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Teaching Grammar in Context

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An English 1000 instructor's search for the best practices in teaching grammar through a reflective teaching experience which references leading scholarship and critically examines classroom activities and students' writing abilities

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Teaching Grammar in Context

Honors Thesis

Presented to the Honors Committee of
Western Michigan University
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of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Lee Honors College

by

Katie Pingle

Committee Members

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The Great Grammar Debate: A Need for Grammar Instruction in the Classroom

As a college junior, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to instruct English 1000, a first-year writing course for college freshman. Working with students to bring writing to the collegiate level was oftentimes problematic as I considered their writing. As English 1000 teachers, we teach the process of writing—brainstorming, drafting, revising, drafting, revising some more, editing, and publishing; and we stress a focus on genre, audience, and purpose in making writing decisions. By scaffolding these best practices, I saw vast improvement in writing: students made deliberate writing choices which reflected our course objectives. Yet, their writing was not yet fully effective because there were distracting grammatical errors which impeded meaning.

I felt like I was failing my students. My own grasp of the complexities of the English language is not supported with years of intensive grammar studies. However, I have been fortunate to have acquired rhetorical skills as an avid reader and writer. In most cases, my students' ears were not as developed, and to make things more challenging, many students learned English as a second language. Without a guiding grammar sense, how could my students succeed in the next few years in college and later into the work force—how successful can a resume be when sentence construction is too confusing for the reader to understand, and what image would this leave a prospective employer? I knew my students needed some instruction on grammar, but I had little background in teaching it, and the isolated grammar lessons I did provide my students with didn't seem to find their way into students' writing as I had anticipated.

My experience as an English 1000 instructor has driven my desire to find a successful way to teach grammar, and I set myself a goal to make sure my second time teaching the course would address the 'grammar issue'. Shortly after my semester ended, I was substitute teaching in a middle school, and spent one hour assisting in an English classroom. It was nearing the end of the semester, and students had taken the grammar portion of their final exam the day

before. Many students hadn't finished the exam, so I proctored the make-up exam in the library. At this moment, I recognized firsthand how not to teach grammar.

The students were frustrated. Before I looked at the exam, I could tell that students were not prepared for it, as the majority appeared to be trying on the exam but puzzled. Thus, it was not that students did not care about the exam, but that they did not know what to do. I approached one student with his head down.

"What's going on—why aren't you working," I questioned.

"I don't know this stuff... I tried to decide what part of speech this word was, but how am I supposed to know," answered the student.

As I looked over the student's test, I was embarrassed to admit that I didn't know all of the answers to this test. A secondary English education major with three years of college behind her could not answer all of the questions on a middle school grammar exam! I managed to get to the end of my third year of college without knowing every defining characteristic of each part of speech. I asked myself: why does a middle school student need to classify these words when I cannot, and why does this test constitute half of his final grade.

I struggle to find an argument supporting the test that I observed. Grammar should not be taught as a set of rules and memorized, as it alone does not make successful writing. At the same time, I am responsible for helping my students develop as writers, and while students may write well-supported and cohesive essays, writing can often be restrained by grammatical errors. This is where my curiosity for teaching grammar has evolved, and this is why I have dedicated my fall of 2012 English 1000 course to unraveling my question: how can grammar be taught more effectively.

Lesson I: Discover Paragraphs

Our first major project was a professional email, so I wanted to choose a grammar topic which would relate to the conventions of this genre. I noticed from my students' rough drafts that many were struggling with organizing their emails—some drafts had large sections of unorganized texts and a few wrote their whole draft without any indentation. I thus had an opportunity for a mini-lesson on paragraphs.

Anderson (2007) describes the past controversy between a paragraph prospective, by explaining how it is now out of date to assume every paragraph needs a “topic sentence and sequential arrangement” as described by Bain (1866), but to think of a paragraph from an opposing perspective, “A new paragraph is a wonderful thing. It lets you quietly change the rhythm, and it can be a flash of lightening that shows the same landscape from a different aspect” (Prose 120). In agreement with Anderson, a paragraph does not need to follow some recipe to be effective; a paragraph should occur when a writer creates a need based on what he or she is communicating.

When I first discovered Anderson's “Give Me a Break: Teaching Paragraphs” chapter, I questioned if students *really* needed a lesson on paragraphs—aren't students taught when to indent in the early grades? Before reading his chapter, I journeyed back to my experiences as a student with forming paragraphs. Although I can't recall when the notion was first introduced to me, I almost felt that the function of a paragraph was altered somewhere between elementary school and middle school.

As an elementary student, I remember writing stories: stories about talking dogs, my family, spooky witches, the little boy in the cartoon drawing on the wall, and what I wanted to be when I grew up. I really enjoyed writing as a child. I also remember that writing became more difficult in middle school: write about *this* topic, research and summarize, make sure you've written three paragraphs. I realize now that my teachers, with best intentions, were restricting writing more and more each year. This push to create a writing formula has likely detracted from students' understanding of authentic writing. Consider inadequate paragraphs:

students are still stuck to 'the rules' they were given in middle and high school on what makes a paragraph and are not comfortable deviating from the rules.

Anderson gives a list of the misunderstandings about writing paragraphs that I recognize my teachers proposed, including: "thinking that paragraphs have to follow a formula" and "subscribing to the idea that all paragraphs should be five sentences long" (117). I wanted my students to recognize that this is not the case, as well as to understand the function paragraphs do serve. To accomplish this, I desired a mini-lesson which would not just tell my students these things, but let them discover the rationale behind an indentation in context.

The "Invitation to Notice" section suggested giving students a newspaper article and having them count the number of sentences in each paragraph, discuss how the paragraph break affects the reader and why that spot was selected by the author, and consider whether this indentation aligns to the rules students had been given for writing paragraphs in the past (Anderson 2007). This 'invitation' seemed a logical approach to helping students discover how to form a paragraph and disprove the restrictions they had been taught, so I adopted this idea into a mini-lesson with my students (see figure 1).

Figure 1:

#1: Discovering Paragraphs

Title of Work: _____

Author: _____

Paragraph	# of sentences in paragraph
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	

Read the article and then answer these questions:

How do the paragraph breaks affect the reader?

How do you think the writer chose where to put the paragraph breaks?

Does this follow the rules you have been taught?

When should I form a new paragraph?

This activity is not restricted to reading a certain article—the same format can be used for any article. I decided to find four articles addressing September 11th, 2001 in remembrance on the anniversary, and also because I realized that this would likely be the last class I would teach who would be old enough to remember the attacks firsthand. I instructed my class to sit in groups of four, and I handed a different article to each person in the group. At first, I had students read the articles and discuss what they read for one minute with their groups (as an exercise for building reading comprehension and summarization skills), and then I handed out the grammar activity, ‘Discovering Paragraphs’.

Almost instantly, I was prodded with questions for clarification—*these aren’t real paragraphs... they are just sentences, so do you want me to just write down the number for the real paragraphs?* Perfect! Just as suspected, my students struggled to see the paragraph variety used in newspapers as acceptable. I didn’t offer much of an explanation at this point because I wanted students to unravel what makes a paragraph without my insight. I could tell that they were annoyed with my refusal to answer their questions, and I overheard real discussion on what makes a paragraph and how that contradicted the rules they once learned.

“Well, my article has some one sentence paragraphs and some two sentence paragraphs, and then the person goes all wild with a five sentence paragraph” declared one student.

“Yeah, mine too, so they aren’t really paragraphs because a paragraph has to have 6-8 sentences,” responded another.

“Well, for the second question, I think that the writer chose to put paragraphs there because he’s talking about one thing here and then another thing there,” observed another.

I heard great discussion from my students. They were upset that the authors of these articles were paid to write paragraphs with just one sentence, but they also felt that the stand alone sentences stood out to readers and brought out important information. After the group discussions seemed to dissolve, I brought the class together for a classroom conversation about paragraphs.

I first called back on the student who questioned if one sentence could really be considered a paragraph, and had him defend his case.

“One sentence is just a sentence; there has to be like at least five sentences in a paragraph,” he claimed. It appeared that he wasn’t the only one with that thought; several other students nodded their heads in agreement. I asked students to raise their hand if they had sentences with 1, 2, 3, 4 or more sentences in a paragraph. We discovered a variety.

“Why would the author decide to do this? Is it helpful? What did people answer for question two?” I asked.

“Well, we thought that it was an easy way to read what the person was saying, it just didn’t feel like a paragraph,” offered a student, who also received agreement from classmates.

“Do you think this author is a bad writer, then?”

“No, because obviously they write for newspapers so they have to be good.”

“So why can they write this way?”

With my questioning, we unraveled as a class that a paragraph does not need a certain number of sentences, but rather, a natural change of topic to desire a new paragraph. We also discussed what genres would typically see longer or shorter paragraphs, and also how this is not a rule, but rather a tendency.

To further prove this point, I gave my students another article that did not have any indentation so that they could practice making decisions on when to indent. They really struggled with this, claiming it was difficult to read something without a break. After a few minutes of struggling, I asked students where they wrote in pilcrows (yes, I did use this terminology, mostly to build my own vocabulary), and we had a discussion about what would work and what wouldn’t. As I had hoped, students offered explanations such as “there is a shift here, so I thought it would be a good place to start a new paragraph”. Fortunately, no one suggested indenting after every fifth sentence.

As I reviewed my students’ grammar handouts, many claimed that the findings in the articles did not follow the rules they had been taught and that they felt they should start a new paragraph when a new idea occurred, not when they had reach the five or six sentence tally. Some, however, still claimed the old rule victorious. Hopefully, those who claimed the old rule decided that *before* we discussed it as a class, and from what I discovered in the professional

emails that they wrote after this mini-lesson, most had accepted that content dictates indentation.

Six of my seventeen students claimed that they felt a paragraph needed a length requirement of five or more sentences, yet every one of these students had more than one paragraph that did not meet this requirement in their professional emails, and half of these students composed paragraphs with two or less sentences successfully (see figure 2).

Figure 2:

Examples of one or two sentence paragraphs:

“I would like to thank you for your time, and hope you decide to take my advice into consideration because a new flyer will help more young professionals join the organization.” (Cody)

“After changing the flyer up a little bit, you should try passing them out or placing them on boards across campus, especially in the Bernhard Center since that is where the movies are played. If you need me to help, I am willing to do so.” (Casey)

“My name is Taylor Hodge and I’m an instructor at Middle East Dance Club. I’m emailing you in regards to our flyer.” (Taylor)

I also noticed unity in my students’ paragraphs—it was apparent that the majority spent time grouping similar ideas in each paragraph. Although most students had strong organization after the peer review session, I gave one student, Maame, feedback to revise a “run-on paragraph”. Originally, Maame had an overload of details in her first paragraph, but by her final draft, she had revised her writing so that her first paragraph’s purpose was to introduce herself and establish a supportive tone to the reader, and the second addressed the need to change the flyer (the draft and my comments are shown in figure 3, while her final draft was returned to her).

Figure 3

24th September, 2012
5125 Harrison Hall
Kalamazoo, MI 49008

Dear Pre-Law Society Organizer,

My name is Maame and it is a pleasure to writing this email regarding your flyer. I came across your flyer at Bronco Bash and pick it up just because my teacher asked my class to bring flyers to class. My class was asked to bring a good flyer and a bad flyer. I had a very colorful and appealing flyer to represent my good flyer and your flyer as the other. Even though your flyer didn't impress me, I read it. I found out that you have a very thoughtful organization that would benefit students going into law school. Even though am not a Pre-law student, the purpose of your organization impressed me, but you flyer did otherwise. You flyer lacked color, interesting images and pictures

I revised your flyer because I thought it would attract many people to read. I added more colors, put a picture of a famous judge on it and I also made the font bigger. I think my flyer is eye-catching. By changing your, I believe many students would read it.

Colorful things are always found to be intriguing and attractive by which would make many people get interested to know more about. By taking the ideas of my flyer would create many new members to your organization. I believe even if the readers are not Pre-law students, they would be interested in sharing the information to their fellow Pre-law friends.

I look forward to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

(AnasMaameKD)

Maame Kankam Da-costa

Comment [O1]: Instead of saying this was for class project, pretend to be someone who has a position in the organization—that way, it seems more authentic. Then, your purpose will be to help your group bring in more members by having a better flyer.

Comment [O2]: Think of how to better organize. Group similar topics.. you may want to start a new paragraph somewhere in the first.

Comment [O3]: This paragraph is really good—tells what you did and why.

Comment [O4]: Give some sort of prompt for them to take your flyer into consideration again

Comment [O5]: ?

Comment [O6]:

Comment [O7]: Also, go through and read you paper aloud. This will sort out some misspelling and little grammar issues.

Overall, I am satisfied with the mini-lesson on forming paragraphs because I can see an improvement in my students' work. We may need to revisit this lesson by reading another genre and discussing the decision the author made when forming paragraphs, or better yet, use student work to discuss the role each paragraph takes in making meaning for the reader.

Lesson II: Playing with Punctuation

Although I traditionally construct grammar lessons based on my findings in students' writing, some ideas have developed from my own journey as a writer. Over the past few years, I have found myself placing priority on one brushstroke in particular: punctuation. Through punctuation, I can emphasize words which deserve extra attention, make ideas flow together, and create variety in my sentence structure. Because I value punctuation's role in my own writing, I knew I had to bring it to my students' attention—how to do so in a best practice manner, however, was not as apparent.

One of the greatest accomplishments of the English 1000 program is the role of teacher collaboration; I'm constantly stealing ideas from other instructors and considering why some lessons were successful as well as why others were not as effective in reaching the instructor's goals. One instructor shared his troubled experience with teaching the semicolon; he shared a video with his students about the power of the semicolon and went through examples with his students on when to use it. It sounded as though his students were highly engaged in the lesson. And they were. When students turned in final projects, the semicolon had reached such a high level of popularity that students had forgotten about the other punctuators. As one who loves the possibilities provided by the semicolon, I can understand students' infatuation. But, not all sentences are deserving of a semicolon, and too many can make writing unnecessarily complex.

After considering this instructor's refusal to ever teach students about the semicolon, I too struggled with my desire to teach punctuation—the one technique that I credit most for strengthening my own writing—to my students. Yet, as optimistic as my goal might have been, I wanted my students to experience the possibilities punctuation presents in writing. Fortunately, I found advice from Harry Noden's "Image Grammar".

As Noden explains, "looking at rhetoric rather than rules takes away the negative feelings associated with error and invites students on an exciting journey of image play, experimentation, and special effects of meaning" (96). This explanation has been a focus of

mine throughout my studies in grammar—to make my lessons brushstrokes for writing as opposed to “rules” to follow. But the question remained: how do I prevent what my colleague experienced? I did not want my students to overcomplicate their writing by overusing the semicolon, colon, or dash. Noden’s explanation of Dawkin’s “Punctuation Heirarchy” answered this question.

The classifications of punctuation are given as different levels of “separation”: maximum separation comes from a period, question mark, and exclamation point; medium separation from the dash, semicolon, and colon; and minimal separation from the comma (96). Noden also addressed my concern about this explanation being “too confusing” for students; this explanation simplified punctuation as it presents “a relationship between meaning and punctuation” and also is a “positive rather than punitive” approach to teaching grammar (96). Following Noden’s advice, I included his explanation in my handout to students (see figure 4).

Figure 4:

Punctuation Hierarchy

The Period, question mark, and exclamation mark(.,?,!) Separation level: **MAXIMUM**

When to use: At the end of a sentence as a dramatic stop.

EXAMPLE:

The Dash (--) Separation level: **Medium**

When to use: To show a strong emphasis for what will follow or for an interruption in a sentence.

EXAMPLE:

The Colon (:) Separation level: **Medium**

When to use: When joining two sentences, the colon communicates anticipation.

EXAMPLE:

The semicolon (;) Separation level: **Medium**

When to use: To join to related sentences that communicate a similar meaning.

EXAMPLE:

The comma(,) Separation level: **minimum**

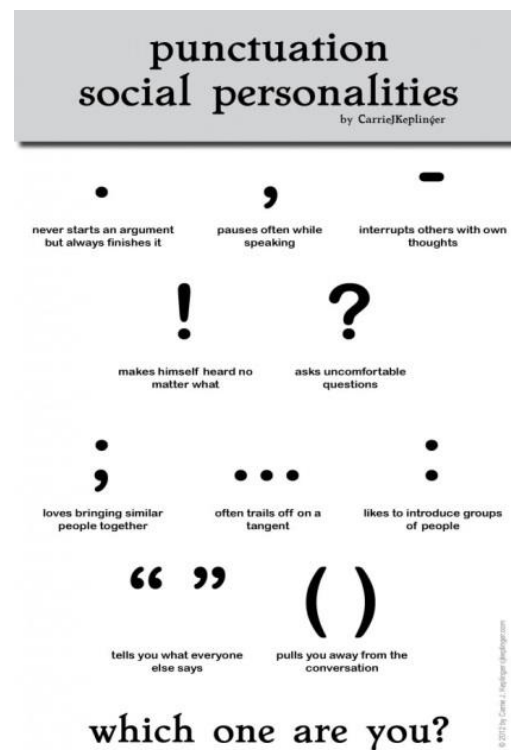
When to use: A pause in the middle of a sentence.

EXAMPLE:

No separation, separation level: **zero**

When to use: When we don't break between thoughts (and often when we use a combining word)

EXAMPLE:



With grammar lessons, I often try to demonstrate ideas with students and then allot time to experiment and share with classmates. In this lesson, I walked with my students through each “level of separation”—we made up examples along the way and as a class discussed the differences between each. I also gave students the opportunity to share their examples so that I could evaluate their understanding and validate their experimentation.

While looking for a diagram of the punctuation hierarchy to serve as a further resource for students to understand the roles of punctuation, I found Carrie Keplinger’s “Punctuation Social Personalities” (shown on the bottom right of the student handout). We read through the different personalities as a class and its connection with what we did previously. I then had my students compare three people to the given descriptions to solidify these ideas.

punctuation social personalities
by Carrie Keplinger

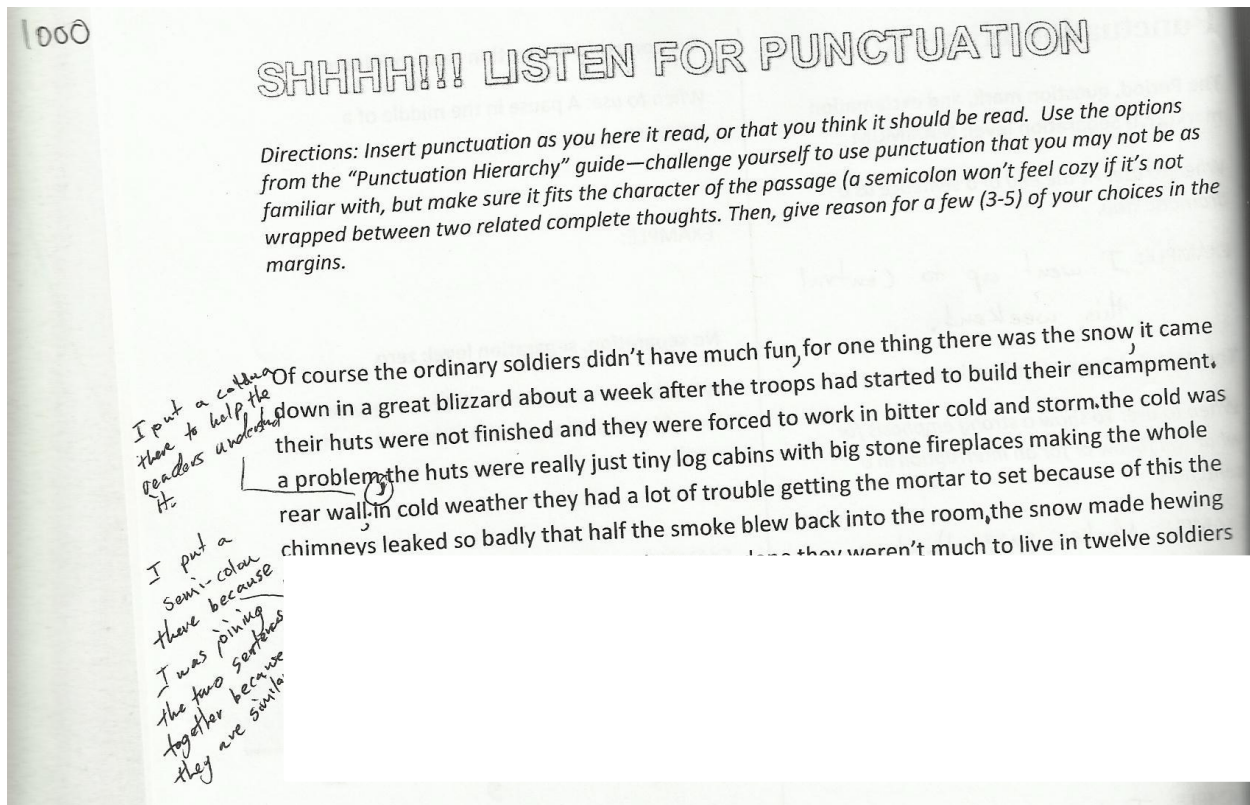
- .** never starts an argument but always finishes it
- ,** pauses often while speaking (Handwritten: *My mom*)
- interrupts others with own thoughts (Handwritten: *My dad*)
- !** makes himself heard no matter what (Handwritten: *My mom*)
- ?** asks uncomfortable questions
- ;** loves bringing similar people together
- ...** often trails off on a tangent
- :** likes to introduce groups of people (Handwritten: *My friend Lenisha always*)
- “ ”** tells you what everyone else says
- ()** pulls you away from the conversation

which one are you?
I would be considered a comma because I always pause alot when I'm talking about something.

Although it may not seem too thought-provoking to have students label their personalities in this manner, having students share which punctuation mark they chose for themselves and someone else seemed to further their understanding of what punctuation does for writing. It also seemed that this explanation was a different way to think about what could have been a confusing discussion about levels of separation. I hope that labeling some of the types of punctuation will help students to remember what each does; with Ashley’s example (left), she may be able to remember her friend Lenisha’s ability to introduce groups of people to others as a similarity to

the colon’s ability to introduce an important result in a sentence.

Having defined when each type of punctuation was appropriate, the opportunity to experiment with these options was presented. I referred to Noden's "Listen to the Beat of Punctuation" which suggests handing students a punctuation-free passage and allowing students to "hear the natural pauses in writing". I used the passage Noden selected from "My Brother Sam is Dead," but a future adaptation would be to use a passage from course readings.



Cody's example (above) shows his deliberate choice in punctuation—he indicated that inserting a comma will "help the readers understand it" and that he used a semicolon "because I (he) was joining the two sentences together because they are similar". Cody's use of punctuation is not exact with the writer's, nor is it what I have chosen in many of the situations. However, this does prove that Cody recognizes that punctuation can be used as a tool to help a reader understand his writing and it can act as a bridge when ideas complement one another.

I concluded the lesson by ensuring that some common misconceptions about punctuation use were understood and conducted a quick class survey:

Quiz:

T/F There is always a right answer when we chose punctuation—it is never possible to have options when punctuating.

T/F The best writers use just as many periods as they do semi-colons because we want our writing to look complicated.

T/F The goal of punctuation is to add meaning to what we write and help our reader understand our writing.

T/F When in doubt about what punctuation to use, it is best to consider the purpose of the punctuation mark and the Punctuation Hierarchy sheet is a good way to do this.

Through this survey (created through an online survey website which students answered using their cell phones), my students ensured me that punctuation grants choices and that these choices depend on the purpose of each word, sentence, and phrase. Through this discussion, I also warned students not to overuse one type of punctuation, as that would overcomplicate their writing, and also that variety is ideal. Overall, it seemed students had taken from the lesson what I had hoped—that punctuation was another skill to add to their writer's toolbox.

Lesson 3: Quotations in Dialogue

With project two, capturing the language usage of a subculture is essential for an accurate portrayal of the group, and correctly capturing this requires the correct use of quotation marks. Although quotations can add excitement and personality to our writing, learning the logistics of where to place the quotation mark is not the most enjoyable or obvious. Thus, this mini lesson had two main parts—an instructional portion and practice in application.

I began my mini lesson on the quotation mark by first assigning students the task of defining each use of a quotation, and then creating an example. Although some may argue that this type of activity is not well-developed in context, I think it does something else: helps students to recognize and use their resources. As Weaver (1996) suggests, teaching grammar in context has its limitations and oftentimes requires re-teaching, as with other methods (17). I recognize that it is unlikely that my students memorized when to use a ‘double quotation mark’ and how to punctuate a quote correctly. Some teachers may feel that giving a quiz on these would be successful, and I disagree with this, too. My goal was not for students to memorize this, and I do not intend to re-teach the types of quotation. My goal was to help my students use their resources when they are unsure of what to do—whether with quotation marks, MLA formatting, capitalization, or the appropriate tone for a writing piece.

It is unfair to expect our students to memorize the grammar rules that they are learning. Each student has a different experience with the rules, and developing an understanding takes practice. Yet, we need to prepare our students for writing accurately. Even after years of studying English, I frequently question my own usage; I am far from having memorized every situation in language, and I have not considered many language constructions. When I struggle with writing, I use my resources to find an answer, and this works. I feel that this same strategy should be modeled to our students, and this is why I had my students complete the following activity with a partner (see figure 5).

Figure 5:

“QUOTATION MARKS”

Quotation marks—“Enclose direct quotations from speech and from writing,” (The Little Brown Essential Handbook, 7th Edition).

Use your book to understand the following uses of quotation marks, pgs 94-97

Double quotation marks: _____

Your example-

Dialog: _____

Your example-

Quotation marks with words used in a special sense: _____

Your example-

Quotation marks with other punctuation (commas and periods): _____

Your example-

Dashes, question marks, and exclamation points: _____

As I look over my students' handouts, I admire their attempts at an example for each different type of quotation mark. Luis wrote: “Come back, he’s ~~wr~~ right behind you. Run” cried Frank, “I can’t, he’s got my leg!” Sara yelled with fear. It is encouraging to see Luis’ creativity with this and also his motivation to learn; Luis could have put less effort in this with a simple example like, “hi” I said, “how are you”, but he decided to push himself as a writer. Yes, Luis may not remember the correct way to punctuate a double quotation, but I would image he will remember that day he wrote about Frank’s life being in danger, and that he could look up in his handbook how to properly quote a similar sentence.

My next step with this mini lesson was to have students write their own dialogue in groups. In previous classes, I had used the iPhone as a teaching tool and found it greeted with much excitement from students, so I decided to revisit this resource in an attempt to engage students—“The Siri Story” (see figure 6).

Figure 6:

Group Assignment—*The Siri Story*

We all know that Siri says the “darndest” things, but have you noticed she doesn’t follow the grammar rules of dialogue? Your group needs to craft a dialogue between Siri and a character—be creative here, make the class laugh! Let’s see what ridiculous conversations we can get out of that crazy girl!

Assign each person one of the following jobs.

Recorder— Writes down the conversation.

Grammar Guru— Checks what the recorder writes in accordance to our quotation mark lesson.

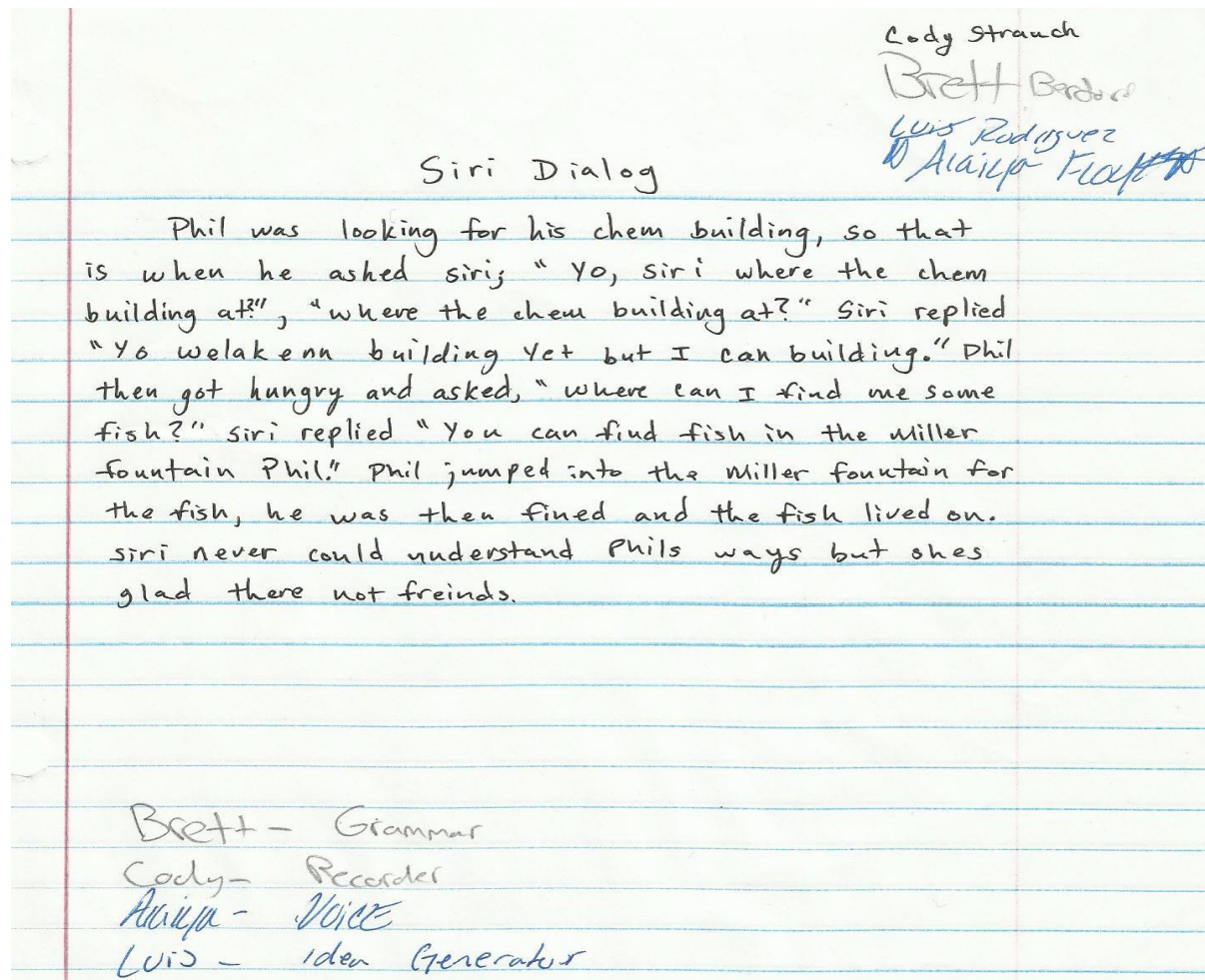
Idea Generator— Suggests funny things to say to Siri.

The Voice— Speaks to Siri, works with what the “idea generator” says and offers suggestions.

(extra members—second grammar guru/ second idea generator).

My students were highly engaged in asking Siri questions and creating a dialogue with her/it. As I compared this group assignment to others, I noticed that my students did better when the roles of each group member were described as opposed to letting the students dictate what needs to be done. As I reflect on the group work submitted, I found they did experiment with dialogue like they were asked, while also created a story to foster authentic dialogue (see figure 7).

Figure 7



The above dialogue are not perfect: commas are missed, indentation is ignored, and capitalization has been forgotten. Yet, my students worked together to create a story where someone may use Siri, shared some laughs, and most importantly, experimented with dialogue.

My lesson on dialogue is not faultless, and it is unlikely that my students took away a strong understanding of the rules that they investigated. Yet, I feel this activity was one of my better ones, as it taught students how to use their resources. Deciding what constitutes a grammar lesson in context depends on who is asked, and although this one may not be strongly exemplary of the discovery approach that I am proposing, it still helped students develop the realization that an attention to grammar strengthens writing.

Lesson 4: Fidgeting with Fragments

Students. Write in Fragments. And it's confusing. But am I Wrong to Think they are Wrong?

I often learn the most from the writers who were ahead of their time, and Howard Nixon's "Fragments S:1," (1968), is one such scholar. Like Nixon argues, I too believe a sentence fragment to be one of the most common areas of concern English teachers have for students. Nixon's approach to 'fixing fragments', however, was much different than the approach that I took with my students and revolutionary to his time; instead of 'fixing' in the sense of trying to eliminate fragments, Nixon suggests "we help guide its flight and not merely try to avoid its dropping" (330).

For my mini-lesson on fragments, I wanted students to recognize the difference between a fragment and a sentence. As one who has not experienced difficulty in writing complete sentences, I was puzzled for a teaching method. In many usage situations, there is an 'easy' way to check correctness—do you have ending punctuation, do you naturally pause here, if there's more than one, is there an 's' to indicate it. However, confirming completeness isn't as apparent. I thus decided to include some technical explanation in my mini-lesson (See figure 8).

Figure 8:

GRAMMAR 2: FRAGMENTS

After Starbucks Coffee opened.

The building with the red doors and beautiful rose garden.

The unlikely suspect wearing pearls.

My brilliant pet rabbit.

What's the problem??

Screaming uncontrollably down the hallway of the ER.

Hidden behind stacks of textbooks in the library.

Jumping for joy at the finish line.

Craving a watermelon glacier from DQ.

What's the problem??

Until next time.

If I only had a brain.

Because he was honest, witty, intelligent, and attractive.

Unless it's raining.

What's the problem??

I first had students try and discover what the issue was with these ‘sentences’. Most were stuck; they couldn’t see anything. After being slightly discouraged that my students did not feel that there was anything incomplete about the fragments, I heard Alaiya announce, “they are missing a predicate”.

What? A predicate! Did a student really know the first few fragments needed predicates to form complete sentences? Well, almost. I asked my student to explain what she meant, and she answered “I don’t know. All I know is each sentence needs a subject and a predicate”. This was a big start; at least one of my students recognized that these were not complete sentences, but she seemed confused by the technical term. I used this as an opportunity for my classroom to work together to figure out what makes a complete sentence.

“Use your books to look up what a subject is—can someone read it aloud?” I asked, as my students raced, surprisingly eagerly, to find the definition offered by Alaiya.

“The part of a sentence that makes an assertion about the subject,” read another.

“Great...and that means what?” I furthered.

“Well, it tells about the subject.”

We worked through the rest of the lesson this way—discussing what was wrong, making meaning from what our handbooks offered us, and finally, changing the fragments into sentences. To further illustrate the importance of both a subject and a verb, I had my students share a sentence they created from one of the fragments, and then shared how fragments were creatively transformed into sentences. I was pleased with both my students’ creativity and also their ability to articulate whether they added a subject to an existing predicate or the converse (see figure 9).

Figure 9: Student examples

The figure consists of two examples of student work. Each example shows a list of phrases on the left and a handwritten analysis in a box on the right.

Example 1:

- Screaming uncontrollably down the hallway of the ER.
- Hidden behind stacks of textbooks in the library.
- Jumping for joy at the finish line.
- Craving a watermelon glacier from DQ.

Handwritten analysis box:

What's the problem??
 It's missing an subject.
~~who and what~~
 subject - who and what
 what

Handwritten sentence: Robert was screaming uncontrollably down the hallway of the ER station. James and I found a wallet hidden behind stacks of textbooks in the library.

Until next time.

Example 2:

- Until next time.
- If I only had a brain.
- Because he was honest, witty, intelligent, and attractive.
- Unless it's raining.

Handwritten analysis box:

What's the problem??
 Missing a Subordinate clause
 subordinate clause: A word group that consist of a subject and a predicate.

Handwritten sentence: If only I had a brain, I would be able to pass mathematics. Because he was honest, witty, intelligent, and attractive, I talked to him.

Although I feel like I gave an adequate lesson on fixing fragments, I do not think I did well to make a case for the intentional fragments supported by Nixon. Nixon takes a stance against a leading linguist of his time, Professor McCrimmon, who claims that “college writing does not lend itself to the use of the minor sentence,” and further that students who are told that a fragment is not appropriate should not refrain from using fragments just because the professor instructed (332). Nixon argues that readings of “respected formal writers” offer a plethora of examples of effective uses of fragments, a writing device which can be powerful (something not implied in McCrimmon’s “minor sentence” description). Nixon also disagrees with McCrimmon’s implication that students should write to appease their professor, by countering that this is not the larger goal of college writing (332).

Nixon concludes that “the method, then, is not to stress what's wrong with a student's sentences, but to demonstrate what he should do, and in many cases is already beginning to do; to show him the choices he can make by illustrating the common ground between his writing and that of professionals; to suggest principles that may call for only a minor alteration in what he does; and, above all, to bring correctness and effectiveness together by assuming the existence of the sophistication most students have in manipulating language and by making our motto "Thou shalt," not its dead-end reverse” (333). This, I believe, is essential in both learning about fragments and grammar in general. We should not treat fragmentation criminally, but rather give explanation of when it is successful and when it is not. Although I was satisfied with my students' understanding of how to make a complete sentence, as many of the fragments I have found are not intentional and could easily be made complete with some change in punctuation (as Nixon argues to be the real issue for many fragments), I have found the need to revisit the use of fragments to show students when a fragment is appropriate and can embellish meaning.

Lesson 5: Language Variation

One of the biggest challenges of teaching English 1000 is accommodating students' diverse experiences with English. Many of my students are English language learners. This past semester, one student was a native Arabic speaker, another emigrated from Africa just a few years before starting college, and several spoke Spanish as a first language. In addition, many students speak African American Vernacular English. For these students, who are often forced to leave behind their native languages or cultural language patterns in favor of Standard English, I wanted to validate the language skills they possessed and give voice to them, but also address some misconceptions about language variation and Standard English. To do so, I gave a deceptive quiz on language usage (see figure 10).

Figure 10:

Grammar: Language Variation

Image hearing these sentences while at the park. Is there anything wrong with them?

Ain't this a good joke? _____

There are not no people to be found nowhere. _____

Ya'll going to the store soon? _____

He's a-walking down the road. _____

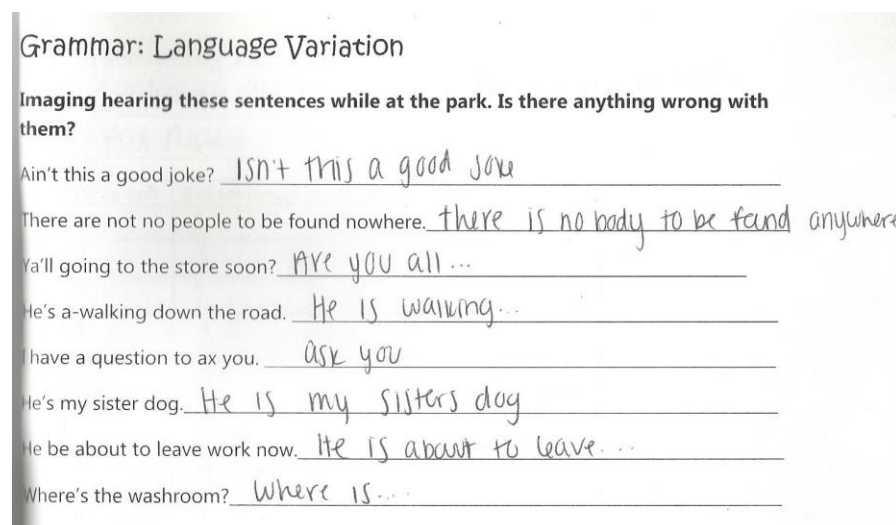
I have a question to ax you. _____

He's my sister dog. _____

He be about to leave work now. _____

Where's the washroom? _____

As I walked around the room, I was not surprised that students 'fixed' these sentences by changing them into Standard English, like Casey's example illustrates:



After students “corrected” the sentences, I questioned them about their answers.

“So, where did the instructions indicate these sentences were heard?”

“.. In the park,” answered a student with slight annoyance.

“And none of you have ever heard people talk these ways? Or talked in any of these ways yourselves?”

“I use ‘ain’t’ a lot,” offered Shauna, “and I know a lot of people who say things like ‘not nowhere’”.

“Then why did everyone claim there is something wrong with each sentence? If people talk these ways, then how can we say they are wrong if we still know what is meant?”

I really enjoyed the conversation that evolved from this mini-quiz. We talked about language variation and change, and also about Standard English: when it is appropriate to use Standard English and when it is not. With Project 2, a project that requires students to create how-to guides for surviving in a campus culture, this discussion opened the opportunity for students to embrace language patterns of their own, likely for the first time in academic writing.

To give students some practice, I brought Steve Urkel into the classroom (via Youtube). Many likely argue Urkel’s most awkward quality to be his use of formal English during informal situations. This activity allowed students to recognize that Standard English isn’t always appropriate, and prepared students to write how-to guides which portrayed the language patterns used by their subcultures (See figure 11).

Figure 11:

Lessons in Grammar

Language Variation: Building awareness of appropriate usage of language with respect to audience and purpose

Can you imagine talking the same way to your best friend as your boss, or telling the same, gossip-filled stories you would at a Tiger's game at the dinner table? Probably not, right? That's because subconsciously, we speak differently depending on who we are talking to, where we are, or even the topic of conversation. Can you imagine if we didn't change how we spoke with respect to these things?

VIDEO CLIP:

Many of you are probably familiar with Steve Urkel. Let's take a few minutes to ponder, what makes Urkel so... strange?

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9DCY_1o8LI&feature=related

Post clip questions:

- What sticks out to you about Urkel? How is he different from those around him?
- If anywhere, where might Urkel blend in?
- What would make Urkel less awkward/ what would be considered "normal" neighbor behavior?

ACTIVITY: Students will become more aware of how language choices change depending on audience and purpose by presenting examples of how not to act in certain situations.

Groups: 3-5 students per group.

Example Scenarios (or, students can choose their own!)

1. Talking to your boss/ teacher
2. Being a Kindergarten teacher
3. A furniture salesman
4. Walmart greeter
5. The cafeteria
6. Two friends out for morning coffee
7. Watching a football game
8. Church service
9. Soccer mom running club

In each situation, there needs to be "normal" people who demonstrate how to talk/act appropriately, and 1 person who just doesn't seem right, or the Urkel of the group, if you will. You will work together on writing a script, and will act out your scenario in a 10 minute or less skit for the class. Make sure you can explain **how "the Urkel's" language choices make him or her awkward.**

Your group will have ____ minutes to work on this activity.

My favorite lessons are those which both meet my learning objectives and engage students, and the language variation lesson accomplished both of these. Students enjoyed creating conversations with each other, and in doing so, they did not use Standard English. Thus, they uncovered that there is a place for different dialects, vernaculars, and slang inside of writing and moreover, that this language variety belongs in our writing as it reflects real conversation. However, students must recognize the importance of code-switching.

Reflection on Teaching Grammar

I do not pretend to have all of the answers for the best way to teach grammar in the classroom, and as many scholars have argued, most grammar lessons do not find themselves in students' writing. I know that my students are still making mistakes punctuating sentences and avoiding unintentional fragments, but I am confident that I have diminished some of the stigma the word 'grammar' holds to students. My students have been presented tools to make choices as *authors*, a title many have hesitated to own as *student* has predominated their identity as writers for many years. With these lessons and others that we explored during class, I know my students feel confident about expressing themselves and will to continue to experiment with various writing techniques which are guided by attention to genre, audience, and purpose.

My curiosity in teaching grammar is far from complete; as I journey into secondary education, I continue to question the methods used by others in the field. My research thus far has been inspired by the writings of several leading English education scholars, including Constance Weaver's "Teaching Grammar in Context" (1996) and "Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing" (2008), which have served as guiding theoretical sources in my teaching practice. Furthermore, I praise Jeff Anderson's "Everyday Editing" handbook for the various 'writing invitations' which have had many practical implications in my grammar lessons. Harry Noden's *Image Grammar* has also been a resource I hold closely and recommend to teachers searching for a creative way to engage students in making deliberate grammar choices. Most importantly, I thank Dr. Jonathon Bush for his guidance in helping me discover the best practices of teaching grammar and his dedication to the English 1000 Department; his efforts here have provided me with an unmatched undergraduate teaching experience which I am incredibly appreciative.

As a final component to the class, my students used their grammar folder as a tool for their multi-genre project, a reminder that they have these resources for future writing. As a way to assess my students' awareness of their own writing growth, students were to write a

reflection of their successful use of grammar in the multi-genre project. As I conclude this research, I would like to share some of my students' reflections.

"It was challenging to include at least four (grammar strategies) into this project, but I think once I got the hang of it and figured out where they needed to go it made my paper better," (Cody)

"Parallel structure was used in the diary entry referring to the basketball game. I chose to use this because I am talked about the image and everything I saw was inside and outside of the basketball arena... in class we talked about how parallel structure is good for showing a pattern of words... I was really trying to paint the picture for the reader" (Ashley)

"In this project I really tried to step out of my comfort zone in my writing. I have a hard time using different types of punctuation... writing you could say is almost like cooking; when cooking you add spices to mix up the flavor but in writing you add different types of punctuation to add better meaning" (Shauna)

"The discovering paragraphs went perfectly with the paragraphs in the acceptance letter; they were short and to the point just like how we learned" (Casey)

"I enjoyed working on all the projects in this class and learning grammar" (Emily)