feel bad” versus “feel badly,” for example, or a preference for “This is she” over “This is her” or the condemnation of expressions like “He ain’t”); style (Does one or does one not end a sentence with a preposition?); spelling; diction; the “mechanics” of capitalization and punctuation; and the research paper. All of these topics typically appear in so-called “grammar” textbooks and, like grammar, they are related to the teaching of writing; but they are most emphatically not “grammar,” and they are therefore beyond my principal focus here.

Much of the confusion and not a little of the heated controversy surrounding the issue of grammar instruction, especially in the minds of parents and administrators, originates in the obfuscation of true grammatical issues by red herring issues such as usage and style. Constance Weaver, in fact, delineates five distinct senses of the term grammar, all in current usage (Weaver, 1979, p. 9).

Is There a Grammar-Writing Connection?
That said, allow me to present my topic of discussion in the following terms: Does a knowledge of traditional textbook grammar — the nomenclature kind of grammar that teaches definitions of “transitive verbs” and “predicate nominatives” and fosters sentence diagramming and the conjugation of verbs — facilitate or improve a student’s competence as a writer?

Without a doubt the real-world answer is no. Think about it: How many students have you taught in your own career who were capable of making As on all of your grammar tests but couldn’t write their way out of a paper bag? Conversely, how many truly excellent writers have you taught who had no idea whatsoever of what a direct object is or where to find one or how to identify one, all this in spite of five or eight or ten years of instruction in traditional grammar by often gifted teachers? Instinctively there is — or should be — a sense that there is little if any correlation between mastery of traditional grammar and competence as a writer.

Research demonstrates the validity of this gut feeling about the relationship between grammar and writing; in fact research goes even further to assert that there is no positive correlation between grammar mastery and writing ability and that time spent on grammar drill and practice is in some ways counterproductive since it is time taken away from writing instruction.

Let me be specific. In 1986 the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills in conjunction with the National Conference on Research in English published George Hillocks’s major study, Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching. In this work Hillocks reported the conclusions of his meta-analysis of the effectiveness of various approaches to the teaching of writing. Of all methods of instruction in composition, Hillocks found that traditional textbook grammar was the least effective:

The study of traditional school grammar (i.e., the definition of parts of speech, the parsing of sentences, etc.) has no effect on raising the quality of student writing. Every other focus of instruction examined in this review is stronger. Taught in certain ways, grammar and mechanics instruction has a deleterious effect on student writing. In some instances a heavy emphasis on mechanics and usage (e.g., marking every error) resulted in significant losses in overall quality. (p. 248)

As strong as Hillocks’s conclusions are, they are neither isolated nor new. Constance Weaver, for example, in Grammar for Teachers: Perspectives and Definitions, an important 1979 study widely disseminated by the National Council of Teachers of
Writing: Hows and Whys

English, observed that "the results from tests in grammar, composition, and literary interpretation led to the conclusion that there was little or no relationship between grammar and composition or between grammar and literary interpretation" (p. 4) and, in slightly different terms, "a considerable body of research and the testimony of innumerable students suggest that studying grammar doesn't help people read or write better (or, for that matter, listen or speak better either)" (p. 4). Several books for teachers later, Weaver's conclusions remain the same today:

...in general, the teaching of grammar does not serve any practical purpose for most students. It does not improve reading, speaking, writing, or even editing, for the majority of students....(Weaver 1998, p. 19)

Elizabeth Haynes reported similar findings in her January 1978 review of research for English Journal: "the report of the Dartmouth Conference..." (1967) stated that the clearest agreement was that the study of traditional grammar had no effect (or even a harmful effect) on the improvement of written composition" (p. 83). Accordingly, she concluded as one of her "best recommendations":

While traditional grammar may be included in the curriculum as a humane and interesting discipline, or as a body of knowledge worthy of study, it should not be taught as an aid to writing. (p. 86)

Johnson and Louis (1990) come to similar conclusions. Why doesn't grammar work as an effective means of developing writing competence? In their view, "The teaching of grammar necessarily involves the decontextualization of language" (p. 5). In other words, when grammar is taught through isolated drill exercises, apart from genuine communication, i.e., real writing for real purposes, there is no student ownership of the lessons, if any, learned. It just does not "take." If this is true of mainstream speakers of Standard American English (whatever that is), moreover, it is even truer of non-mainstream students.

Farr and Daniels (1986) observe,

There is no reason that an approach to writing that has failed with mainstream students should be made the center of the curriculum for non-mainstream students [as it often is], unless we have conclusive evidence that it will work. (p. 44)

An influential review of best practice in the English Language Arts classroom underscores what experienced teachers have been saying for years: "Grammar and mechanics are best learned in the context of actual writing" (Zemelman et al. 1993, p. 52).

Not only does there seem to be no connection between the study of formal grammar and compositional competence, but there is also some evidence that mastery of complex, Latin-based school grammar is developmentally beyond teachers' reasonable expectations for at least some of their students. Most recently Hudson (1987) reported that "When students have achieved a level of formal reasoning [in Piagetian terms], they are much more likely to understand the rules and nuances of abstract grammar tasks" (p. 83).

Other writers agree. J. N. Hook and William H. Evans, in their influential text The Teaching of High School English, answer the question, "How much grammar—especially how much syntax—should be taught to junior and senior high school students who are native speakers of English?" with the pithily pointed "Not much" (Hook & Evans, 1986, p. 248). Dan Kirby and Tom Liner concur. In Inside Out, one of the most widely accepted classroom resources for teachers of writing published in recent years, Kirby and Liner argue that "Traditional grammar instruction—labeling parts of speech, identifying forms—is of little value in most courses" (Kirby & Liner, 1988, p. 258). More academic studies reach similar conclusions. David Foster notes,

The plain fact is that even aside from the arguments-on-principle suggested earlier in this chapter, no convincing empirical evidence has shown any link between knowing grammar—traditional or transformational—and writing well. (Foster, 1983, p. 132)

And Arthur Applebee, in an important historical survey of the teaching of English, refers with approbation to "the old and well-documented evidence that grammatical knowledge has no demonstrable relationship to writing ability" (Applebee, 1974, pp. 249-250).

The case against traditional grammar is strong indeed, ... (yet) it continues to be taught and often with a real vengeance.

Why Do We Teach Grammar?
The case against traditional grammar is strong indeed. As we all know, however, it continues to be taught and often with a real vengeance. Why is this? I think there are
many answers to this question, but let me posit four explicitly.

In the first place, most grammarians teach grammar because they know it, they are good at it, and they enjoy teaching it. Rare indeed is the English teacher who does not like grammar yet teaches it enthusiastically. Yet non-grammarians, English teachers frequently feel in the depths of their professional hearts as if they should like grammar, and I am often approached after workshop or conference presentations by such teachers wanting an extra dose of cordial against the guilt they feel. This happily supply is that simply liking a subject or a topic is not in and of itself sufficient reason for teaching it.

**Grammar instruction is so widespread because it is so easy to teach.**

Second, many grammarians teach traditional grammar because they were taught it in school. Past experience and models are most often the bases of current behavior, so we should not be surprised to find our colleagues, even ourselves, perpetuating the school of their own experience. Given the inherently inertial response of most schools to change of any sort, it is small wonder that English methods have changed little in many places from what they were decades ago.

A third reason that grammatical instruction is so widespread is that it is so easy to teach, at least as most often practiced in the classroom. Consider: the teacher assigns a topic, a couple of pages of explanation from the text, and an exercise or two for practice, reviews definitions orally the next day and then goes over homework sentences orally or at the board; perhaps spends additional time on concepts students find especially troublesome (the subjunctive mood, say, or predicate nominatives); and then assigns a test. The ease of this pedagogical approach, of course, is hardly the same as ease of mastering the concept, and this is perhaps why so many students have been deadened to the joys of the English curriculum after eight or twelve years consigned to this lowest level of instructional hell.

A final reason for the widespread teaching of grammar is that parents and administrators expect it. After all, they were taught this way, and grammar was good enough for them, wasn’t it? All too often, of course, it wasn’t. Too many people remember their English classes as an exercise in little more than character building precisely because of our profession’s blind faith adherence to a rigidly ineffectual pretense of teaching writing (or “correct speech” or “good English” or whatever we thought it was) through grammar. One reason the problem continues is that so few good English teachers become principals or instructional leaders.

So what are we to do about teaching of grammar? Continue as before, chuck it entirely, or arrive at some middle ground that will satisfy both camps?

I’m not sure the third alternative is realistically achievable, but I believe in something like it. Most important of all, I think, is the need to draw a distinction between a grammar which is of pedagogical use to the teacher and a grammar which is the content taught to students. Hook & Evans (1986) state the issue in these terms:

...The basic reason for offering some instruction in grammar is that it shows how the English sentence works—how the parts cooperate with each other to assist us in the expression of meaning.

For this purpose we need not traditional, structural, transformational, or some other conventionally recognized grammar, but a pedagogical grammar. This is one that selects from the welter of theories and terms just those few that will help ordinary students (few of whom will become linguists) to understand the basic characteristics of the most powerful tool they are likely to own, their language.

What this pedagogical grammar ought to do is to stress and clarify the systematic nature of the English sentence... (p. 249)

Expressed differently, what Hook & Evans are saying is what has been stated more succinctly by Kirby & Liner (1988): “Our diagnosis of students’ writing problems should be informed by our knowledge of linguistics” (p. 259). As teachers we need to have a formal understanding of the syntax of English grammar in order to identify and then help to rectify our students’ shortcomings as writers, in other words. Beyond this, we need “some common vocabulary for discussing sentence elements” (Foster, 1983, p. 133); Foster suggests perhaps traditional grammar for “the elements of syntax” (clause, phrase, subject, conjunction, etc.) and transformational grammar for “the operations students must work with” upon these sentences (p. 133). This makes sense to me, but I hasten to add that what I am recommending is that students learn just...
够的术语来提供真正的服务。我认为大多数学生——或者除了那些表现出对练习的兴趣——应该将语法图示；我不认为动词时态影响学生的写作能力；而且我尤其不认为整个班集体的语法练习对于任何事情都是有益的。

Weaver（1979）提出了一套有益的建议，供课堂教师参考：

In short, grammatical knowledge is more useful to teachers than to students. Teachers with some explicit knowledge of grammar should be able to design, select, and sequence a variety of sentence-combining activities. Students who have had considerable amount [sic] of practice with such activities tend to show improved control of sentence structure in their free writing, an increased ability to write syntactically mature sentences. There is some evidence that such practice may also improve reading comprehension. But before incorporating such exercises into the English language arts curriculum, teachers need to make such decisions as (1) which kinds of exercises are appropriate for the students’ level of development; (2) whether such exercises should cover a variety of syntactic constructions or only a few; (3) whether the sentence combining should be done apart from normal writing, in conjunction with it, or both; (4) whether such exercises should be written or oral or both; (5) whether such exercises should be structured, unstructured, or both; (6) and whether

to use technical terminology in the exercises or whether to teach mainly by example.

One important point is that grammar needs to be combined with rhetoric; that is, students need not only to practice ways of combining sentences but to discuss which ways are more effective and why… (pp. 86-87)

Another well reasoned argument on why to teach grammar, what about it to teach, and how to go about it all is provided by Noguchi (1991), who offers a “writer’s grammar” which students can profitably apply to stylistic problems.

Of course as we address the essence of what we and our students really need grammatically, we should not in the process neglect the teaching of the conventions of writing. Atwell points out that “Teachers need to remember that conventions were invented by writers, not handed down by God or English teachers” (1998). She then goes on to remind us all that

Throughout history writers developed rules and forms so others would read their writing as they intended it to be read. We do our students a big favor by approaching rules and forms not as miniatue to be mastered, but as a means of helping them make their writing look and sound as they wish it to and in order that readers will engage with a text and take it seriously. (pp. 184—185)

Of What Use Is Grammar?
So what do we do on Monday morning? And Tuesday through Friday? If we are teaching writing, then our first job is to have the kids write. Students need to develop fluency as writers so that they will be willing to write with the kind of frequency required for improvement to take place: if you don’t write, you can’t become any better at it. Next we need to have students write meaningfully for real purposes and real audiences. When it matters to students who they are writing for, about what, and why, then it suddenly becomes easier to teach them the importance of form and correctness. Once they understand this importance, they are more likely to internalize lessons of correctness taught within the context of real writing. Students also need opportunities to learn from one another and from the teacher in group and paired conferences. In the real world the writer who works in isolation, without feedback, help, and encouragement, is a rare bird indeed: the newsroom of a big city daily can be the noisiest of places for precisely this reason.

Students make mistakes for reasons, they do it systematically, and they do it often.

When focusing upon specific student errors, teachers should be selective, not exhaustive. Students make mistakes for reasons, they do it systematically, and they do it often. Take time to learn the kinds of errors made by individual students and then help those students individually. When groups of students make a common error, teach the concept at stake in a mini-lesson (Atwell, 1998), but still reserve most of your effort for individual attention within the context of a student’s own writing (Rief, 1992).

What kinds of specific lessons and/or activities are most likely to reinforce and
Grammar ... Again

strengthen a student’s “grammar sense”? Tchudi and Tchudi (1991) suggest a variety in addition to the sentence-combining recommended above. Most of the Tchudis’ recommended activities focus upon language and dialect awareness; having students become familiar with the nature of language and with the characteristics of their own and their classmates’ (pp. 175-178). Other of their suggestions focus upon more traditional grammar topics but, as they point out, “separated from the felt need to change people’s language behavior” (p. 166). Among their engaging activities: using Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” as a means of exploring what students already know about parts of speech and syntax; teaching parts of speech “independently of rules of usage” so as to avoid overkill; teaching nomenclature and identification of grammatical terms via non-textbook materials, for example, newspapers, school memos, etc.; utilizing substitution frames in order to teach parts of speech via positions within the sentence, etc. (pp. 166-169). Hook and Evans (1986) also discuss “The Basic Patterns of the English Sentence” and strategies to teach them at some length (pp. 250-256); and they provide a most helpful presentation of what they call “The Most Persistent Errors in Syntax” (for example, sentence fragments and run-ons, faulty subordination, dangling modifiers, faulty parallelism, etc.) and ways to combat them (pp. 261-266).

The problems of minority students and nonstandard English speaking students—primarily problems created by the schools’ inadequacy in addressing multiple English dialects and by the imposition of political expectations upon the English curriculum—present a special class of instructional perplexities for many teachers. It is beyond the scope of our ability to deal with those here, but there are a number of admirable studies which do so. See, for example, the classic study by J.L. Dillard (1973) as well as Dandy (1991) and Taylor (1990).

I am not prepared to go much beyond this, although like most English teachers I have to admit that I have in the past gone much beyond this point. Best practice to me now, however, seems to be to have students learn to write by writing; to teach students just enough rudimentary terminology to establish a common ground specifically for the purpose of discussing real problems in the students’ own writing (and some teachers can do this without much more than “sentence,” “paragraph,” “noun,” and “verb”); and to reserve any formal study of textbook grammar—traditional, transformational, structural, or whatever—to the precincts of an elective course relatively late in a student’s high school career. The National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association have together developed a comprehensive and practical guide to the teaching of English Language Arts in Standards for the English Language Arts (1996). The approach recommended here and the philosophy which underlies it are both fully informed by a complete and reliable understanding of the nature of language and language acquisition. Those looking for more guidance across the entire spectrum of Language Arts education would do well to begin here and in the works listed in “Appendix E: Resources for Teachers” (pp. 119-130).

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Teaching Grammar in Context: One Approach

BY HARRIET WILLIAMS

Beyond Basic
If reluctant writers have been in a writing workshop for any length of time, they can usually name two of the key qualities of good writing—focus and development. Unfortunately, sometimes even when they know the focus they want their piece to have, they find it difficult to express that focus clearly if they don’t have a command of sentence formations beyond the simple sentence.

For example, it’s not unusual for a basic writer to compose a passage like this one from Amber, a 17-year-old. In her piece about date rape, Amber is attempting to focus on a girl’s acceptance of a ride home from a party with an acquaintance, but her choppy sentence structure not only makes the piece irritating for a reader, it also diffuses her focus. Here’s a sample passage:

The girl was a freshman. She was naive. Her name was Sylvia. She accepted a ride home from a party with a friend of a friend.

Novice writers also have difficulty with development. Even when response groups or their own developing instincts tell them they need to add information, they frequently tend to devote an entire sentence to each added detail. In the following sentence Billy, a secondary remedial writer, attempts to apply the advice of group members who have told him he needed to add a location to his original sentence from a history paper:

The battle of Chattanooga was fought on Lookout Mountain. The battle sealed the South’s doom.

Billy felt his history teacher would be pleased with the addition of the first of these sentences which identifies the “where” of the battle, but he was still not comfortable enough with grammatical constructions to incorporate that information into his original sentence. Instead, by writing the sentence separately, he loses in focus what he gained in specific detail.

How can an understanding of grammar help students such as these write richer and more focused prose? None of the students in the remedial class with which I was working felt they had a strong command of sentence structure. They put their heads down when they heard “participial phrase” or “appositive,” yet those structures were just what their writing needed if they were to add detail while maintaining their