

# **Teach Grammar through Verb Sense & Pattern Recognition**

Judi Van Erden, Westmont High School, Westmont, Illinois  
jvanerden@cusd201.org

# I am

A teacher since **1998**

Taught **every grade-level in high school**: Pre-AP; AP Language & Composition; AP Literature & Composition; Creative Writing; Psychology in Literature; Our Society in Literature.

**AP Language & Composition Reader** since 2011

Currently teach **College Readiness, Creative Writing, and Senior English**

# **I am not.....**

**A grammarian!**

No grammar in high school, no grammar in college, no grammar workshops while studying for my teaching certificate.

But I was expected to know grammar in my previous job as a Technical Writer and I am expected to teach grammar in College Readiness while preparing students for the ACT and SAT.

# Why I like teaching grammar

- Grammar is a logic-based discipline that develops cognitive and critical thinking skills. Students only have to master a small technical vocabulary in order to engage in sophisticated conversations about their language usage.
- Once students learn the technical language, they can understand—rather than memorize—the relationship of parts of speech and punctuation to language structure.
- People judge us, rightly or wrongly, by how we speak and write.
- By improving our understanding of the significance of patterns to language, we can better appreciate other languages and the speaking patterns of people who are not native English speakers.

# Grammar is a contentious subject

## A bit of history.....

- The first grammars that we know of originate in ancient Greece, Rome, and India.
- Primary goal: protect the “purity” of the language.
- Right away, grammar gets branded as elitist and a focus of the snooty snobby set.
- And then there’s this.....

# **“The Wrong to Teach Grammar”**

A century of research shows that traditional grammar lessons—those hours spent diagramming sentences and memorizing parts of speech—don’t help and may even hinder students’ efforts to become better writers. Yes, they need to learn grammar, but the old-fashioned way does not work.

This finding—confirmed in 1984, 2007, and 2012 through reviews of over 250 studies is consistent among students of all ages, from elementary school through college. For example, one well-regarded study followed three groups of students from 9th to 11th grade where one group had traditional rule-bound lessons, a second received an alternative approach to grammar instruction, and a third received no grammar lessons at all, just more literature and creative writing. The result: No significant differences among the three groups—except that both grammar groups emerged with a strong antipathy to English.

# The argument only addresses writing

Unfortunately, that study was published in 1979, a period that precedes the emphasis on standardized testing that students and teachers currently face. It was also a time when there was very little emphasis on students who faced these tests as second language learners.

This perspective also *ignores the importance of grammar to reading comprehension and fluency.*

# **Grammar & Reading: an important relationship**

“The relationship between grammatical understanding and reading has been less researched within the field of L1 education even though there are important reasons to believe such a relationship exists. For example, psycholinguistic research has shown that reading requires syntactic processing (Verhoeven and Perfetti) and explicit training of such syntactic processing skills may therefore contribute to better reading.”

From the abstract of a study titled, **Grammatical understanding predicts reading comprehension in secondary-level students: insights from a Finnish national survey**, by Jenni Marjokorpi and Jimmy van Rijt



“...a focus on form appears to be necessary...for optimal second language learning” (233), in part because “when instruction is meaning focused only, learners do not develop many linguistic features at targetlike levels” (233).

Jan Frodesen, University of California at Santa Barbara

# Pattern recognition is important to learning

Pattern recognition = “Cognitive Simplification” and helps with & reflects

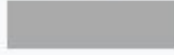
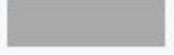




- cognitive function
- decision-making
- social interaction and
- language acquisition

# Languages are Categorized by Patterns

Linguists began categorizing languages by pattern in the 18th century.

By the end of the 19th century, the Jesuits started categorizing the languages of the world, the better to preach to the masses. And, by the end of the 1800s, in 1891, Georg von der Gabelentz proposed the term “linguistic typography” in his work, *Sprachwissenschaft*, which translates to *Language Science*.



Word order	English equivalent	Proportion of languages	
SOV	"She him loves."	45%	
SVO	"She loves him."	42%	
VSO	"Loves she him."	9%	
VOS	"Loves him she."	3%	
OVS	"Him loves she."	1%	
OSV	"Him she loves."	0%	

# SENTENCE PATTERNS

SV=Subject+Verb

SVO=Sub.+Verb+Object

SVC=Sub.+Verb+Complement

SVA=Sub.+Verb+Adjunct

SVOC=Sub.+Verb+Obj.+Comp.

SVOO=Sub.+Verb+Obj.+Obj.

SVOA=Sub+Verb+Obj.+Adjunct

**Basic English Grammar**



R I L S  
ROMAN INSTITUTE OF LANGUAGE STUDIES

Reminder:

**Compliment** = word(s) needed to complete the meaning of the sentence.

**Adjunct** = a modifier; usually an adjective.

# English is an S-V-O language

English is a subject-verb-object (S-V-O) language, meaning that the dominant pattern of English sentences is noun-verb-noun. And we can simplify the pattern even more so to each sentence contains a subject-verb (S-V) unit. That unit is necessary for a complete sentence.

I propose that the subject-verb unit must be the basis for grammar instruction in K-12 education.

# What should students know?

Basic technical language of grammar:

- Clause
- Phrase
- At least 8 parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, adjectives; verbs, adverbs; conjunctions; prepositions; interjections; transitions\*
- Additional terms: subject/verb unit; clause; sentence; phrase

\* *Although transitions represent a function as opposed to a part of speech, that distinction is esoteric as far as students are concerned.*

# Parts of Speech

Nouns

Pronouns

Adjectives

Conjunctions

Interjections

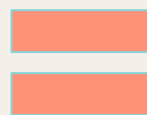
Prepositions

Transitions



Verbs

Adverbs



Clause

Extras  
Articles  
Phrase



# Verb Sense: The key to grammar instruction

Math teachers talk about **number sense**, the ability to solve problems or reasonably estimate numbers in one's head. Like figuring out 10% or 12% in your head.

When teaching grammar (and reading) I like to focus on “verb sense.”

**Verb sense** is the ability to identify the main verb in a clause and the subject with which it is aligned.

Verb sense makes **decoding text easier**, **determining the subject** of the sentence **more precise**, and **helps with proper punctuation placement**.

# The **Verb** is the most important word

- Everything in the sentence keys off the verb.
- The verb determines the focus of the sentence.
- The subject/verb must agree.
- Punctuation is dependent on the subject/verb unit.
- The verb is the key to decoding difficult sentences.
- Recognizing the subject/verb unit is important to punctuation placement

# HT approach re-introducing students to Parts of Speech

Help students **reason through** the parts of speech by asking them questions:

- What's the most important part of speech?
- Connect a subject/noun to the verb.
- What's another kind of noun?
- What **adds** information to the noun? To the verb?
- What's the difference between a clause and a phrase?
- What do you need to connect to independent clauses?
- etc.....

# Practicing Verb Sense

- Working with text
- Use verb sense to decode text
- Talk about punctuation and its use when reading texts
- Asks students to practice looking for the main verb when they read and begin to notice that they're reading speed increases

\*This is what Constance Weaver meant by *rhetorical grammar*.

# ACT: Top 10 Grammar Rules per Kaplan

1. Run-ons and fragments
2. Verbs: Subject-Verb Agreement & Verb Tenses
3. Punctuation: Commas, apostrophes, colons, semicolons, dashes, periods
4. Idioms
5. Wordiness
6. Parallel Structure
7. Pronouns
8. Modifiers: Adjectives/Adverbs and Modifying Phrases
9. Word Choice: Transitions & Dictions
10. Organization & Strategy

Grammar can help you teach almost all these skills!!

# Subject/Verb Practice

## Finding the Main Verbs

The following sentences are the first seven sentences of an article titled, *A Hole in the Head: Can a brain implant treat drug addiction?* by Zachary Siegel from the September 2022 issue of *Harper's Magazine*.

1. On a bright summer day in July 2021, James Fisher rested nervously, with a newly shaved head, in a hospital bed surrounded by blinding white lights and surgeons shuffling about in blue scrubs.

2. He was being prepped for an experimental brain surgery at West Virginia University's Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute, a hulking research facility that overlooks the rolling peaks and cliffs of coal country around Morgantown.
3. The hours-long procedure required impeccable precision, "down to the millimeter," Fisher's neurosurgeon, Ali Rezai, told me.

# Use knowledge of prepositions and verbs to edit text to make it easier to understand

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire **as much** from his chamber **as from society**. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, **though nobody is with me**. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come **from those heavenly worlds**, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent **with this design**, to give man, **in the heavenly bodies**, the perpetual presence of the sublime.



# ACT Application

*Pauwau* is an Algonquin word that once

referred to medicine men, who danced, during  
tribal ceremonies. However, Europeans

1. **A.** NO CHANGE  
**B.** men; who danced  
**C.** men who danced,  
**D.** men who danced

# ACT Application

The participants danced to the music of drums.

7

Each group of people who sit around a large skin

drum, singing and playing the drum in unison, is

8

known as a “Drum.” These Drums provide the music

7. A. NO CHANGE

B. dance

C. were dancing

D. would have danced

8. F. NO CHANGE

G. drum, singing and playing the drum in unison

H. drum singing and playing the drum in unison,

J. drum singing, and playing the drum in unison

# Resources

## Constance Weaver

- Grammar for Teachers: Perspectives and Definitions
- Teaching Grammar in Context
- Lessons to Share
- The Grammar Plan Book

## Amy Benjamin

- Engaging Grammar: Practical Advice for Real Classrooms  
(includes a K through 12 scope and sequence)
- Grammar Alive!
- Teaching Grammar

# Resources

Cleary, Michelle Navarre. *The Atlantic*. "The Wrong Way to Teach Grammar." 25 Feb 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/02/the-wrong-way-to-teach-grammar/284014>

Elly, W. B., and Others. The Role of Grammar in a Secondary School Curriculum. Educational Research Series No. 60.

Graham, Steve and Dolores Perin. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 99, No. 3, 445-476. "A Meta-Analysis of Writing INstruction for Adolescent Students"

Hillocks, Jr. George. *American Journal of Education*. "What Works in Teaching Composition: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental Treatment Studies." Nov 1984. Vol. 93, No. 1. pp 133-170

Marjokorpi, Jenni and Jimmy van Rijt. "Grammatical understanding predicts reading comprehension in secondary-level students: insights from a Finnish national Survey." Received 14 Dec 2023, Accepted 27 Jun 2024, Published online: 15 Jul 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2024.2376280>