

Five Grammar Lessons With Sneaky Double-Duty Goals

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If you are a writing workshop teacher, you may have mixed feelings about grammar. Sure, students need to learn conventions. But conventions aren't exactly glamorous. It isn't usually the lessons about commas that rivet your students and lead to the most honest, heartfelt writing of their lives. But teaching conventions is an important part of a writing teacher's job, nonetheless.

Before considering how you will approach grammar instruction inside of your writing workshop, you may want to do a little reflection on your feelings and beliefs about grammar and why you teach it. If you teach grammar solely because it's part of your school's curriculum, or because your students will be tested on it, it might be difficult to find your passion when it comes to planning grammar instruction. In their seminal book *The Power of Grammar* (Heinemann, 2005), Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton wrote, "These are our goals for teaching grammar: to teach knowledge of conventional usage in order to increase power, opportunity, and voice; to teach habits of fluency, inquiry, and experimentation; and to engage students in such a way that this knowledge and these habits are sustaining and flexible." Seen in this light, grammar instruction becomes an important tool to help students to present their best writing to the world.

Fortunately, great grammar instruction can support and even enhance the rest of your writing instruction. Many grammar lessons have sneaky, ulterior motives. For example, learning how to punctuate quotes from an outside source in information writing can lead to greater research and better evidenced writing. Following are five grammar lessons, each with a sneaky goal to power up writing in other ways.

LESSON ONE: Paragraphing

Many students, when they are first learning to elaborate, write on and on in giant blocks of text. I often want to encourage their enthusiasm and hate to put a damper on their writing by stopping to teach them about paragraphing. I have found that a quick study of a mentor text to learn about when to start a new paragraph encourages most students rather than dampens their spirits.

To teach this lesson, find an excerpt of a read aloud book or other text that students know well. Ideally it is a section with many short paragraphs and different reasons for new paragraphs. You might study this section together and generate a list of times that the author started a new paragraph. Depending on your writing genre (mine has a narrative bent), your list might look something like:

- When a new person speaks
- When there is a change in place
- When time moves forward or backward
- When there is a change in mood
- For dramatic pause or tension

Then, teach students how to use editing marks to plan where they will start new paragraphs in subsequent drafts of their writing. If your students need more help before jumping into their own writing, you might create a sample text that students can mark up or that you mark up together as a shared writing exercise before letting them loose on their own drafts.

Sneaky Goal: Teaching paragraphing often leads to greater elaboration. Students can see quickly which paragraphs are paltry and need beefing up. They might also see whole sections that could benefit from extra dialogue, explanation, or description of events.

LESSON TWO: Punctuating Dialogue

This is also a lesson that can be taught well with a quick study of a mentor text. Show students how published authors punctuate dialogue. To help them practice, you could write a few sentences that contain dialogue on sentence strips. Cut each sentence into parts, and include quotation marks and commas on separate pieces of sentence strip. Have your students work in partners to organize the parts of the sentences and punctuation marks so that the sentences make sense and are punctuated properly.

Sneaky Goal: Lessons about dialogue can lead to greater character development. As students learn to punctuate dialogue properly, they feel inspired to add more. The more voice they give their characters, the more developed their characters will be.

LESSON THREE: Conjunctions

You might teach specific lessons about conjunctions outside of writing workshop time, or you may simply have a chart posted with common conjunctions and their uses. A couple of examples of how conjunctions affect the meaning of sentences can help them to understand how and when to use them. For example:

Michael had breakfast and he was late to school.

Michael had breakfast, so he was late to school.

Michael had breakfast, yet he was late to school.

The first sentence doesn't necessarily imply a relationship between the two things, though one could be inferred. The second sentence implies that he was late to school because he ate breakfast, and the third implies that he was late in spite of eating breakfast.

You might ask students to go on a conjunction hunt in their writing or in a text you create first. They can tally how many of each kind of conjunction they find in the piece. If they only find a few conjunctions, challenge them to add more. You might set goals together for how many different conjunctions they will aim to add to their writing.

Sneaky Goal: If you notice students whose writing feels short and choppy, adding conjunctions and combining sentences will help them to vary their sentence structures for greater readability. As an added bonus, students will have to think about connections between ideas in their writing and about what they really, really mean to say.

LESSON FOUR: Verb Tense

You may notice writers mixing up tenses as they play around with past, present, and future in their writing. Read aloud picture books in both past and present tense. You might even go for future tense. *Just me and My Little Brother* by Mercer Mayer is a wonderful example. Have students mark all of the verbs in their writing and notice and fix verbs that are a different tense from the rest of the piece.

[Edit: Mercer Mayer books in general are wonderful studies of the power of verb tense. *Just Lost!* is a great example of the effect of past tense. Because the narrator recounts the events in past tense, there is a sense that he has distanced himself from them and is looking back with relief and a new-found bravado. It reads as if he is telling his father about his day at the dinner table. *Just Go to Bed* is a great example of the effect present tense. The narrator is so in the moment, so engrossed in his play that going to bed seems impossible.]

Sneaky Goal: Considering verb tense can help writers to write from inside the story. They might experiment by changing their writing from past tense to present tense, for example. Doing this may help them to remember details they hadn't before, because they are really trying to picture what happened. They may end up with greater specificity of detail and more elaboration.

LESSON FIVE: Sentence Fragments

About sentences, Ehrenworth and Vinton write, “Gertrude Stein claims that sentences are not emotional, but we disagree. The sentence is the stuff of story, and in every sentence resides a small story” (p. 61). Students can learn to make sure each sentence story is just the right length. Though you don't have to delve too deeply into technical terms for sentence parts, you might teach students simply that each sentence needs a subject (a noun or pronoun) and a predicate (a verb or verb phrase). Each sentence story, then, must answer the questions: *Who is this about?* And *What are they doing?* For each sentence story, students might ask themselves these questions, and notice and fix sentences that don't fully answer these questions.

Sneaky Goal: Studying their writing at the sentence level can help students to power their writing by considering whether they have used the strongest nouns and verbs possible.

So, there you have it. A handful of grammar lessons that don't take long and can even lead to more elaborated, more thoughtful writing. These lessons can be adapted for small group lessons, one-to-one conferences, or perhaps even as minilessons if a majority of the class shows a need for them. Certainly, some grammar instruction can and should happen outside of writing workshop time. It helps if students understand concepts such as parts of speech, verb tense, and punctuation before coming to these lessons in the midst of their writing.