

Practical Grammar Applications: Finding the Missing Link

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Abstract: Gilson explains her students' journey from worksheets and grammar exercises to daily oral language sentences and to the ultimate goal of dissecting their own writing. Her simple suggestions of how to engage more students with a tactile strategy and by incorporating color-coded highlighting have helped visual learners "see" what elements make up their writing.

As English teachers, we chose our profession for a plethora of reasons. Some might have followed their love of literature. Maybe others thrived on teaching writing. I would guess that few English teachers chose their vocation due to the excitement experienced in their own high school grammar lessons. As a new teacher, I knew how to teach grammar only the way that I learned it: stand-alone lessons extracted from a textbook or workbook. From what I could tell from my students' worksheets and quizzes, they were learning it. Thus thinking that my students could apply that knowledge to their writing, I had high expectations for their first assignment. This was my first lesson in transfer, or rather its absence. I continued to see run-on sentences, comma splices, pronoun-antecedent agreement problems, and short, choppy sentences. I needed to find a way to show my students the connection between grammar and writing. As many English teachers have discovered, strong writers are typically strong readers. My students are typically neither. Currently, I teach in a rural district located east of Green Bay, which educates just fewer than 2000 students, with only approximately 640 enrolled in grades 9-12. Furthermore, with the majority of my students being in the lower half of their class, their English skills are generally average to below average. Their motivation is minimal, and they want to see the purpose behind learning grammar. My objective is for them to learn the practical applications of grammar as they pertain to writing.

For years I trudged on, thinking that one day my students would make the connection between the worksheets that made them identify the parts of speech and their own writing. My ultimate goal was, and still is, for my students to write well, not just to regurgitate definitions and labels. Being a good writer involves many skills including a strong understanding of conventions. Some may question why grammar is even taught, but according to Writing Standard 2.E of the Common Core State Standards (2010), we must make sure our students can produce a clean piece of writing that utilizes the correct conventions as they “Establish and maintain a formal style” (p. 42). Grammar is one of the pathways to writing instruction. Much of the terminology is foreign to students, so in order to improve writing, students need to know the terms. I can’t teach how to improve sentence structure by varying sentence types if the students do not know the types of clauses. Clauses are built from nouns and verbs which leads to understanding the parts of a sentence. The end result is identifying and punctuating sentences correctly.

When I explain writing to my freshmen, I compare it to making soup. Those students who have seen *Charlie & the Chocolate Factory* know that Charlie’s family makes soup with only water and cabbage because that’s all they can afford. If students use nouns and verbs to form their writing (“soup”) and nothing else, their “soup” is rather bland. The spices that make their entree more appealing are the adjectives, adverbs, and phrases. Thus, the argument for grammar instruction is made.

I seemed to make some type of breakthrough when I incorporated a type of daily oral language into my lessons. For example, we work collaboratively to correct sentences projected onto the Smartboard, which contributes to understanding the importance of proofreading and applying the rules. But just as I was making gains with the learning element, I was still failing to include everyone. As usual, the same students continuously answered my grammar questions, so I needed to find a way to engage the majority, if not all, of my class in the lessons.

It was at this time that I integrated a tactile strategy that attracted students to grammar for the first time. By tossing around a soft rubber ball and explaining a few rules, I made more progress. The rules include:

- When given the ball, the student must make a correction/identification.
- If students contribute a correction that has already been made, a second correction/identification must be made before passing the ball to the next person.
- The ball must be tossed to a student who has NOT contributed to the sentence yet. If it is tossed to a student who has already contributed, a second correction/identification must be made before passing the ball.
- When tossing the ball, the recipient does not have to WANT the ball. The person in possession can toss it to anyone who has not already contributed.

The purpose of each of the rules is to ensure that students are paying attention and to add an element of fun to a typically boring subject. I was making progress because, for the first time, some of my students were actually asking to have the ball thrown to them. Now instead of having two or three students engaged in the lesson, I had 10-15 students actively engaged. The tactile element became a selling point for many with attention issues. As educators, we need to become more aware of the needs of our visual and tactile learners, and since I changed my method for grammar lessons, I was seeing more learning.

In conjunction with tossing the ball, I created formulas. Some grammatical definitions can be long and confusing, so I wanted to simplify the concepts. After listening to myself ask the same questions to students asking for help, I created formulas to simplify the long, tedious definitions that seemed to confuse many. These formulas are as simple as:

- Prep phrase = prep + noun
- Inf phrase = “to” + verb

- $I = S + V$ (Independent Clause = Subject + Verb)
- $D = SC + S + V$ (Dependent Clause = Subordinating Conjunction + Subject + Verb)
- $I = S$ (Independent Clause = Simple Sentence)
- $I + , C + I = CP$ (Independent Clause + Conjunction + Independent Clause = Compound Sentence)
- $I + D = CX$ (Independent Clause + Dependent Clause = Complex Sentence)
- $D, + I = CX$ (Dependent Clause + Independent Clause = Compound Complex Sentence)

Along with the formulas, I did some color-coding. By displaying a list of subordinating conjunctions on pink paper and using yellow paper for the coordinating and correlative conjunctions, now my students had a visual of the parts. At the time, my school did not have a grammar textbook, so I put these handouts together forming a Survival Kit. This is a resource that I allow students to use on their tests and quizzes. In addition to the classroom color-coded visuals, I had my students color code their lists in their Survival Kit.

As years came and went, I still was not convinced that true learning was taking place. When I assigned writing, I was frustrated to see that many students had not made the connection between grammar and their writing. I was not sure what the missing link was, but I knew that I was getting closer. At this point, my students had their own copy of the sentences, and as a class we did the following:

1. Find the corrections.
2. Identify the prepositional & infinitive phrases, each one having its unique label.

3. Find the subordinating conjunction that begins the dependent clause; highlight the dependent clause in pink. (D = SC + S + V)
4. Find the independent clause and highlight it in blue.
5. Identify the sentence formula.

Still, something needed to be adapted. The formulas were keeping grammar simple, but students couldn't make the connections as easily as I'd hoped. After all, just because students were being obedient and doing exactly what I did on the Smartboard didn't mean that learning was taking place. With more emphasis on learning styles, my awareness of the different learners sparked an idea.

Two years ago, I changed my method by requiring students to have yellow, pink, and blue highlighters for class. That was the missing link! Now students could literally *see* the different parts by their colors and understand the structure of their writing. For the first time, they could see the parts of a sentence in terms of clauses and phrases. For example:

When astronomer Galileo observed sunspots (in 1610), church leaders were angry that he'd suggest the sun wasn't perfect. D, + I + D = CX

The day was filled with mixed emotions, but everyone seemed to have a good time. I +, C + I = CP

Now students could see the simplified formula in color. The visual learners were making better connections because each sentence gave them another example of where independent clauses were used. In addition, the placement of coordinating conjunctions and dependent clauses was easily seen in their corresponding colors. When the process finally gets put together, the students begin with a sentence that needs correcting and end with a corrected sentence that is completely colored.

Not only did the sentence formulas provide a simplified understanding of sentence structure, but I also realized that my job became much easier when grading. I found myself sitting with a yellow highlighter, a pink highlighter, and a pencil, now only needing to simply highlight a coordinating conjunction yellow and write I + , C + I in the margin instead of an explanation of a compound sentence. This method also gave me a basis to explain how to change the structure of their writing. It opened the discussion to varying sentence beginnings because now I could take a pink part (dependent clause) and place it in front of the blue part (independent clause). I also discovered that once students could find dependent clauses, my teaching of adverb, adjective, and noun clauses became painless. Again, our discussion of dangling modifiers seems to make more sense since my students understood the parts of their writing better.

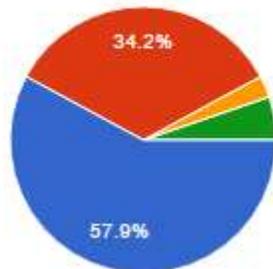
Like most instruction, it takes time to see the transfer of knowledge, but I have noticed a few added benefits of teaching grammar in this method.

- This method can be used at any level. My freshmen, juniors, and seniors are all exposed to the same instruction. By starting with this type of instruction that pulls the elements of writing apart into smaller sections of phrases and clauses, students gain a better understanding of the parts of their writing. While I work on mastering the phrases and the difference between dependent and independent clauses with freshmen, the juniors and seniors learn the difference and placement of noun, adjective, and adverb clauses.
- The formulas provide simplified definitions for students to both understand and use.

- Simple entrance and exit tickets can serve dual purposes. Not only can I check for understanding of the content we are covering, but I can also expect the answer to be in the form of a complex sentence that begins with a dependent clause. This is where my learning took place. It wasn't until I did this that I realized the students could demonstrate their understanding in a specific application.

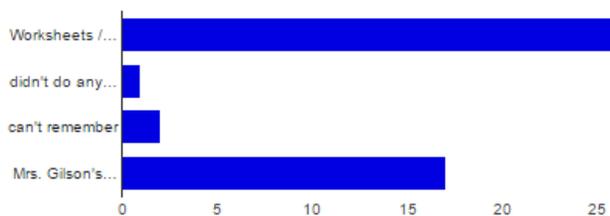
This year, every senior in my class has been in my junior class and has learned grammar from me using this method. My juniors are all completely new to this format, as are my freshmen. When I surveyed all of my students anonymously this year, their feedback included:

Do you think the color helped you understand the sentence formula?



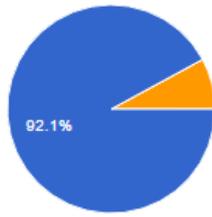
definitely	22	57.9%
yes	13	34.2%
No	1	2.6%
not sure	2	5.3%

How have you learned grammar in all your years of school?



Worksheets / grammar book exercises	26	68.4%
didn't do any or did very little	1	2.6%
can't remember	2	5.3%
Mrs. Gilson's weird way	17	44.7%

In your opinion, has Mrs. Gilson's method of teaching grammar helped or hurt your understanding of grammar?



Helped	35	92.1%
Hurt	0	0%
No effect	3	7.9%

In your opinion, HOW has Mrs. Gilson's method of teaching grammar helped or hurt your understanding of grammar?

It helps me pull apart sentences to see what's all in there and how we got there

I knew what I was looking for when the words were highlighted.

It has helped me a lot! Mrs. Gilson's method helped me understand grammar.

Highlighters made it easier to distinguish how sentences "work" or how to look for clauses in sentences. Also, the packet we received at the beginning of the year helped to find prepositions, gerunds, infinitives, etc.

It gave me creative/unique ways to remember formulas and other grammar rules.

It has helped me by making my own sentences and seeing how the whole sentence is broken down.

It helped because it helped me to understand sentence structure better and how to identify different parts of a sentence.

It helped me because it helped me understand what I was actually doing and it made a lot of sense, instead of just doing it because the teacher said so. This way is a lot more efficient.

It helped me understand where to put commas and make sentences more complex

I finally understand their and there. Haha just the way she explains things and goes over them I understand. She doesn't just throw a worksheet at you n watch you fail

It helps me understand the grammar by making it fun.

By her silly methods and different activities to help you learn the grammar.

She made it fun to learn, which helped me pay attention. Her class was the only year in all my years in high school I actually understood what I was doing with grammar.

Helped me color coat the independent and dependent clauses, even understand the differences a lot easier knowing they have color to them and easier to separate from each other. Also, the hints under the "I" or "D" cards helped me.

I like working with the class so that if you have a question you can ask right away instead of going home confused.

It helped me understand it better with the highlighters.

It helps understand the logic of several different aspects involved in mugshots.

More hands on, easier to understand

I can now determine the part of sentences easily now.

I think Mrs. Gilson's method helped me in tests remembering what colors to use for independent and dependent clauses.

Maybe a better illustration of this method's impact is student writing. At the start of the school year, I assess my students' abilities for a baseline evaluation and monitor their growth as the year goes on. Here are two pieces of writing from one student:

First Semester

In the Venn Diagram comparing *The Lion King* to *World on a Turtle's Back* and *Man to Send Rain Clouds*, there are many similarities. One similarity is that both pieces of literature are non fiction. *The Lion King* is a cartoon and the short stories are myths about how something is made. Another similarity is a tie to nature. For example, the three stories include animals or a connection to them as a part of life or the circle of life. All three stories also have a relation to an authority figure. *The Lion King* has Mufasa, *World on a Turtle's Back* has grandpa, and *Man to Send Rain Clouds* has the church. *The Lion King* and the Native American stories clearly have many similarities.

Second Semester

My attitude about reading has changed drastically because I finally realized that reading things that you like very much is more interesting than just reading whatever the teacher assigns. The first observation that I have made about my reading habits are I have to be reading with things going on around me because then I focus more on what the book is about. The second observation that I have made about my reading habits are that I will only read when I am super super bored.

The obvious improvement is sentence structure. During the first semester, this student wrote short, choppy sentences, and by the second semester, his writing produced more complex sentences.

This year I discovered another activity that makes this entire process more effective. As Gallagher mentioned in his presentation at the WCTE convention in October 2016, we need to give our students *more* opportunities to read and write, remembering that we do not need to evaluate everything they write. After that convention, I went back to my classroom and tried something that I call “Quick Write.” This activity consists of students either watching a short video or listening to a short reading. The students then take two to three minutes to respond to the video/reading in writing. This is where the grammar lesson gets inserted. After finding the shortest sentence in their writing, students need to dissect it. They follow the same procedure that we use for a daily oral language, applying their knowledge to their writing. When I started doing this, the students gave me similar feedback. They told me that they understand the concepts of clauses and phrases much better by using their own writing. Not only was there a greater understanding, but they also agreed that using their writing was more challenging than using the sentences that I provide to the class. In addition, one of the three ingredients in Bernabei’s *Grammar Keepers* (2015) is daily journal writing. I also use journals in class as well as quick writes. By having students write more often, we increase their exposure and give them opportunities for grammatical application. Crovitz and Devereaux (2017) also support the applied context of grammar in student writing in *Grammar to Get Things Done*. As a result, I try to find a good balance between using this method with the prepared sentences and having students dissect their own writing. I will continue to improve upon this method, but I am convinced that the use of simplified formulas and colors help all students understand the parts of sentences as well as improve their writing.

Check out my student website that houses each of the documents linked in this article as well as includes my contact information. I would love to hear from you!

References

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