

## **Grammar intertwined throughout the writing process: An “inch wide and a mile deep”**

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*ABSTRACT: Drawing on theory and practice, the authors argue that, rather than trying to “cover” all grammatical skills, something traditionally done in many classrooms, and with limited results, teachers can more successfully teach less grammar with better results by focusing on key grammatical options and skills in the context of actual writing, throughout the writing process and over time. The article includes specific examples of teachers integrating grammar within writing instruction, as supported by theoretically and pedagogically sound practices. The article also presents a planning framework for teachers seeking to integrate grammar more effectively in their classrooms. Particularly emphasized is the value of using literature as a source for grammatical examples and skills. Sections also address specific adaptations for elementary writing workshops and the teaching of editing.*

*KEYWORDS: Editing, grammar, mini-lesson, writing process, writing workshop.*

We were recently in a local high school classroom where a teacher was teaching the skill of sentence combining. On the surface, it appeared that the lesson was basically well developed and well-organized. The teacher showed a series of simple sentences on an overhead and asked for student reaction. Once students responded with such statements as “simple,” “basic,” “boring,” or in one case “baby-ish,” the teacher went on to ask students for ways to combine the sentences. He showed various techniques, ranging from taking out a word to make sentences connect, to the use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. He even briefly taught the use of a semi-colon. He then challenged the students to revise the paragraph. They worked in pairs, arguing and developing ideas, until he asked for examples. As a class, they then revised the entire paragraph together.

Did the teacher integrate grammar into the writing process? Of course he did. Was the activity effective? Sadly, the answer is a definite “no”, or at least “not as effective as it could have been”. Why not? Clearly, the kind of activity was appropriate in general: sentence combining has repeatedly been found effective for enriching

writing (Andrews, Torgerson, Beverton, Freeman, Locke, Low, Robinson & Zhu, 2004, though there is also some evidence that imitating sentences or attending directly to students’ own sentence structure may be at least as valuable). On the surface, it certainly looked as if the teacher was integrating grammar into the writing process – using mini-lessons to enrich and enhance student writing. Grammar was considered not as a “right” or “wrong”; there were opportunities to consider not just grammar (what is possible) but rhetoric (what would be most effective), and the teacher’s procedures actively engaged students in modifying text.

Yet, there were serious flaws in the lesson. When the mini-lesson was over, the teacher then passed out the students’ “grammar” homework: a sheet containing 25 sets of sentences ready to be combined. He then said, “OK, enough grammar. Open up your literature texts...” As students dutifully put away their work and assignments and began another activity, we heard one student say to another, “What was that all about?” The response: “I dunno.”

So close! What went wrong? The teacher made grammar useful. He went beyond the idea of grammar as a list of rules to be memorized. But he missed the most important point: to place grammar within the context of actual writing. He also forgot to talk about purposes, audiences, and possibilities. He taught the skill, much as if he would teach any disconnected skill such as, say, tying a bowline knot. He gave examples. He showed the skill; then he gave an assignment. From his students’ perspective, he taught sentence-combining just as an old sailor will teach youngsters about knots – just because he knew the skill and he thought the students should know the skill as well. But the all-important notion of relevance was missing; there was little connection to the reasons for the skill, or a larger understanding of how those skills can be useful and used in actual writing.

The grammar mini-lesson we witnessed also appeared to be an isolated event. Students were not used to seeing grammar as meaningful and inherent to their writing. There were no lessons with follow-up, no demonstrations of different ways that one sentence could be reduced to part of another, no writing workshops that made grammar or any other aspect of a writer’s craft part of his students’ daily work. Students appeared to have been conditioned to think of grammar as a skill disconnected from their writing processes – and from literature. On paper, it seemed as if this teacher’s lesson would work. We had even been invited to this classroom by one of the teacher’s senior colleagues so we could see how their school was utilizing “grammar in context”. But what should he have done? And how can teachers more effectively teach sentence-combining strategies – and key aspects of grammar – in conjunction with literature and writing?

Let’s contrast the aforementioned mini-lesson with the work of some teachers who understand and implement “best practice” in teaching grammar with writing in their classrooms. Amanda Schripsema and Carol McNally are two middle-school teachers we know and respect, who teach in southwestern Michigan. For Carol, Amanda, and for many other teachers, grammar is not just an “add-on”; nor is it a chore, or a sporadic activity. As they demonstrate, teaching grammar can be an inherent, natural and important part of teachers’ support of their students’ writing – at all stages of the writing process. Our first teacher didn’t convince his students of the value of sentence-combining, probably because he didn’t guide them in combining sentences

within their own writing. His students were not able to connect, for themselves, the rhetorical skill of combining sentences with their own acts of writing. In our conception of teaching and guiding the writing process, grammar is integrated throughout – through mini-lessons, focus groups, and one-to-one conferencing. See the immediate difference?

Amanda offers a powerful analogy:

Do we force sixteen year olds to learn every gear and function within a car’s engine before we let them hit the road? No. Knowing how each gear will work will not improve the process of driving . . . . What helped us to improve? Our car manual, or hours of driving practice? The same goes with writing. We need to let our students practise, and it’s through authentic practice that we can explain why the gears grind when one does not shift properly (grammar or mechanical problems).

What an amazing difference from our first teacher’s lesson to Amanda’s “practice makes perfect” analogy. While the first was related to the writing process, it was still out-of-context and not much more than an “exercise” for students. For Amanda, however, grammatical practice comes as part of the natural process of writing. It is an inherent and useful part of learning to write.

During the writing process is an excellent time to introduce some grammatical skills that can then be practised in authentic writing, whether the writing assignment be only a paragraph or multiple pages in length. Amanda’s analogy is put to test in a mini-lesson she regularly teaches. This mini-lesson is not an isolated activity, but part of her self-described system in which grammar is a normal, everyday part of what her students do, so students are already expecting activities that integrate grammar into their writing, and are disposed to understand the importance of the grammar-generated content enriching their writing. In her “Grammatical rhythms in paragraphs” mini-lesson, Amanda introduces her students to some basic ideas of sentence variation and sentence combining. She begins by showing several “professional” examples of this skill, including one from *Make your words work*, by Gary Provost (2001):

This sentence has five words. This sentence has five words too. Five word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It’s like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety. Now listen. I vary the sentence length and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes when I am certain the reader is rested I engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals, and sounds that say listen to this, it is important (p. 55).

Amanda also shows literary examples, including the following by Norman Mailer (1975):

Foreman threw a wild left. Then a right, a left, a left, and a right. Some to the head, some to the body, some got blocked, some missed, one collided with Ali’s floating ribs, brutal punches, jarring and imprecise as a collision at slow speed in a truck (p. 181).

After showing various examples, Amanda then engages her students in considering grammatical rhythm and sentence variation as they prepare to use these skills in their own work. She asks students to make judgments about the writing, asking them, as fellow authors, which sentences and paragraphs they like, and how the authors convey meaning, voice and emotion through sentence rhythm and variation. They are then asked to practise this skill of varying sentences and add it to their repertoire of writing skills for their current and future writing projects.

The writing process offers an opportunity to continually reinforce previously “learned” skills. Many teachers make the mistake of “covering” various grammatical skills and then assuming that students know and can apply them. This is clearly a mistake that our opening teacher made. He felt that he had “covered” sentence-combining even though his students’ initial introduction to the concept was by no means enough for any real mastery of the skill.

For an example of reinforcing grammar within the process, let’s look more closely at what Carol McNally advocates in her middle school classroom. Like Amanda, Carol also looks to literature for grammatical examples for her students. In this project, she draws on Lois Lowry’s *The giver* (1993). As an experienced teacher, Carol asserts, “one of the most prevalent tendencies of middle-school writers is to include a high frequency of short, choppy sentences – all of like construction – in their writing” (Weaver, McNally & Moerman, 2001, p. 22). Carol begins her lesson by deconstructing a passage by Lowry into “a piece of writing any middle school writer might have written”, using simple constructions, limited syntax and minimal description:

His training had not yet begun. He left the auditorium. He felt apartness. He made his way through the crowd. He was holding the folder she had given him. He was looking for his family unit. He was also looking for Asher. People moved aside for him. They watched him. He thought he could hear whispers.

She then lets her students give their opinions of the writing. They work together to practise fixing the “choppy” sentences by sentence-combining and reworking and rewriting the text. As Carol states, “I must state here that this class had previously studied the effects of beginning sentences with participial phrases...so, in addition to combining sentences, many students also integrated this previously learned stylistic grammar choice to enhance their re-creations of Lowry’s passage” (Weaver, McNally & Moerman, 2001, p. 23). Afterwards, Carol shows Lowry’s unaltered text and discusses the grammatical choices Lowry made within it with her students. Of course, Carol also promotes students’ use of the grammatical constructions and sentence-combining techniques she’d taught into their own writing.

What did Amanda and Carol do that our opening teacher did not? For starters, they made grammar real. It wasn’t just an exercise. Clearly grammar was taught selectively as an important means of appreciating literature and enriching one’s writing. Carol comments: “If I had started these lessons by telling my students we were going to be studying grammar, or more specifically, participial phrases and appositives, and doing sentence-combining, my guess is their attitude would have

precluded the positive results that I see more and more often in their everyday writing” (Weaver, McNally & Moerman, 2001, p. 24).

Harry Noden offers an excellent example of grammar as enrichment in *Image grammar* (1999). For Noden, grammar is a means of helping students develop their text much in the same way that painters are able to use various brushstrokes to craft their art – or the ways that any artist or craftsman uses specialized skills to develop the craft. As Noden explains:

Traditionally, the study of grammar has dealt only with words, phrases and clauses. However, when I began to see grammar as the process of creating art, it seemed unnatural – even impossible – not to view grammar as a continuous spectrum in a whole work. As I explored this view with my students, the connection seemed to bring grammar into a meaningful relationship with stories, novels, screenplays, poems, reports and songs – the ultimate products of the writer’s art (ix).

Our students are often like the novice artist who sees a beautiful scene she wants to replicate and develop, but lacks the ability. Instead, then, she uses only rudimentary tools and is unable to replicate those images. It takes a skilled artist to replicate the intricacies of an artistic notion. The same applies to writing. It takes specific skills for the crafting of language to make writing interesting and sophisticated. As Noden demonstrates, it’s most efficient and effective to teach grammatical options and stylistic techniques through students’ own writing – even if what they write is only one sentence imitating the sentence of a master craftsman. We can best help our student writers learn and use these skills and techniques when we teach them – often via literary examples – while students are engaging in the writing process.

### **HOW CAN WE TEACH GRAMMATICAL OPTIONS THROUGHOUT A SINGLE WRITING EVENT?**

The answers to this question can be varied, of course. We teachers do not necessarily stop the class while they are writing and teach a mini-lesson, though we might do exactly that when we discover a need. We are accustomed, perhaps, to teaching mini-lessons on the mechanics of writing, when the need arises. But we are not all so accustomed to teaching the use of effective language structures when the opportunity arises from students’ own writing.

Consider, for instance, the piece of writing produced by Amy, a student in Scott Peterson’s class, in response to an assignment to write about a scary night. First, the students clustered ideas for their description, and Amy spontaneously produced some *-ing* modifiers, two of which she incorporated in the following sentence: “*I felt the wind going through the trees like ice cream melting in the summer*” (Weaver, 1996, p. 167). While the students wrote, Scott walked around the room briefly answering students’ questions and offering suggestions and praise. During this activity, he might have noticed this sentence of Amy’s and decided to write it on the board or on a transparency for a brief mini-lesson, to show the class how they could add action phrases to their description. Though extremely brief, such a mini-lesson offers to other writers in the class a grammatical tool they may want to employ consciously.

In the ebb and flow of the writing process, there are many spontaneous opportunities like this to teach the use of modifying structures, for example, or parallelism, or other grammatical options that might enhance the elaboration and flow of ideas. As students begin revising and editing, still more opportunities arise to teach effective ways of revising sentences and paragraphs, and to teach editing skills like subject-verb agreement or the use of punctuation. When teachers do pre-plan their mini-lessons, sometimes they just plan to look for opportunities within their students' writing that day, in order to teach a particular concept. They plan, in other words, to seize opportunities that arise from the writing that students are doing.

Often, however, the teacher can have the greatest long-term effect by starting with a pre-planned lesson on using grammar effectively to express content, then following that same concept through the revising, editing and proofreading processes. Of course, time constraints make it impossible to do this sort of teaching with every piece of assigned or self-chosen writing, and even when we teachers try our best, some aspect of the process may get shortchanged: either revising or editing, usually. When that happens, we can make a note to be sure to emphasize the missing step next time.

That said, what follows is a glimpse into one attempt to do it all. The story is still being lived.

### ***The paper bag princess and participial phrases***

*Connie tells the following story of teaching one particular grammatical concept to enrich writing:*

Jeff Henderson, a sixth grade teacher at Baldwin Middle School in Hudsonville, Michigan, had asked me to teach a demonstration lesson on using present participial phrases. We decided that I would teach the kind of participial phrases that offer “extra” information to enrich writing: ones that have to be “set off” by commas. As Jeff said, “These sentences represent what most sixth-grade students consider to be good sentences already. So your instruction will awaken their awareness to what a sentence – specifically a noun – can be (become) when *-ing* phrases are used.” Since Jeff and I had been working on tying grammatical instruction in writing to the literature Jeff used in the classroom, I volunteered to develop a lesson relating to the class's current unit on folktales.

Initially explaining to the class that they would be writing either a prequel or a sequel to *The paper bag princess* (Munsch, 1980), I then read the brief text while showing the pictures on the overhead. In this spoof of the usual fairy tale plot, the prince is saved from the dragon by the princess, who is clothed only in a paper bag, because the dragon has burned down her castle. After brief class discussion – it turned out that most of the class had heard the story – I then presented some participial phrases as examples, calling them simply *-ing* phrases. The following were my most successful examples, drawn from the prequel to *The paper bag princess* that I had written and would later share as a model:

Tall and willowy, Princess Elizabeth had brown hair with blond highlights and clear blue eyes, penetrating to the very heart of all who knew her.

Ellie was adventurous, too, riding into the dense forest at every opportunity, looking for new things like hidden pools or caves.

Riding forth one sunny day, passing from the safety of the castle yard into the uncertainty of the forest, Ellie heard a mournful howl.

Asking the class what the *-ing* phrase described in each case, I pointed out that the *-ing* phrases all added interesting, “extra” details about the princess and her actions, and therefore needed to be set off from the rest of the sentence by a comma or commas. The class then considered whether either of the *-ing* phrases in the middle example could logically be moved to the front of the sentence; generally, we liked the idea of moving the first *-ing* phrase to the front, to create *Riding into the dense forest at every opportunity, Ellie was adventurous, too, looking for new things like hidden pools or caves.*

Next, leading the students in creating some *-ing* phrases together and deciding whether they were movable or not, I finally invited the students to work in pairs to add details via *-ing* phrases to some bare-bones sentences I had developed about the prince and about the dragon – to give the students ideas, I suggested, for their own writing. The skeletal sentences included these:

The prince stared at the paper bag princess.  
The dragon smashed the castle.

As the students shared ideas and wrote, Jeff and I walked around the class, helping the students grasp the concept of adding an *-ing* phrase at the beginning or end of the sentence, to modify “the prince” or “the dragon.” We also pointed out when the writers needed to set off their *-ing* phrases with a comma.

After that, I shared as a model for the students the prequel that I’d written the night before, making sure to use *-ing* phrases and “adjectives out of order”, which Jeff had already taught the students to experiment with in their writing. Again I pointed out that all of my *-ing* phrases occurred at the beginning or end of the sentence, but in either case described the subject – just the way published writers most often use and deploy such modifiers. At the end of the class period came the follow-up assignment: the students were asked to write a prequel or sequel to *The paper bag princess*, using some participial phrases to make their writing come alive – to show instead of telling. Jeff asked the students to use at least two participial phrases in their story.

Figure 1 shows the prequel I wrote as a model for students.

#### **Princess Elizabeth’s Adventure**

Princess Elizabeth, known as Ellie by family and friends, was beautiful. Tall and willowy, she had brown hair with blonde highlights and clear blue eyes, penetrating to the very heart of all who knew her, attracting everyone whose path she crossed. Ellie was adventurous, too, riding into the dense forest at every opportunity, looking for new things like hidden pools or caves.

Riding forth one sunny day, passing from the safety of the castle yard into the uncertainty of the forest, Ellie heard a mournful howl. She halted abruptly, wondering what

could possibly be crying so pitifully. Ellie thought perhaps she shouldn't venture alone into the darker and darker forest, yet curiosity and concern led her on, hoping she could somehow ease the creature's pain. As Ellie rode among strange kinds of bushes and trees, their branches closer and closer, the creature's plight sounded more and more desperate. Finally Ellie came to a small clearing, where a beautiful fox, silver with bushy tail, lay trapped. Yowling and moaning, the fox looked at her desperately, pleading with pain-filled eyes for her to free him from his pain. Carefully, Ellie dismounted, tying her horse's reins around the nearest tree so he wouldn't run from the fox. Fearful but determined, Ellie stepped on the edge of the trap, pulled on the top of the metal jaws that clamped the fox's foot, and gently released that foot, mangled and torn from his efforts to escape the trap. The two of them stood looking at each other, fox and princess, Ellie's eyes filling with tears of relief and the fox's with tears of gratitude.

The fox was so grateful that, when his paw had healed, he told the other forest creatures how the girl had rescued him. Eventually, word reached her parents and others in the castle and town.

From then on, Princess Elizabeth was known fondly as Ellie the Brave.

### Figure 1. Connie's prequel, written as a model

The following day, Jeff taught the lesson to his other classes. He also looked at the rough draft prequels and sequels that students in the classes I taught were in the process of writing. Jeff wrote:

Noting many misconceptions, I put the overhead transparency back up and reviewed with the students what you [that is I, Connie] had underlined in your story. The students asked some general questions, and then I had them “peer edit,” looking for use of the *-ing* phrases and helping each other make corrections.

Jeff noted that there were quite a few wrong ideas, misunderstandings of how participial phrases worked. “There were two main problems: (1) students misunderstood that the goal was to modify the subject noun; and (2) they also misunderstood that what we wanted them to create were entire participial phrases, not just single-word participles.” Together we had looked at and created only *-ing phrases*, not single-word participles, because I was aiming for greater development of ideas. Obviously, I had not managed to make that clear; nor had Jeff and I together when we walked around the class while they were expanding the sentences about the prince and the dragon.

In the days that followed, while the students were drafting their stories, Jeff did another mini-lesson to help clarify for the students what these “non-essential,” extra *-ing* phrases looked like and how they could be constructed to tell more about the subject of their sentence. He also taught a lesson designed to differentiate the kind of phrases we'd taught from other uses of verb forms ending in *-ing*. Two of the best pieces of resulting writing are included in Figures 2 and 3.

#### Princess Elizabeth

Walking bravely and independently into the sunset, Princess Elizabeth thought long and hard about how the wealthy, unkind prince had betrayed her. She learned that a true prince should be a loving, kind-hearted young man who truly cares about others. A true prince shows good character through his inner self. She did not need a prince to take care of



her. Thinking independently, Princess Elizabeth decided to start her own business. With her caring personality, she made paper bag clothing and apparel for the poor and homeless.

One day, a poor man came into her shop. The man, desperate for clothing to wear, asked her to make a paper bag outfit for him. He thanked the princess for her generosity and left the store. The man, visiting often, was given more and more paper bag clothing made by the Princess. The princess was always willing to make him more clothing.

At the time, Princess Elizabeth didn't know the man was more than just her friend. Although he was a poor man dressed in paper bag clothing, his heart was always overflowing with kindness. Lovingly, the princess measured the size of his heart rather than his appearance.

Looking deeply into her eyes, the man asked Princess Elizabeth to marry him. The princess had never, in her life, met someone so thoughtful. Responding willingly with a “yes,” she saw the poor man transform suddenly into a handsome prince. Amazingly, this did not surprise the princess, for this is what she saw in his heart all along. Princess Elizabeth was a queen to be!

Their wedding took place a few months later. Princess Elizabeth, walking happily down the aisle, was wearing a brown paper bag wedding gown. Gazing at the prince who was waiting for her, wearing a paper bag tuxedo, she was thinking how lucky she was for realizing there was more to a boy than his charm. Princess Elizabeth realized that her Prince was truly more wonderful than anyone else on Earth.

Continuing giving to the poor, Queen Elizabeth and her handsome husband took good care of the people in their kingdom. Helping to make paper bag clothing for the needy were their four caring and giving children.

Living happily ever after, they were blissfully blessed.

**Figure 2. Hannah's story about Princess Elizabeth**

### **Drake the Dragon**

This is the story of how the dragon became the smartest and most fierce dragon in the land.

Once upon a time, there was a dragon named Drake. Drake attended the College of Dragon Training (CDT) but the problem was, he was the very worst dragon there. While other students were burning down entire forests in one fiery breath, Drake could barely set fire to a twig. He was also constantly picked on by the C.D.T. bullies, the frightening, ferocious Fire Wings.

Drake was also different in other ways. For example, he had an appetite for castles, princesses, and princes instead of crunching, hot charcoal.

One day on his way to flight class, Drake unfortunately crossed paths with the Fire Wings. “Gonna take eighty tiring, slow days to fly around the world again?” one teased. Another pulled a toothpick out of his back pocket and asked, “Hey, could you do me a favour and burn this up? Or is it too much for you?” Laughing hysterically, the gruesome group casually strolled away.

That was the final straw for Drake. He gathered up every last bit of his energy and blew out a flaming, swirling fire-ball. It not only fried the toothpick, but charred the Fire Wings as well. From that day on, Drake was never picked on again.

He kept on practising with his newly found strength. Eventually he could fly around the world in ten seconds and burn down one hundred forests in one blow.

From then on Drake was known as the smartest and fiercest dragon in the land.

**Figure 3. Nate's Story about Drake the Dragon**

In these students' stories, I have underlined the non-essential participial *-ing* phrases in each piece. Nate's piece in Figure 3 has only one, set-off participial phrase, but

generous use of single-word participles that occur before the noun: *frightening*, *crunching* (probably an adjectival), *tiring*, *flaming* and *swirling*. This may have been the result of initially not understanding that we were aiming for entire participial phrases and/or the result of possible confusion stemming from the lesson Jeff taught to help students grasp what we wanted. We simply do not know the cause or causes, but we do know that Nate was not the only student whose use of *-ing* phrases wasn't entirely what we had anticipated, even when the stories themselves were really strong.

Now let's deconstruct the sequence of lessons a bit. Did everything go smoothly? Obviously not, either for Jeff or for me – and you don't know all of it yet! At the last moment, I discovered that I'd left some transparencies at home, and Jeff had to make new ones. Obviously thrown off balance by this final scramble, I forgot to set the stage for what the students were going to do: I forgot to say right away to the first class I taught that they would be writing a prequel or sequel to *The paper bag princess*, so they could be alert for ideas as they listened to me read the book and show the illustrations on the overhead. How could I have forgotten something so obvious? One of my examples didn't work well with the first class, and one of the bare-bones sentences about the prince and the dragon was harder to add *-ing* phrases to than I had anticipated. During the days when students were drafting their stories, Jeff had surgery on one knee and was unable to give the students feedback on their stories as quickly as he would have liked. Does all of this sound more like normal teaching? It was!

But despite everything, Jeff estimates that about 40% of the students used this “new” grammatical construction to add details to their stories, and some of the resultant prequels and sequels were excellent.

As we talked about the results of our teaching efforts, we wondered whether more groundwork should have been laid with a simpler assignment than the prequel or sequel. Should I have asked the students just to write a paragraph, first, in which they used two participial phrases? Maybe. Well, probably. On the other hand, Jeff and I both knew that one pass through the writing process would not be enough, no matter what we did. Jeff remembered reading an article about learning words, in which the authors reported that children required eight to ten repetitions of a concept before it was learned.

As I write, Jeff is headed for another round of surgery but says that afterwards, “I will re-visit this grammar concept and see what 8-10 iterations bring!” We both wait to see what long-term effects this teaching may have.

## **FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR THROUGHOUT THE WRITING PROCESS**

In planning such extended teaching of grammatical concepts, it helps to have a framework with steps you can use as reminders of what can make such teaching finally take hold, to become part of students' own repertoire as writers. Here is my current version of such an idealized process, a framework I keep in mind as I plan, but often modify in actual practice:

1. Share a model
  - from literature
  - from a previous or current student
  - created by the teacher
  - composed on-the-spot by the teacher
2. Create another model
  - teacher
  - teacher and students together
3. Compose (or do related activity) in small groups or pairs; share, and clarify as needed.
4. Compose a sentence or sentences individually: share, and teacher can check the work if desired and possible.
5. Ask students to apply concept (that is, to use the grammatical element or writing skill) in their own writing.
6. Consider supplying students with a checklist that includes the item, to use in their final revision or editing phase.
7. Provide for feedback from peers and/or provide teacher feedback.
8. Re-teach a new mini-lesson as needed, and/or
9. Hold revising or editing conferences to re-teach concept as necessary, showing students how to apply, or correctly apply, the concept in their own writing.
10. If needed, go through a similar process again with a different writing event. At the very least, continue helping students draw upon this concept again in other pieces of writing, as they revise and/or edit.

*Again, let us repeat:* this is not a sequence set in stone, but simply a reminder of steps that can make the learning and application of the construction or skill more effective. What we actually *need* to do depends upon our classes, no two of which ever seem to be the same; what we *can* do depends, perhaps, upon whether or not we can take to heart the idea of teaching fewer concepts but teaching them more effectively.

So we echo Theresa Reagan-Donk’s oft-repeated advice to teach “an inch wide and a mile deep”. Decide what aspects of grammar are really worth teaching and then teach them well – throughout the production of one piece of writing, and over weeks, as needed. Indeed, follow up the initial work over the rest of the school year, at least as you guide students in revising their writing for greater effectiveness. The lessons take a while to prepare, but you can build a repertoire over time, share lesson plans among colleagues and borrow appropriate literary examples and teaching ideas from elsewhere.

### **Grammar lessons applied spontaneously**

The ultimate goal of such teaching, of course, is for students to use what we’ve taught independently and spontaneously, without our having to prompt them by teaching a reminder lesson or developing a revising or editing checklist that calls for students to use the concept or skill. Rebecca Schipper, a ninth grade teacher from the same school system as Jeff, has had great success this year teaching “adjectives out of order” (a term from Harry Noden’s *Image grammar*, 1999), appositives, and parallel

grammatical constructions for students to use in their writing. The lessons were taught in that order.

### Stylistic devices

So far, we have discussed two ways to improve your writing, stylistically. Those two ways were through the use of “out of order” adjectives and appositives. A third way is through the use of **parallelism**, also known as **parallel structure**.

Simply put, parallelism is using the same structure (for emphasis) to list things. You are probably familiar with this idea from working with comma rules. Below are some examples of parallelism from Wiesel’s *Night* (1960).

Several days passed. Several weeks. Several months. Life had returned to normal. A wind of calmness and reassurance blew through our houses. The traders were doing good business, the students lived buried in their books, and the children played in the streets (Wiesel, 1960, p. 4).

The Germans were already in the town, the Fascists were already in power, the verdict had already been pronounced, yet the Jews of Signet continued to smile (Wiesel, 1960, pp. 7-8).

We were no longer allowed to go into restaurants or cafes, to travel on the railway, to attend the synagogue, to go out into the street after six o’clock (Wiesel, 1960, p. 9).

One by one they passed in front of me, teachers, friends, others, all those I had been afraid of, all those I once could have laughed at, all those I had lived with over the years. They went by, fallen, dragging their packs, dragging their lives, deserting their homes, the years of their childhood, cringing like beaten dogs (Wiesel, 1960, pp. 14-15).

[What other, unmarked examples of parallelism do you find in the above sentences?]

Now, find two examples of parallelism in the novel you are reading. Try to look only in the reading for this week. Write the examples (along with the page number) in the space below.

**YOUR ASSIGNMENT:** After reading *If you’re not from the prairie...*, the picture book story, write your own paragraph using the same format. You should choose something that is specific to you and then elaborate. Remember the stylistic devices we have used, and now, parallel structure. Be sure to use an interesting opener and closer, good word choice, MLA format, and any other writing requirements we have covered.

### Figure 4. Rebecca Schipper’s assignment on parallelism

For the lesson on parallelism, Rebecca first read the students David Bouchard’s picture-book *If you’re not from the prairie...* (1998). Her assignment sheet (see Figure 4) asked students simply to write a paragraph following the model of the book. Rebecca did not specifically ask the students to use the adjectives out of order or the appositives that she had previously taught, though her assignment sheet does say, “Remember the stylistic devices we have used.” Several of the students did include the constructions previously taught, as we can see in the examples from Brooke, Kara and Caleb:

If you're not the youngest child, you don't know what it's like to have an older sibling, whome with you always fight. If you're not the youngest child, you don't know what it's like to have your parents, caring and clueless, on your side. If you're not the youngest child, you don't know what it's like to watch your older brother, a towering goof-ball, getting all the privileges. If you're not the youngest child, you don't know what it's like to love your big brother with all your might.

**Brooke Zitricki**

Of course the “if” clauses are the parallel construction they were to copy from the model, but Brooke’s paper also included adjectives out of order – *caring and clueless* – and an appositive, *a towering goof-ball*.

In the following piece, Kara, too, has used adjectives out of order – *weak and vulnerable* – and an appositive, *a sly and tricky eel*. Her “if” clauses are similar to Brooke’s:

If you're not an only child, you don't know what it's like to have no brothers and sisters and not to have to fight. If you're not an only child, you can't know, you won't know, that you don't have to share, and if you want anything, just give your parents a little glare. If you're not an only child, you're definitely not spoiled, you don't have people, weak and vulnerable, wrapped around your finger in a coil.

If you're not an only child, a sly and tricky eel, you will never know how it feels.

**Kara Petkus**

Figure 5 shows Caleb’s response to the same assignment:

### **Fierce lion**

If you don't wrestle, you don't know what it's like, you can't know what it's like. Wrestling for a team brings a sense of focus, adrenaline, anger, pain, sweat and hate for your opponent, and all of these emotions pulse through your body with great intensity.

If you don't get a takedown, you don't know what it's like, you can't know what it's like. The feeling of accomplishment and weakness. The slam between two huge masses of muscle. The state of being on top and smashing the opponents face into the mat. You can see his pain, anguish, frustration, and blood pouring out of his body in one great emotion. If you were a wrestler, twisted and tormented, you would also feel no compassion for your contender.

If you don't get pinned, you don't know what it's like, you can't know what it's like. The feeling of defeat, disappointment and dissatisfaction. The feeling that settles in you when you let your team down, your family down, your home crowd and other loved ones in your life down.

If you don't wrestle, you don't know me, you can't throw me. I am a wrestler, a fierce lion on the hunt, on the mat it can be seen. In mental silence generating a deep-seated mean.

**Caleb Schutter**

**Figure 5. Caleb’s response to assignment on parallelism**

Notice in Caleb’s “Fierce lion” piece that the last instance of “If you don’t...” does not end the same as the other instances. Caleb breaks the pattern, in order to bring his piece to an end. Notice too that there is parallelism in his use of effective sentence fragments, and within the fragments themselves. He also uses *twisted and tormented* as adjectives out of order, along with his metaphorical appositive in the last paragraph: *I am a wrestler, a fierce lion on the hunt....* Clearly Caleb is a skilled writer, with command of a growing repertoire of grammatical options for conveying ideas and details and figurative language.

From the first lesson onward, Rebecca began noticing that her students were later using the taught structures spontaneously in their other writings. Her December 6 journal entry includes the following:

Every week my students have a quiz over their novel reading. The really fun thing is that on these essay quizzes, the kids are using “out of order” adjectives and appositives without my ever prompting them to include these in the writing. The students are just starting to get it that these kinds of additions to sentences really add a lot. Shockingly, I haven’t seen much overuse of it, either.

In February, Rebecca reiterated that kids were still using out-of-order adjectives and appositives on their own, along with parallel constructions. No wonder she is “sold” on the idea of teaching an inch wide and a mile deep!

## WHAT ABOUT WRITING WORKSHOP?

Writing process models typically reflect what we think of as a writing event, from generating ideas to publishing. In middle-school and high-school classes especially, students often work on a writing project with a clearly defined beginning, middle and end. While the process itself offers flexibility, the end-product is defined by the teacher – or the curriculum guide. Though this process is not strictly linear, since students will be continually moving within stages as they draft, revise, re-envision and draft again, teachers tend to consider in what “stages” of the writing process they can introduce this or that grammatical option or skill.

A second, and very different approach to the writing process occurs within the “writing workshop”. While there are instances where students are all working on a specific genre or topic at the same time under the guidance of a teacher, more often in the writing workshop, students may be working on different genres and/or topics of their own choice. They may be in different phases of writing – from idea development to publication. They may need very different support from teachers and peers in terms of grammar to enrich and enhance their writing. Writing workshops depend on a teacher’s sense of what her students need, both in terms of grammar and other aspects of writing – a sense of who needs what kind of support at any given time. There is a mix of whole-class instruction and individual support.

In *The writing workshop* (2001), Katie Wood Ray describes the differences between the “writing process” approach and her own conceptions of the writing workshop:

I have seen many classrooms where students “do the writing process”, and the focus is on pieces of writing and how to take those pieces of writing through the writing process – prewriting, drafting, revision, editing and publication.... This down-the-line emphasis can be contrasted to writing workshop, where the focus is very much on the writers rather than the process that leads to finished pieces. Now, without a doubt, students in writing workshops utilize all the steps of the writing process – their teachers give them lots of instruction around the process so they can get ready for publication – but it’s not like they really do the process. It’s more like they use the writing process to get other things done (p. 4).

Many secondary teachers are used to teaching writing as a single event, guided from beginning to end – a process whose value is unquestioned. While it may be more difficult to immediately envision the concept of a writing workshop, we want to emphasize its immense value for all teachers, not just those in the elementary and middle grades in which writing workshop has been so successful. For a fuller description of writing workshop, we highly recommend Ray’s *The writing workshop* (2001) and *Wondrous words* (1999), along with multiple texts by Nancie Atwell, including most recently *Lessons that change writers* (2002).

How can grammar find a home effectively in this very different and wonderfully student/writer centered version of the writing process, in which students may be writing at different levels, on different genres, and in need of different support – all at one moment in time? Of course, the specific answers to these questions are found in the knowledge all teachers have of their particular classrooms, students and teaching goals, but some general principles and suggestions can help to guide us.

We asked our Western Michigan University colleague, and experienced, fifth-grade writing workshop teacher Patricia Bills, to tell us how she integrates grammar into her writing workshops. There is considerable overlap between her processes and procedures and the general planning framework we offered earlier.

### **Writing workshop as described by Patricia Bills**

Patricia Bills describes four components of writer’s workshop – mini-lessons, focus lessons, teacher conferences and demonstrations – followed by a note on conventions and editing.

#### ***Mini-lessons***

A typical writing workshop session begins, once administrative tasks such as a “status report” of student work is complete, with a mini-lesson on specific skills. These grammar mini-lessons should take up no more than 5-25 minutes. The emphasis is on writing, not on grammar. Teachers can use mini-lessons as opportunities to enrich their students’ writing with new grammatical skills for style, or as an opportunity to teach specific conventions. Many times these topics come from a teacher’s own knowledge of universal (or close to universal) problems teachers want to focus on. Sometimes, these topics come from what the teacher observes as a “high needs” area: usually something a majority (more than 80%) of the class needs at the time. The key

with a mini-lesson in a workshop is to find an issue that all students, no matter what writing they are working on, can then apply with the understanding that those skills may be revision for some, but new to many.

### ***Focus lessons***

One of the problems with the formulaic nature of the writing event process is that skills that are taught within that process are sometimes unnecessary for all students. Often, teachers can create a mini-lesson based on the needs of a smaller group of students. Sometimes, all a teacher has to say during writing workshop is something like, “I notice that some of our writers are interested in” some specific grammatical point, following that with “I’m going to teach more about this at our writers’ table in about five minutes.” Students who want to learn more will come up. Other times, specific invitations are necessary in order to capture students who may not recognize their need. In each case, it is a targeted audience.

### ***Teacher conferences***

One of the wonderful traits of writing workshop, and the way it creates a working atmosphere of students engaged in writing, is that the teacher is given the opportunity to confer with students on a regular basis. This is an excellent time to give individual instruction on grammatical issues, based on the specific needs – enriching or enhancing – of that student. The most tricky thing about getting good at conferring is to pace the timing so that many students get meaningful feedback in each workshop. It’s easy to fall into a conversation with a child about his writing that takes too long. Talking to children is an engaging, energizing, exciting time; but it’s important to learn to keep the meetings short and to the point, while reminding the children that a follow up meeting will occur. Lucy Calkins (1994) recommends five minutes for each conference, which includes three stages:

1. Research (listening to the student talk about or read the piece);
2. Compliment and decide (teacher compliments the student on what works in the piece and decides what the student needs most at this time);
3. Teach (a specific skill is taught, with the understanding that the teacher will revisit the student later in the workshop).

Conferences usually end with directions such as, “Give that idea a try, and I’ll be back to find out how it went for you.”

### ***Demonstrations***

In a writing workshop, it is important that the teacher also becomes a writer, along with her students. Teachers should not only talk about grammatical issues and teach via mini-lessons when they introduce a skill, they should also demonstrate that skill in their own writing. Teachers should talk about their own writing and the skills they use in that writing. Sometimes, these demonstrations happen as a part of the mini-lesson. With more difficult or complicated skills, the demonstrations happen as a part of



longer lessons where teachers require all students to try to apply that skill in their own writing, right there and then. A big part of the demonstrations are the moments when teachers allow students to give feedback on their adult writing. This does two things: it asks students to apply the new skill immediately in a low-stakes writing environment, and includes the teacher as a part of the writing community. That point goes a long way to demonstrate for kids how writing is for everyone, and that everyone deals with grammar issues at every level. Grammar is not just for school writing, but all writing.

### ***A note about conventions and editing***

Conventions are a key point teachers should discuss in mini-lessons. Students often keep a “writer’s toolbox” of conventions and grammatical skills to use at different points in their writing. Writing workshops help students become self-sufficient. However, when teachers read and respond to writing, they should use this as an opportunity to identify specific conventions to teach to individual students. Such conventions become the focus of many individual conferences, focus lessons, or – when a large majority of students need it – a whole-class mini-lesson.

## **EDITING: EVERY TEACHER’S BUGABOO**

So, now we come to the part of the writing process we fret over the most – editing. We suspect that others share our struggles. Why is teaching editing so hard? Because, we contend, as teachers we no longer have control. It is up to our students to do the work: good, strong, intellectually challenging work that relies on engaging with particular genres and texts, grammatical concepts, and stylistic elements in a triangle in which all elements need to be addressed. We need to give students the tools to edit, but then they have to use those tools. Often, our students simply want us to be the experts on “fixing” their grammar. And too often, perhaps out of frustration, or perhaps out of obligation, we have too often complied. Yet remarks one of us made almost thirty years ago are still true:

There seems to be little value in marking students’ papers with “corrections,” little value in teaching the conventions of mechanics apart from actual writing, and even less value in teaching grammar in order to instill these conventions (Weaver, 1979, p. 64).

In short, “fixing” papers doesn’t teach much about using grammar. It just breeds dependence. We need to take an opposite course and help our students seek independence from teachers, and help create our own irrelevance to their writing lives. One of our most important means of attaining irrelevance is to help students learn to diagnose, understand and independently revise their own convention and style errors. We want them to become their own mechanics. We want them to be able to lift the metaphorical hood of their of own prose and be able to diagnose, understand and tinker with the grammatical conventions and stylistic elements. In some cases, they will be able to immediately fix specific errors and address issues with ease. In others, consultation will be necessary – some second opinions will be needed. Most

importantly, though, those opinions will be generated from the students’ knowledge of their own writing and their ability to diagnose and understand their own errors.

But what are the best ways to bring about this independence? As we shared our own ideas, we kept invoking one person we knew could give valuable answers, based on his own middle-school teaching experience: Jeff Anderson, our colleague from San Antonio, Texas, and the author of a book we greatly admire, *Mechanically Inclined* (2005). Here, in brief, Jeff describes his approach to helping students become independent editors of their own writing.

### **Teaching editing over time in Jeff Anderson’s class**

Here is Jeff in his own voice.

#### ***Editing instruction: Where’s the error?***

It’s the second week of school. I put a sentence on the overhead and ask a student to read it aloud. “Tell me what you notice,” I say to the class. They know the game; the sentence has something wrong with it. Immediately, Michael hones in on things that must be wrong: apostrophes, capitalization, commas. The problem is, the sentence is completely correct – a model in fact. However, my new students believe that if a teacher asks them to look at a sentence, something must be wrong with it, and they need to pounce quickly. Grammar is a “gotcha” and mechanics are mistakes. Students are incredulous when I explain that there aren’t any mistakes. I just want to hear what they observe.

Though the red pen has been put away by many teachers, red-pen thinking still marks the approach in most English classrooms, as do grammar and test preparation materials. Where’s the error? It’s all about the error. What’s wrong with that?

#### ***Facing the error of our ways***

First, getting students to edit well is not merely about students practising editing. In fact, effective editing instruction is more about teaching students the patterns and concepts of the English language that readers expect courteous writers to follow. Rules. Mechanics. Grammar. Whatever you want to call it, readers seem to get in a tizzy if a writer is so careless as to not edit her work. Thus, we try to teach kids to get in a tizzy about errors, and we all just end up in one big tizzy, feeling pulled under by the constant undertow of errors – or some students simply give up and err with abandon. For the most part, kids know that there is probably something wrong with their writing. They just don’t know what is wrong or how to fix it.

For example, we do a good job of getting our students in a tizzy about the *it’s* versus *its* problem, or *you’re* or *your*, or *their* versus *there* or *they’re*. Students basically guess, and they get it right part of the time. It’s easy to get young writers to the point where they know they should worry about *theirs*, *there’s* and *they’re’s* – but that’s where it stops. This all reminds me of my dear mom’s birthday. It fell on February 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup>. I knew it really hurt her feelings how I got it wrong – so I just knew I was

wrong whatever day I thought it was. I never came up with a way to know the difference. That’s how students make editing decisions. It’s not about writing process or meaning. It becomes about, “Yeah, I know this is where I mess up.”

That’s a start – awareness is a first step to successful editing, but it is here that most editing instruction runs astray. Instruction stays stuck in the “catch them if you can”. There are so many errors that I, as the teacher, just need to cast out a net and get what I can, or so many of us have come to think. It’s not about creating meaning, shaping prose, making points clear. Writing seems to be about avoiding being wrong. We all hate being wrong, don’t we?

If we teach little in terms of editing, and students just write, they may become slightly better with time, but perhaps *only* slightly better. On the other hand, if we get them to edit sentences day after day after day, they will see editing as something divorced from the writing process, something we do so that the teacher has time to take roll and record an easy grade every week. That’s not exactly the message I want to send.

The solution is not giving the students, day after day, sentences with errors that they are told to correct. That’s not teaching editing – that’s practising. Practising cycling can help me improve; however, if I practise in the wrong shorts, I can become injured. Anyone who’s ever tried to wrangle a class full of students to find multiple errors and explain why they think they are errors has surely felt injured – if only in the ego. Where on earth did they get that explanation? Did they just pull it out of the sky? Students don’t learn how to write correctly from merely editing strings of sentences. They learn within the writing process. They learn from studying powerful examples from the books they like – imitating, trying, playing with, and yes, editing for the most important concepts.

### ***Working editing into the writing process***

So, instead of having students correct disembodied sentences, I can show them positive and powerful models from their writing, my writing and literature. However, I can’t stop at showing great sentences to kids and asking what they notice. I need to build on the knowledge that they’re gleaning by helping students generate their own sentences and editing their own and others’ writing for important concepts like compound sentences and how to create them. Understanding compound sentences helps students avoid comma splices and add depth and connection to their ideas.

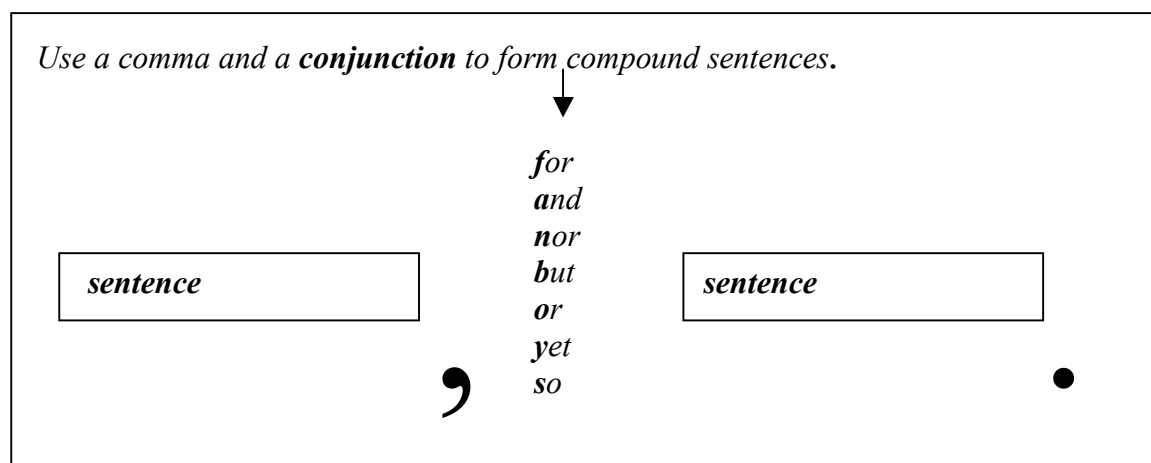
I start my lesson on compound sentences by introducing the FANBOYS: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*. After chanting them a few times, I say, “I am going to show you a powerful tool for your writing that is going to help you write better and help you on writing tests.” I want them to start off by knowing they already have fluency with the FANBOYS, so I ask them to write a sentence in their writer’s notebook that uses one of the FANBOYS. I write my sentence on the overhead: *I love teaching, but I wish I made more money*. Some look at my model, some write. We share what we came up with. As we do, I record sentences on the board under two headings: on the left, *Not Compound Sentences* and on the right, *Compound Sentences* (see Figure 6).

“They’re all good sentences, right?” I pause. “But what makes the two categories different?” Samantha says, “One side is compound, the other’s not.” “What do you notice about the compound sentences?” I take a few minutes, eliciting responses, shaping them

Not Compound Sentences	Compound Sentences
I studied for my test. I am so tired.	I was hitting Edwin and Ozzy, but they moved away from me.
I like apples and peaches. My mom said I had to choose the skirt or the jeans. I couldn’t have both. Denamel and Miguel are my friends.	I am mad, so leave me alone. My dog is very fat, but he is a fast runner. Alaina acts nice, but she’s really evil. Furbie is cute and playful, but he poops all over the place.

**Figure 6. Jeff Anderson, lists categorizing compound and non-compound sentences**

around the fact that a compound sentence is two sentences combined together to show a connection. “Like compound words, they are put together. What do you notice about how they are joined?” I lead students back to the FANBOYS connectors (coordinating conjunctions) if students don’t notice them on their own. The FANBOYS are listed in Figure 7, my visual representation of how simple sentences are joined to make a compound sentence. In this figure, “sentence” means “simple sentence” in each case, but I don’t use that terminology with my students.



**Figure 7. Jeff Anderson, compound sentence pattern<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> [Jeff’s chart precipitated an email correspondence between the editor and Jonathan Bush, on the basis of which it emerged, as if we didn’t know this, that there is more than one variant of standard, formal written English, and that punctuation practices in standard American English differ from those in standard British English. The editor queried the use of a comma before the conjunction *and* in a compound sentence where the subject of both clauses is the same. He wondered whether Jeff’s own sentence – “For example, we do a quick reread of a freewrite and look for compound sentences or comma splices” broke his own rule. Jonathan countered by suggesting that Jeff’s sentence uses a conjunction to connect a compound phrase, but it doesn’t create a compound sentence since “look for compound sentences” doesn’t make an independent clause. The editor suggested that in British practice, the elision of the subject in the second clause of a compound sentence *doesn’t* reduce its independence. Readers who feel passionate about this might compare the two practices represented in

The next day, I put up a few models from literature on the overhead and share a graphic that represents the compound sentence (see Figure 7). We talk about how we can tell if a sentence is compound or not. I share with them these checkpoints:

- Are there two sentences joined with one of the FANBOYS and a comma?
- Did you do a test to make sure each side of the compound sentence had a subject and verb? (Who or what did, or is, something? What did they do, or what are they?)
- Are the ideas connected or related in some way?

We go back to our chart from the day before and test these strategies after testing them on the model sentences on the overhead. Then students are asked to find compound sentences in their reading, to be collected in their writer’s notebook, on cards, or written on large wall charts (Anderson, 2005). As you might guess, several of the note cards will be wrong – a quick assessment of sorts – but this is not a failure. It merely lets you see where students are with the concept (Vygotsky, 1986). For example, when learning about compound sentences, students often find just any sentence with a FANBOY or a comma and think it’s a compound. That’s one of the stepping-stones on the pathway, one step closer to the truth of compound sentences. Another way to provide meaningful practice is to de-combine sentences from literature and ask the students to re-combine them.

I also ask students to write one sentence about a read-aloud or any reading. They can write sentences in their notebooks or on tiny strips of paper that can be given to me as they exit the classroom (Yoshida, 1985). Of course, as the need arises, discussions should be held around the meaning of each of the FANBOYS. Later, students can then go back and search for more examples. I can type up the other “found” compounds and have students cut them up and categorize them into compound and non-compound sentences. We repeat the discussion. Then students glue their compounds under the visual scaffold (Figure 7) in their writer’s notebook. This way students have a ready supply of examples to refer back to. For many students, visuals and examples are more powerful teachers than rules.

Now that we’ve imitated, hunted, categorized, discussed, clarified and done this again, I can easily cue students to combine some of their own sentences as soon as possible, so they can see how we use compound sentences as writers. And, of course, how we as writers check our own work for what we call comma splices – commas joining two sentences without one of the FANBOYS.

We do need to practise editing frequently once a concept has started taking hold. In my classroom, I like to do an express-lane edit (Anderson, 2005). Basically, I use the metaphor of the express lane at the grocery store. We use it when we only have a few items. We know that focused editing experiences (Spandel, 2005) are the most powerful, so why not pick only one or two items to edit for? For example, we do a quick reread of a freewrite and look for compound sentences or comma splices. If

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the following websites: British English at [http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/profdev/literacy/571599/nls\\_ssgfw\\_sentences04.doc](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/profdev/literacy/571599/nls_ssgfw_sentences04.doc) and American English at [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g\\_commacomp.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_commacomp.html). Terry Locke]

students say they don't have any compound sentences, then tell them to add one. Besides correcting errors they find in their writing, students should also highlight when a concept was used correctly. This can be literally highlighted or recorded as a reflection at the end of the draft they are editing. Afterward, we can share the successes, errors, and stumbling blocks, and problem-solve together.

### How do we avoid teaching everything and nothing?

Here's the deal. When it comes to grammar and mechanics, we probably can't teach it all without deluging students with so much that they remember nothing. So we need to go very deep with fewer concepts. Does it matter that my students are only sixth-graders? Yes and no. Yes, because teaching editing concepts and guiding the editing process takes more time. And no, in that the same or similar techniques work well with all levels of students. As teachers we know we have to focus on what's important first. I start with looking at the kinds of errors my students make, but to ground me I also like using Connors and Lunsford's study of the twenty errors most commonly marked by college teachers of writing (Connors and Lunsford, 1988). Figure 8 presents this list of errors.

1. missing comma after an introductory element
2. vague pronoun reference
3. missing comma in a compound sentence
4. wrong word
5. missing comma(s) with a non-restrictive element
6. wrong or missing verb ending
7. wrong or missing preposition
8. comma splice
9. missing or misplaced possessive apostrophe
10. unnecessary shift in tense
11. unnecessary shift in pronoun
12. sentence fragment
13. wrong tense or verb form
14. lack of subject-verb agreement
15. missing comma in a series
16. lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent
17. unnecessary comma(s) with a restrictive element
18. fused sentence
19. misplaced or dangling modifier
20. *Its/It's* confusion

**Figure 8. Twenty errors most commonly marked by college teachers (Connors & Lunsford, 1988, as included in Lunsford (2003, p. 14).**

Instead of falling into a big black hole of errors, I can handle twenty. And, these are not only what's tested on the state tests in Texas, where I live, but also what may have had significant influence on the relative weighting of editing issues on the ACT test.

Moving away from red-pen thinking and error hunting (Weaver, 1996) takes time. I have to constantly temper my desire to show children all their errors when they show me something they are so very proud of. Correction of all their errors is not what they need, but I have also learned that they are not helped by my ignoring errors, either. I

think of the song, “Cruel to Be Kind,” by Nick Lowe. Some members of our profession think that marking up a student’s draft is the medicine they need to become good writers: tough love, if you will. I am cruel now, they think, but this will translate into kind later. Or, at the other extreme, if I am only kind, “Domingo, this is so good,” and I never help him refine or hone his grammar and mechanics, though I may be kind in the moment, I am cruel for his future. So instead of red-pen or no-touch thinking, I make my class about discovery, models, beauty, categorization, visuals, and writers using grammar and mechanics to shape text and create meaning. And they are the ones editing their writing, with instruction and guidance; my students are both the writers and the editors.

### **THE FINAL WORD: OUR “MODEL” OF GRAMMAR IN THE WRITING PROCESS**

Throughout this article, we have presented an implicit model of the writing process – in the narratives and in the section on a framework for teaching grammar throughout the writing process and over time. We had intended to present a model of the writing process as a concluding visual, but decided against it because the actual teaching of writing is often fluid – and dependent, in part, on students’ needs, developmental levels and writing expertise.

If we were to create a model of the writing process, though, it would be recursive rather than linear, and it would include more than the typical models do. Most writing process models contain the common phases of pre-writing (planning or rehearsing), drafting (getting ideas down), revising (taking another look at one’s work), proof-reading, and publishing – that is, sharing with the intended audience. We strongly believe that a model to guide the writing of at least selected pieces should include more phases after the initial drafting. True, writers need to revise for organization and flow, for adding interesting details and deleting irrelevant ones; these are the traditional activities referred to as revising. In addition, however, writers need another cycle, another pass through the text, to attend to such matters as combining some sentences into one, moving syntactic elements around in a sentence, eliminating wordiness and redundancy, and choosing the “just right” words. Editing, we believe, is a crucial and still later step, in which subjects and verbs are made to agree, pronoun reference is clarified, and punctuation, usage and spelling are further attended to. Over the school year, over the school years, student writers can learn to attend to more and more of these issues if teachers keep guiding them through the writing process and keep teaching needed writing skills and strategies.

So what of our decision not to put these aspects of the writing process into a visual? We decided against even a recursive model because we have come to think of the ebb and flow of waves as a useful metaphor for what goes on when writers write – especially when they compose on the computer and can readily make changes “back there” while drafting “here” and perhaps jotting notes at the end of their computer file for some later part of what they plan to write. The writing moves forward in swells, with one swell cresting but not crashing, another swell creating a massive wave that moves forward and crashes successfully before ebbing again, and other nearby waves that are in various stages of swelling, ebbing, and flowing back, to become invisible once again.

So it is when we draft a piece of writing. We may jot down ideas while planning and then start to draft, realize that a previous sentence didn't lead smoothly into this one and return to fix it, think some more and write snippets that get parked somewhere temporarily, move forward, reach back, shoot sideways with interesting tidbits that we later reject as “not fitting”, and perhaps more and more reorganize, revise, and edit our writing as we continue to draft. Although the flitting back and forth is not nearly as easy when one is writing in cursive, nor nearly as easy for the less practised writer, still the ongoing process of writing a meaningful piece ebbs and flows rhythmically, if not always smoothly or predictably. In fact, we think the writing process is predictably unpredictable – the kind of phenomena addressed by chaos theory.

Within this ebb and flow in the classroom, as students plan and draft and revise and edit and prepare their work for publication, there are many opportunities for knowledgeable and prepared teachers to intervene, teaching not only time-honored topics like lead sentences, smooth transitions, and using conventional, “standard” grammatical forms and punctuation, but also teaching the writing craft as partly a matter of using grammatical resources that are available for adding detail, creating flow, foregrounding some sentence elements and backgrounding others, while writing with a clear and appropriate voice. A conscious knowledge of certain aspects of grammar, along with the ability to use and manipulate them, does have much to offer writers.

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