

Review: *Grammar to Get Things Done: A Practical Guide for Teachers Anchored in Real-World Usage* by Darren Crovitz and Michelle D Devereaux (Routledge, 2017. 232 pp.)

Adam Sprague, Assistant Professor and Student Success Coordinator,
Bellin College, adam.sprague@bellincollege.edu

Kennesaw State University colleagues Darren Crovitz, author of *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, and Michelle D. Devereaux, author of *Teaching about Dialect Variations and Language in Secondary English Classrooms: Power, Prestige, and Prejudice*, have collaborated to offer readers a new lens to view grammar instruction. Their new book, *Grammar to Get Things Done: A Practical Guide for Teachers Anchored in Real-World Usage*, aims primarily to convince secondary English teachers to move away from traditional grammar instruction and embrace a pedagogy grounded in how we, as humans, use language in real-world situations on a daily basis.

At first glance, this text may appear to be white noise lost in the shuffle alongside dozens of other books advocating for teachers to drop their worksheets and red pens in the trash bin and adopt a more modernized approach to grammar instruction. While Crovitz and Devereaux do spend a good deal of time and effort making it clear that they stand firmly with those who have argued for teachers to move away from decontextualized grammar instruction, this text differs from many of its predecessors in that the authors offer a specific alternative approach: teaching grammar within the applied contexts of everyday language use.

This approach is not without a well-argued rationale. The first half of the book defines key terms related to grammar and grammar instruction before exploring the differences between prescriptive and descriptive grammar. Although these definitions and discussions will fail to contribute a wealth of new knowledge to the seasoned linguist or grammarian, the authors do provide a sufficient summary and explanation of the

varying viewpoints for those new to the topic or just planning their first grammar-intensive course.

The authors also supply a sociocultural analysis of grammar, that is, front row seats to a debate focused on discussing just whose language standard English is and how our valuing and devaluing of certain dialects impacts those around us. In good humor, the authors label prescriptivists as “back-to-basics language scolds and ‘grammar nazis’” (p. 8). However, they do avoid showing bias as they state that such an approach to grammar instruction does provide “practical and professional benefit to students” (p. 8). Still, the critiques of prescriptive approaches come often. For example, the authors strongly critique teachers who ask their students to do traditional, repetitive grammar drills. One method the authors find particularly problematic is when teachers “ask students to memorize [a grammar rule], identify [a grammar rule] in ten unrelated sentences, and then rewrite another set of sentences using [the studied grammar rule] correctly” (p. 10). The problem is that while “teachers need a firm grasp of grammar and usage to help their students become better writers and language users” (p. 10), they question how this knowledge will help students see how grammar matters in their lives.

Also, the authors detail how viewing standard English as the only correct means of speech provides power to some while silencing and demeaning those who fall into a demographic that does not regularly use standard English. Here we see one of the authors’ main claims come to light: by valuing only standard English, we are negatively impacting our students (and many in society) emotionally and academically by “othering” them as incorrect. This section of the text is powerfully written and may be particularly useful for readers without strong backgrounds in linguistics and rhetoric and composition or for those unfamiliar with the connections between language and power presented by Paolo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Readers will enjoy how the authors continually pepper the section with ideas for teachers to bring discussions related to language-as-power into their own classrooms, a welcome change from other texts that, at times, rely too heavily upon theory rather than practice.

While the initial three chapters address the many rule-based grammars in use around us, the sociocultural aspects of these grammars, and the importance of understanding concepts related to language expectations among different contexts in order to teach grammar well, the strength of the text comes in Chapter 4. Here, the authors take on four specific grammatical concepts (sentence types, clauses, phrases, lexical categories, and punctuation) and provide 25 modules outlining how the concept works in our language, how speakers use the concept in the real world, and how to teach the concept via student-focused activities. Even though readers may be tempted to skip ahead to the sample units and modules, as they are excellently described and outlined in easy-to-understand language, the authors explicitly state that they do not mean for this section of the book to be used in isolation as a “straight-off-the-shelf workbook” (p. 11).

Still, Chapter 4 has to be considered the text’s largest achievement for its reliance on the practical. Readers leery of the theory-heavy onset of the book can rest assured that the primary emphasis of the text is classroom application. The sample integrated units and modules will undoubtedly help English teachers of all levels gain confidence in positioning their own grammar instruction in real-world experiences. In other words, Crovitz and Devereaux have created a text with various entry points for teachers and scholars of all levels. Some may find the brief history of grammar useful for their own teaching or research, while others may find the sample units most useful in helping them integrate this new style of teaching grammar into the units they already teach.

In short, this is a wonderful book on grammar instruction. It not only discusses the rationale behind their pedagogy, but it also provides examples of how to teach grammar in context. Readers will be happy to see that it is neither theory heavy nor an explicit “here is a curriculum” type book. Rather, the text will leave readers with skeletal base lessons, units, and a pedagogical rationale to use and modify.

Fear and Loathing in the English Classroom would likely make for a dreadfully boring movie, filmed in a classroom filled with fearful students, sentence diagramming worksheets, and subject-verb agreement drills. In some cases, the teachers may also loathe the unit--unsure of how to make the content both interesting and relevant to their students’ lives. Even the authors admit that “grammar is often viewed as a dry and

boring subject by teachers and students alike” (p. xv-xvi). There are no easy solutions to this problem, but moving away from teaching grammar in isolation may be one way to overcome this fear and loathing. In this text, Crovitz and Deveraux have articulately made the case that teachers should consider requiring students to analyze their own communication in class but do warn readers that “there are no magic wands with grammar instruction, no quick and easy solutions” (p. 11).

Still, it is interesting that in most English courses, teachers regularly encourage their students to discuss the politics of power and language and analyze their own voices as student writers. This text left me wondering why it is, then, that we largely avoid these topics when teaching grammar. Perhaps we need to stop avoiding these conversations in the grammar classroom, but one concern the authors do seem to overlook is the issue of how overwhelming and time consuming the process of approaching each student’s unique voice can be (not to mention the unique communicative events they regularly encounter, potential intended audiences they are exposed to, etc.) in large, writing-intensive courses. These concerns become even more paramount when working with multilingual, remedial, or basic writers. For as positive as this review has been, readers may struggle with transferring these strategies into their already time-crunched curriculums, as the authors point out that you will need to spend much time “[working] through these concepts yourself until you feel confident connecting language choices to specific situations and intentions” (p. 11). For the overworked and underpaid adjunct professor, for example, such a task may simply not fit into one’s calendar. In some ways, the book may leave readers feeling as though the ideas presented are a bit too idealistic despite their practical presentation. What readers will not deny, however, is the fact that the arguments presented in this text do lead us to question our own methods of grammar instruction.