

Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing

Constance Weaver

While I was doing research for my book *Teaching Grammar in Context* (1996b), I was surprised to discover that during the Middle Ages, grammar was considered the foundation of all knowledge, the necessary prerequisite for understanding theology and philosophy as well as literature. As Jeffrey F. Huntsman (1983) puts it, "grammar was thought to discipline the mind and the soul at the same time" (59). I was even more surprised to discover that a major publisher of textbooks used in home schooling and in fundamentalist schools describes a certain middle grade grammar and writing program (*God's Gift of Language Series*) by saying that "Grammar is taught with the purpose of making clear to the students the orderly structure of their language, a picture of God's orderly plan for the world and for their lives" (A Beka Book, 1996, *Home School Catalogue*, 36). Clearly some people think that grammar should be taught as a formal system because it represents order, authority, and something that—to them—seems absolute, without question (Chapman 1986; Holderer 1995; Gaddy, Hall, and Marzano 1996).

With such deep-seated beliefs, some parents and community members argue vociferously for teaching grammar as a system—formally, and not necessarily in conjunction with writing. They argue for grammar on what, for them, are moral and religious grounds. And when other stakeholders in education realize that grammar is not being taught as a formal system and that students are not necessarily mastering some of the conventions of edited written English, it is easy for them to simply assume a causal relationship and believe that English teachers are not doing their duty when they don't teach grammar as a complete subject.

As professionals teaching the English language arts, we too are sometimes convinced that we learned practical things about sentence structure, style, and editing from doing exercises in our grammar books; for

instance, I can tell you very specifically some of what I learned that has helped me as a writer (though I'll admit I only needed one or two semesters of intensive grammar study to reap its potential benefits, not the six semesters to which I and my classmates were subjected). Because some of us are convinced we benefitted at least somewhat from the formal study of grammar, it can be difficult for community members and English teachers alike to believe what decades of grammar studies tell us: that in general, the teaching of grammar does not serve any practical purpose for most students (Hillocks and Smith 1991). It does not improve reading, speaking, writing, or even editing, for the majority of students—nor does the teaching of English grammar necessarily make it easier for students to learn the structure of a foreign language (indeed, many students who have studied English grammar consciously learn the structure of English for the first time when studying a foreign language).

THE RESEARCH

Typically the research studies have not been fine-tuned enough to reveal that the study of grammar does have at least limited benefits for a few of us as writers. But even this more optimistic conclusion is called into question somewhat by a landmark study done by Findlay McQuade (1980). He taught an elective, junior-senior level Editorial Skills class that enrolled students who, it appears, were typically college-bound. The students reviewed parts of speech and basic sentence structure, then dealt with application of such principles as "agreement, reference, parallel construction, tense, case, subordination" to the task of finding errors in sentences written expressly for that purpose. Students, parents, and the teacher were happy with the course, until some students who had succeeded in the Editorial Skills class were assessed in reading, writing, mechanics, and vocabulary, then assigned to a course in writing mechanics on the basis of that assessment. This unhappy result led McQuade to investigate the effects of his course.

The author, an authority on grammar, discusses research and classroom practice.

What he found was startling. Overall, students showed as much gain on their Cooperative English Tests in years that they hadn't taken the Editorial Skills class as in the year that they had (McQuade 1980, 28); the ES class seemed to make no difference in students' preparation for the College Entrance Examination Board's Achievement Test in Composition (29); the class average on the pre-test was actually higher than the average on the post-test (28); most of the reduction in errors was a reduction in relatively simple errors (mainly capitalization) by just a few of the students (29–30); and though the students' pre-course essays were not spectacular, their post-course essays were "miserable" and apparently "self-consciously constructed to honor correctness above all other virtues, including sense" (29). No wonder that this and other studies have led research summarizers like George Hillocks (1986) to conclude that:

None of the studies reviewed for the present report provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skills. If schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional grammar (as many still do), they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing. (138)

Or to put it even more bluntly, "School boards, administrators and teachers who impose the systematic study of traditional school grammar on their students over lengthy periods of time in the name of teaching writing do them a gross disservice" (Hillocks and Smith 1991, 248). (For other choice quotations from research summaries, see my fact sheet on the teaching of grammar that NCTE published as a SLATE Starter Sheet in the spring of 1996.)

What, then, are teachers to do? Should we teach formal grammar to all our students, knowing full well that only a few are likely to make practical use of what we've taught? Or should we abandon the teaching of grammar entirely, unless we teach it as a subject for inquiry (Postman and Weingartner 1966) or as a subject simply of intellectual interest, if not religious/moral value?

Probably neither extreme is the best option. In an article critiquing the earlier research summaries, Martha Kolln (1981)

pointed out that teaching grammar in the context of writing might be much more effective than teaching grammar as a separate subject (as evidence, she cites, for instance, a study by Roland J. Harris [1962], which is reported at length in Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer 1963). Later studies by Warwick B. Elley *et al.* (1976) and by McQuade (1980) do not invalidate this point. On the other hand, it is by no means clear that "application" of selected aspects of grammar cannot be done just as effectively, and a lot more efficiently, without detailed, explicit grammar study, as illustrated by Frank O'Hare's experiments in sentence combining (1973). This is the argument advanced by Rei Noguchi (1991), and it's the argument advanced in my new book as well (Weaver 1996b). Though the research investigating this issue has been meager, it is definitely promising. For example, Lucy Calkins (1980) found that third graders learned punctuation much better in the context of writing and "publishing" than by studying punctuation rules in isolation. Furthermore, an experimental study at grades four through six showed that students who were taught the conventions of language in the context of their writing generally made better use of writing mechanics than did students who had studied these skills in isolation (DiStefano and Killion 1984).

WHAT ASPECTS OF GRAMMAR SHOULD WE TEACH?

Of course some educators may still want to teach at least an elective course or unit in the structure of the English language, simply on the grounds that studying the language is interesting and/or intellectually challenging—or can be made so (Postman and Weingartner 1966). What all students need, however, is guidance in understanding and applying those aspects of grammar that are most relevant to writing (see sidebar, p. 22).

Teaching Grammar in Context includes suggestions that we teach a minimum of grammar for maximum benefits (Weaver 1996b). This is what I call a "scope-not-sequence" chart, covering relevant concepts that might be taught sometime between kindergarten and graduate school. The chart includes five categories:

teaching concepts of subject, verb, sentence, clause, phrase, and related concepts for editing;

- teaching style through sentence combining and sentence generating;
- teaching sentence sense and style through the manipulation of syntactic elements;
- teaching the power of dialects and dialects of power;
- teaching punctuation and mechanics for convention, clarity, and style.

The partial chart on this page presents details for the first of these categories.

While this full chart (Weaver 1996b, 142–144) includes most of the grammatical concepts needed for sentence revision, style, and editing, and while some concepts are listed in the developmental sequence found in research studies, neither the sets of objectives nor the detailed lists should be understood as presenting a sequence for instruction. What's appropriate at any given time will vary considerably from school to school, class to class, and especially from individual to individual. Therefore, I would suggest that teachers consider the chart, examine their own students' writing, and offer the kinds of guidance their students need—mostly at the point of need (though some basic grammatical concepts may need to be taught aside from the writing process itself).

At the very least, I would recommend that teachers in a school or school system decide what their own students should be taught at each level, with considerable overlap. Better yet, teachers could collectively decide what the teachers at each grade level should be responsible for teaching, but only to the students who demonstrate the need or readiness for these predetermined concepts and skills in their writing.

UNDERLYING LEARNING THEORY

There are no miracles here. That is, teaching grammar in the context of writing will not automatically mean that once taught, the concepts will be learned and applied forever after. On the contrary, grammatical concepts must often be taught and retaught, to individuals as well as to groups or classes, and students may long afterwards continue to need guidance in actually applying what they have, in some sense or to some degree, already learned. There is no quick fix.

In part, this is because the learning of grammatical concepts is so complex. For example, Muriel Harris and Katherine E. Rowan (1989) point out that practice, practice,

and more practice usually does not promote adequate understanding (see also Kagan 1980). In part, this is because the practice exercises in grammar books are carefully crafted to be relatively easy; they do not give students the opportunity to grasp the critical features of a concept like "sentence." In their study of college students' concept of sentence, Harris and Rowan found that many students were confused by the meaning-based definitions of sentence that they had been taught ("A sentence is a group of words that expresses a complete thought"). Many of the students could not reliably differentiate between grammatical sentences and fragments or a run-on or comma splice. In order to understand the concept of "sentence," they also needed to understand what was *not* a sentence, and vice versa—but they had a firm grasp of neither.

I am convinced that one reason our traditional teaching of grammar has little transfer to writing situations is the underlying behaviorist learning theory. We have simply taken for granted the behaviorist ideas that practice makes perfect and that skills practiced in isolation will be learned that way and then applied as relevant. We have assumed that this is the way teaching and learning should work, despite the overwhelming evidence that it doesn't. With respect to grammar, Harris and Rowan (1989) show quite convincingly that a conscious grasp of grammatical concepts requires a depth of understanding that is not often gained through practice exercises alone.

The list on the next page reflects one of my attempts to contrast a behaviorist, transmission theory of learning and teaching with the constructivist, transactional theory that better reflects how people learn in general and how teachers may better promote the learning of concepts and complex processes. The learning of grammatical concepts is itself a complex process.

TEACHING CONCEPTS OF SUBJECT, VERB, SENTENCE, CLAUSE, PHRASE, AND RELATED CONCEPTS FOR EDITING

Objectives

- To help students develop sentence sense through wide reading.
- To help students learn to punctuate sentences correctly (according to accepted conventions) and effectively (judiciously violating the rules on occasion, for rhetorical effect).
- To help students learn to make verbs agree with their subjects.
- To help students learn conventions for punctuating subordinate clauses.

Ends of Behavioral-Constructivist Continuum

- BEHAVIORAL PSYCHOLOGY
 - Transmission
 - Reductionist
 - Habit formation
 - Avoiding mistakes prevents formation of bad habits
 - Students passively practice skills, memorize facts
 - Teacher dispenses prepackaged, predetermined curriculum
 - Direct teaching of curriculum
 - Taskmaster, with emphasis on cycle of teach, practice/apply/memorize, test
 - Lessons taught, practiced or applied, then tested
 - Performance on decontextualized tests is taken as measure of learning of limited information
 - Learning is expected to be uniform, same for everyone; uniform means of assessment guarantee that many will fail, in significant ways
 - Adds up to a failure-oriented model, ferreting out students' weaknesses and preparing them to take their place in a stratified society
- COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY
 - Transactional
 - Constructivist
 - Hypothesis formation
 - Errors necessary for encouraging more sophisticated hypotheses
 - Students actively pursue learning and construct knowledge
 - Teacher develops and negotiates curriculum with students
 - Responsive teaching to meet students' needs and interests
 - Master craftsman, mentor: emphasis on demonstrating, inviting, discussing, affirming, facilitating, collaborating, observing, supporting
 - Mini-lessons taught as demonstration, invitation; adding an idea to the class pot
 - Assessment from a variety of contextualized learning experiences captures diverse aspects of learning
 - Learning is expected to be individual, different for everyone; flexible and multiple means of assessment guarantee all will succeed, in differing ways
 - Adds up to a success-oriented model, emphasizing students' strengths and preparing them to be the best they can be in a stratified society

(Weaver 1994, 365; Weaver 1996b, 149)

Teaching grammar in the context of writing will not automatically mean that once taught, the concepts will be learned and applied forever after.

Certain aspects of the constructivist theory of learning seem especially relevant for the teaching of grammar. One is that the learner must form hypotheses about concepts in the process of coming to understand them. This means that we teachers must give a wide range of examples to illustrate a concept (such as “grammatical sentence”) and also that we must contrast these with common non-examples that are frequently mistaken for instances of the concept (such as a dependent clause, which has a subject and predicate—often part of the handbook definition of a sentence—but which is grammatically not complete as a sentence). Another significant implication is that errors are common and probably even necessary in the process of formulating more sophisticated hypotheses—or to put it more simply, errors are a necessary concomitant of growth (Shaughnessy 1977; Kroll and Schafer 1978).

Thus we should not be surprised if students make new kinds of errors after we have taught a “new” syntactic structure or editing concept, nor should we penalize students for taking the risks that have resulted in these errors. Instead, we should praise students for what they’ve attempted, then gently show them how to eliminate what we perceive as error (Weaver 1982). We also need to adopt a stance of humility before we undertake to “correct” students’ writing, or to help them “correct” it themselves. As Richard J. Connors and Andrea A. Lunsford (1988) put it:

Teachers’ ideas about error definition and classification have always been absolute products of their times and cultures. . . . Teachers have always marked different phenomena as errors, called them different things, given them different weights. Error-pattern study is essentially the examination of an ever-shifting pattern of skills judged by an ever-shifting pattern of prejudices. (399)

And this doesn't even begin to address the issue of dialect differences (for instance, see the article by James Sledd in this issue).

KINDS OF LESSONS: SOME EXAMPLES

The kinds of grammar lessons I suggest in *Teaching Grammar in Context* are incidental lessons, wherein (for example) grammatical terms are used casually, in the course of discussing literature and students' writing; inductive lessons, wherein students may be guided to notice grammatical patterns and derive generalizations themselves; teaching grammatical points in the process of conferring with students about their writing; mini-lessons, which present new and useful information (to a class, group, or individual) in a brief format (Atwell 1987; Calkins 1986); and extended mini-lessons, which typically involve students in trying out or applying the concept, briefly and collaboratively, in order to promote greater understanding. Here, I would like to offer three examples of extended mini-lessons, which are common and often productive. Individual conferencing is perhaps even more valuable, as illustrated with one example. These lessons were taught by teachers from fifth-grade to upper-level undergraduate, but all are appropriate for secondary students. Each example reflects one or more of the principles of constructivist learning theory. Each also illustrates the teaching of a grammatical concept, an editing concept, and/or a stylistically effective use of language.

Ann

Ann, a fifth-grade teacher, had noticed that when her students answered comprehension questions in reading, science, and social studies classes, they frequently responded with dependent clause fragments, especially those starting with *because*. She admits that when students wrote subordinate clauses for answers, she used to add independent clauses in red ink "to help them see the error of their ways. But to no avail: the subordinate clauses keep coming with all the tenacity of the Energizer Bunny."

Before taking a course in grammar and teaching grammar, Ann had been inclined to think that she should teach grammar as a formal system in order to help students eliminate such fragments from their writing. As a result of research read and ideas discussed in the class, Ann decided to teach just

extended mini-lessons on areas of particular concern: in this case, writing grammatically complete sentences instead of dependent clause fragments. She taught two such lessons, one focusing exclusively on the subordinating conjunction *because*, since it is so often used in answers and in other writing. She had students work in pairs and added a peer editing component, asking pairs to trade and check one another's work.

Ann learned several lessons as a result of this experiment. First, the students understood the examples very well and asked a lot of questions about applying the "rules" to their writing. However, Ann also discovered that her transparencies involved, perhaps, too much information for her fifth graders. Furthermore, though the worksheets seemed simple and obvious to Ann, some kids had trouble, especially with the terms and concepts of *subordinate clause* and *independent clause*. And in spite of the mini-lesson examples and the examples at the top of the activity sheets, some students forgot capitals, commas, or periods, others misplaced commas, and still others capitalized the subordinating conjunctions in the middle of sentences. Furthermore, many of these errors were overlooked during peer editing. Ann also discovered that the practice took longer than she had anticipated—almost half an hour. In other words, neither Ann's lesson nor the students' responses achieved perfection.

"Lastly," Ann reports, "on subsequent student writing the Bunny was back. Students were still using subordinate clauses as sentences." However, Ann did not become discouraged, for she knew better than to expect one mini-lesson to produce mastery, even when extended with some practice. Ann writes:

As Lois Matz Rosen puts it, "Learning to use the correct mechanical and grammatical forms of written language is a developmental process and as such is slow, unique to each child, and does not progress in an even uphill pattern." (1987, 63)

Sarah

Taking the same course in grammar and teaching grammar as Ann, Sarah had likewise been inclined to teach traditional grammar; in fact, she admits that "Last year, I have realized, I did too much traditional grammar,

and sadly enough I am afraid I did not teach my students how to become better writers.” So it became her goal to improve her teaching of writing and not concentrate on the traditional grammar lessons. She writes:

Already this year, it has been exciting to watch the difference in my classroom as I implement new teaching ideas. This year I see much more enthusiasm for writing and grammar because the students are not fully aware they are being taught grammar. Disguising my grammar lessons behind the mini-lesson format in the writer’s workshop has prevented me from having to endure a repetition of last year’s groans regarding how boring grammar is.

Sarah had previously encouraged her seventh graders to use adjectives and adverbs in their writing but found that often her students’ “descriptive” poems or paragraphs included little description and no details to make the pieces come alive. When it was suggested that she guide her students in writing a “five senses” poem about fall, Sarah decided to experiment with two different ways of encouraging students to use adjectives and adverbs. First, she asked the students to write about fall but gave them little direction, except for mentioning, “Be sure to use those adjectives and adverbs for detail!” The students turned in their writings at the end of class.

About two weeks later, Sarah guided the students in writing their second fall poems, the “sense” poems. She explains:

The Monday before, I had each student bring in one or two leaves, so by Wednesday we had a large basket of them. Before writing on Wednesday we did prewriting exercises together as a class. My students loved it! We threw the basket of leaves in the air and watched them fall in different directions. Then the students took turns placing their leaves on the hot air register and watched as their leaf got blown up toward the ceiling. After this they went around the classroom sharing a favorite fall memory or Thanksgiving tradition. Finally, with that introduction, I explained the writing assignment as using the five senses and they began writing. Those that had trouble with the first fall writing assignment now had previous knowledge and ideas from the prewriting activities on the five senses to provide organization. The difference in their writings was amazing as shown below.

Tom’s poems

Before

It is fall you rake the leaves crustily over a pile “o” mud. It is nearly ear shattering when you rake the flames on the ground. How chilling it be, no one knows. It (fall) is so unpredictable.

After

Smells like destruction when burned.

Clogging your lungs.

Tastes like the dirt of the earth, destroying your taste buds.

See the leaves on the trees fall effortlessly to the ground,

Where they will be raked, mulched, and burned.

Touch them—they feel like razor blades, when you jump on them.

Hear them? You can’t!

But if you can’t hear them, do they really fall?

Amy’s poems

Before

Fall is the leaves changing colors; they can be green, yellow or red.

Fall is the cold and the freezing at night.

Fall is when your backyard is covered with leaves.

After

I can smell the apple pie baking in the oven.

I can smell the burning leaves in the neighbor’s yards.

I hear the leaves crackling under my feet as I trudge through the yard.

I hear children yelling as they jump in a pile of leaves.

I see blended colors on the leaves like someone painted them.

I touch the leaves and I feel the veins.

I touch the leaves and sometimes they break in my hands.

I taste the turkey as the grease runs down my throat.

I taste the pumpkin pie and now I know it is fall!

One important thing to notice is that many of the descriptive words in the “after” poems aren’t necessary adjectives or adverbs; they are nouns (“razor blades”) or verbs (“mulched”), as in the sense poem from Tom, a student in Sarah’s lower language arts class,

who disliked writing and reading. Another important point is that while the “before” poems used some adjectives and/or adverbs, the “after” poems used a much greater variety of constructions that function adjectivally, to modify nouns, or adverbially, to modify verbs or whole clauses. One example is the participial phrases in the “after” poem by Amy, a student in Sarah’s advanced language arts class. (The non-italicized phrases in both “after” poems are present participle words and phrases functioning like adjectives, to modify the preceding nouns.)

What is to be learned from Sarah’s experience? Several things, I think:

1. Various kinds of prewriting experiences can greatly enhance the quality of students’ writing. This is something Sarah already knew and typically practiced.
2. A variety of adjectival and adverbial constructions will probably emerge when students are guided in focusing on the details of experience, rather than on grammar.
3. Asking students to focus on “adjectives” and “adverbs” might actually limit students’ use of the more sophisticated structures they would use naturally.

Renee

Secondary teacher Renee uses a conference approach to teach writing, including sentence revision and editing. The excerpts on this page and p. 22 show a first draft of a sophomore’s paper and the beginning of a much longer sixth draft.

First, Renee suggested to the writer that he consider an opening that “grabs the reader’s attention.” She further suggested that conversation can do that. In working with a later draft, Renee guided the writer in seeing how to put the reader “there,” in using participial phrases to convey narrative detail, and in using punctuation conventionally. In a subsequent conference, she and the writer might still consider whether one or both of the comma splices should be left as is or eliminated (Weaver 1996b, 84–85).

My University Classes

In teaching upper-level undergraduates who are preparing to be teachers, I have often

One day when I was riding in my moms car coming home from Kalamazoo we looked behind us and we saw ~~there~~ smoke coming out of the back of the car. We didn't know what it was from so we kept on driving wondering what it was from. We saw people on the other side of the road swerving away from us and the guy in front of us was trying to stop us. So we stopped on the side of the road and smoke rolled over the hood we jumped out of the car and saw our car go up in flames. We called the fire department and they put the fire out. My moms car was ~~total~~ total ~~and~~ but the insurance company payed for another one. [end of 1st draft]

Sophomore's first draft (Weaver 1996b).

found that even these students do not evidence much concern for the mechanics of writing before they have “turned in” their papers. (This is in so-called content area classes, wherein I do not routinely lead students through stages of the writing process unless they request or obviously need such help.) The motivation is somewhat higher when students have gotten their papers back with “corrections,” accompanied usually by an explanation and occasionally by the general reminder that “You need to get a grasp on this, because it’s something you’ll be expected to teach even elementary-level students!”

At this point, I have found some success with in effect treating the returned paper as a not-quite-final draft (for many related ideas, see Rosen 1987). So far, I have developed information sheets on two of the most common “errors” in mechanics: use of just a comma between two independent clauses (the “comma splice”) and absence of the apostrophe in possessive nouns.

First, I distribute the handout(s) to students and explain the concept(s), using the examples on the sheet(s), which have been taken from actual student papers. Then I organize the students into groups and invite them to play around with correcting the other sentences, which again have been taken from students’ papers, as in the hand-

HANDOUT ON COMMA SPLICES

Comma splices

A "comma splice" occurs when two grammatically complete sentences (independent clauses) are joined with just a comma.

On rare occasion, comma splice sentences are found in published writing. This usually occurs only when the two grammatically complete sentences are short and, for the most part, grammatically parallel. Examples:

1. The students that need to touch the book can, the children that need to verbalize their thoughts are responded to.
2. And they learn on their own, they in a sense teach themselves.
3. These children are not stupid, they just learn and understand in different ways.

Usually, however, comma splices are considered a "no no." Below are examples of comma splice sentences that don't meet the conditions for acceptability: ones that should be "corrected." With a neighbor, please consider effective ways of eliminating these comma splices by using different punctuation, restructuring the sentence, or adding a connecting word.

1. I was very impressed, the teacher pointed to the words as the students said them.
2. Then the students were blindfolded and given a button, they had to name the characteristics they felt the button contained.
3. This little exercise really worked, as soon as she started singing the children started singing right with her.
4. My first expectation was the shared book experience, this seems to be one of the most fundamental aspects of whole language.
5. The first is a poetry notebook, it is the first item on the agenda that day.

The Flaming Engine

We ran out of the car looking for someone to help, yelling at them to call 9-1-1. "We already did," they told us. Then they asked, "What happened, what happened?"

We were coming home from the mall, driving on Shaw Road, when the stoplight ahead of us turned red. We stopped, waiting for it to turn green. The light turned green, and then we slowly pulled away, going faster, we accelerated to fifty-five miles an hour. My mom looked in the rearview mirror and asked my brother to look behind us and see if the smoke was coming from us. "I think so," he said. Then we looked ahead and the guy in front of us was waving his hands and pointing to the side of the road. "I think we should get out," my mom said. My mom stopped the car and we all jumped out of the car. My brother and I ran to the back of the car, and my mom ran to the front.

[end of 1st paragraph.]

Then we heard the firetrucks coming. They stopped, then two guys, already dressed in their fire equipment, jumped off the truck, got the water hose and started to put out the fire. While they were doing that one of the

Beginning of sophomore's sixth draft (Weaver 1996b).

out on this page. I also give each group a grammar handbook, asking them to check the phenomenon in question, and/or to look up other kinds of "errors" that have been marked. The students are also asked to discuss with each other what needs correction in their own papers (not necessarily just comma splices or possessives), to determine what they still don't understand, and to ask me for clarification and help as I circulate around the room.

I encourage students to help each other edit future papers, to use a grammar handbook to help with grammatical problems they know they have, to seek my help in an

individual conference if needed, and to take risks with grammatical constructions.

This procedure has typically reduced the incidence of these kinds of errors in subsequent papers—not only the one or two kinds of errors on my handouts, but other kinds as well. In addition, though, I usually find "new" kinds of errors, such as students punctuating ordinary plurals and verb endings with apostrophes, not just using the apostrophe in possessive nouns. My favorite overgeneralization is from the earnest young man who wrote "mathematic's" after learning about the apostrophe in possessives (e.g., "the mathematician's knowledge"). I greet such new kinds of errors with a smile and a chuckle, reminding the pre-service

teacher that new errors will occur, almost inevitably, as writers try to apply concepts that are new to them and only partially understood. I remind them that as teachers, they too should encourage risk-taking and growth in the use of language by responding to children's new errors in a similar manner.

CONCLUSION

As I indicated before, there are no miracles here. No matter how students are taught grammatical concepts, syntactic constructions and stylistic devices, or language conventions and editing concepts, they will not automatically make use of these in their writing. However, the relevant research confirms what everyday experience reveals: that teaching "grammar" in the context of writing works better than teaching grammar as a formal system, if our aim is for students to use grammar more effectively and conventionally in their writing.

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Constance (Connie) Weaver is a professor of English at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, where she teaches courses in the reading and writing processes

and whole language education, as well as a course in grammar and the teaching of grammar. She has previously published two books on grammar, including the NCTE publication *Grammar for Teachers* (1979). Presently she has several other books in print dealing with reading, whole language, and educating students with attention deficit disorders. Her latest book is *Teaching Grammar in Context* (1996, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann).

CALL FOR RESEARCH STRAND PROPOSALS

1997 NCTE Annual Convention, November 20-25, 1997; Detroit, Michigan

NCTE's Standing Committee on Research is accepting proposals for papers to be presented during the **Research Strand at the 1997 NCTE Annual Convention** in Detroit (November 20-25). Each individual is limited to inclusion on *one* proposal only; inclusion on more than one proposal will eliminate an individual for consideration on the program. Proposals are welcome from researchers practicing diverse methodology and coming from varied perspectives.

Appropriate proposals for this strand will include reports of research related to the nature, teaching, and learning of language arts in and out of schools and analysis of issues in research goals and methods. Proposals should make clear the theoretical framework, research design, and completed/anticipated results of the study. The Committee will entertain three types of proposals: (1) individual presentations to be incorporated at the discretion of the Committee in sessions with at least two other related papers; (2) coordinated sessions in which at least three speakers address related questions; (3) symposia in which at least two speakers and a respondent or three speakers bring different points of view to bear on an issue in research.

PROPOSAL FORMAT

Length: Proposals for individual presentations should be no longer than three pages (double spaced). Proposals for coordinated sessions and symposia should be no longer than six pages (double spaced) including an explanation of the relationship among the proposed papers.

Cover Page: The cover page of the proposal should bear the title of the proposed paper or session and the names and addresses of all speakers. In the case of coordinated sessions and symposia, the person responsible for contacting other members of the panel should be listed first.

In the upper right hand corner of the cover page, type one of the following as the general area to be emphasized: literacy practices, literature, reading, composition, classroom discourse, teaching thinking, teacher training, integrated language arts, or other. If the area to be emphasized is *other*, please indicate briefly what it is, e.g., early literacy acquisition.

Copies: Send five (5) copies of the proposal and one copy of the cover page stapled to one copy of the proposal to: Russel K. Durst, Chair, Committee on Research, University of Cincinnati, Department of English (ML-69), Cincinnati, OH 45221.

DEADLINE

To be eligible for review, proposals must be postmarked on or before **January 17, 1997**. Faxed proposals will not be processed.

JUDGING PROPOSALS

All proposals will be judged blind in a peer review process by members of the NCTE Standing Committee on Research, the NCTE Assembly for Research, and other members of the research community. They will be judged on the basis of significance to the field, soundness of argument and/or research design, appropriateness of conclusions, and clarity. In the first round, each proposal will be read by three judges, at least two of whom have expertise in the proposal's area of emphasis.