

# The Fallacy of Naturalism and the Demise of Grammar Instruction:

*A Brief History, with Practical Suggestions*

*for Teachers of English*

by Robert D. Shepherd

Years ago, when I began my career as a teacher, the reigning textbook series in the United States was *Warriner's English Grammar*. No multi-level textbook series in American history had as long or as successful a run. For those of you too young to remember, a typical *Warriner's* text contained individual chapters with no-nonsense titles like these: .

- The Noun
- The Pronoun
- The Verb
- Adjectives and Adverbs
- Conjunctions, Prepositions, and Interjections
- Verbals
- The Sentence: Subjects, Predicates, and Complements
- Capitalization
- Punctuation
- Usage
- Spelling

Appended to each text — quite literally an afterthought — were a few meager chapters on writing — one on The Paragraph, one on The Composition, and one on The Outline (by which was meant formal sentence and topic outlines). A typical lesson in *Warriner's* contained definitions and examples followed by exercises that dealt almost entirely with identifying forms. A typical exercise direction read something like this:

Underline the gerunds in the following sentences and describe the function of each. Remember that gerunds can function as subjects, as

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Genesis of this essay: This work,  
which distills some of what I've  
learned over the years about  
grammar instruction, owes a  
great debt to the work of E.  
D. Hirsch, Jr., who has written  
extensively about some of the  
consequences of the fallacy  
of naturalism in American  
educational thought. The essay  
also owes a debt to Diane  
Ravitch, Emeritus Professor of  
Education at Teacher's College,  
Columbia University, who sent  
me an e-mail asking what  
teachers today could do about  
the teaching of grammar.

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direct objects, as indirect objects, as predicate nominatives, as object complements, or as appositives of any of these.

I remember spending an evening, thirty-five years ago, going through a tenth-grade *Warriner's* text and doing a count of exercise types. Of the 200+ grammar exercise sets in the text, only about 20, or 10 percent, dealt with grammatical errors. By errors, I mean such problems as faulty pronoun reference, lack of agreement between subject and verb, and dangling or misplaced modifiers. The rest of the exercise sets in that book — enough to keep students quite busy for a year — were about nothing more than identifying forms:

Copy the following sentences to your paper. Underline the subjects once and the predicates twice. Identify the major parts of each predicate using these labels: direct object (DO), indirect object (IO), active verb (AV), linking verb (LV), predicate nominative (PN), predicate adjective (PA), or objective complement (OC).


So, for the most part, *Warriner's* was made up of little more than exercises in syntactic taxonomy, though the series supposedly existed to teach kids how to avoid errors in their speech and writing. Given that fact, *Warriner's* probably met the fate it deserved. Today, *Warriner's*-style grammar handbooks have all but disappeared, and few schools now teach “traditional grammar” (i.e., “parsing”). But traditional grammar instruction did not disappear because the traditional grammar texts were awful. What happened to it? Why did it disappear from our classrooms? What is being done in its stead? The answers to those questions make for an interesting and instructive story — a minor chapter in American intellectual history, to be sure, but one that points toward a key cultural myth that has had an enormous and deleterious effect on our educational system.





The traditional grammar textbook disappeared because of the emergence of a new orthodoxy regarding child language acquisition. The orthodox belief promulgated in most education schools today is that grammatical ability is not something that has to be taught. A child's grammar, or so many teacher trainers have come to believe, is something that develops naturally, without intervention by teachers. Indeed, it develops in spite of such intervention. This idea appeals to those who subscribe to a view of child development that E.D. Hirsch, the author of *Cultural Literacy*, refers to as **naturalism** — the idea that a child's intellectual development is a natural process, like physical growth, that occurs best in a nurturing environment characterized by minimal artificial restraints. Naturalism in this sense runs deep in American culture and is a borrowing from French and English Romanticism. It is true, of course, that there are aspects of intellectual functioning that do unfold naturally and in the absence of instruction. It is now known, for example, that the parts of the prefrontal cortex involved in planning and impulse control do not start developing until we are in our mid-teens and are not fully developed until we are in our mid-twenties. But there are some skills and abilities that people will not develop without intervention, and there are some that are dependent on developmental factors that can nonetheless be enhanced via intervention.

Where did the education theorists get the idea that a child's grammar develops naturally, with little or no outside intervention? They got it by listening at the keyholes of linguists. The great tradition in American linguistics in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was a descriptive one, based upon the study of American Indian languages. In the 1920s and 1930s, two great synthesizers of the descriptive linguistics tradition, Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield, both wrote influential books that emphasized the primacy of speech over writing and the importance of a descriptive as opposed to a prescriptive approach to language study. Some pedagogues concluded, based on the work of Sapir and Bloomfield, that a descriptive as opposed to a prescriptive approach was appropriate in classrooms as well, and this notion was the beginning of the end for traditional grammar instruction. It was not until the second half of the



twentieth century, however, that the anti-grammar camp came into possession of the big guns that would blow grammar out of the classroom. Beginning with the publication of *Syntactic Structures* in 1957 and continuing to the present day, Noam Chomsky of MIT led what can only be described as a revolution in linguistics, one consequence of which was the widespread belief that language acquisition is largely an autonomic process dependent upon unconscious interactions between an innate, internal language acquisition device and the raw material of the child's linguistic environment. It was this idea that led education professors, the National Council of Teachers of English, and editors in the major textbook houses to move decisively against traditional grammar instruction.

Chomsky's theory has gone through many reformulations over the years. These have been called, in turn, transformational-generative grammar, the standard theory, the revised standard theory, government and binding theory, and, most recently, the minimalist program. Today, thanks largely to the work of Chomsky and of the brilliant but less-well-known Ray Jackendoff (the great expositor of the so-called X-bar theory of syntax), linguistics stands in the same relation to the traditional grammar of *Warriner's* as contemporary quantum mechanics and relativity theory hold to the mechanics and optics of Aristotle. That is, a commonsense but woefully inadequate "folk" theory has been replaced by a new group of scientific theories with enormous sophistication and explanatory power.<sup>1</sup>

Like many great thinkers, Chomsky started with a simple question, asking himself how it is possible that most children gain a reasonable degree of mastery over something as complicated as a spoken language. With almost no direct instruction, almost every child learns, within a few years' time, enough of his or her language to be able to communicate with ease most of what he or she wishes to communicate, and this learning seems not to be correlated with the child's general intelligence. If one looks scientifically at what a child knows of his or her language at the age of, say, six or seven, it turns out that that knowledge is extraordinarily complex. Furthermore, almost all of what the child knows has not been directly taught. For example, long before going to school and without

being taught what direct objects and objects of prepositions are, an English-speaking child understands that the first two sentences, below, “sound right” and that the second two sentences do not.

Jose threw the football.

The football landed in the neighbor’s yard.

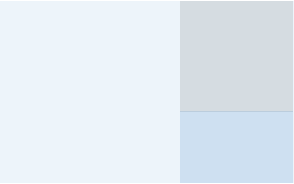
\* The football threw Jose.

\* Landed the football the yard neighbor’s in.

In other words, on some level, the English-speaking child “knows” that objects follow (and do not precede) the verbs and prepositions that govern them, even though he or she has no clue what objects, verbs, and prepositions are. The Japanese child, in contrast, “knows” just as well that in Japanese objects precede (and do not follow) the verbs and prepositions that govern them. So, to a Japanese child, the word order of the first two sentences above would sound, in a Japanese sentence, quite strange, while the word order of the second two sentences would be unexceptional. And, indeed, children do not learn such rules by being taught them, any more than a whale learns to echolocate by attending echolocation classes.



Chomsky’s central insight was that in order for a child to be able to learn a spoken language with such rapidity and thoroughness, that child must be born with large portions of the universal grammar of language already hardwired into his or her head. So, for example, the neural mechanisms that provide for classification of items from the stream of speech into verbs and prepositions and objects, and those mechanisms that allow verbs and prepositions to govern their objects, are inborn. They are part of the equipment with which human children come into the world. Then, when a child hears a particular language, English or



Japanese, for example, certain parameters of the inborn language machine, such as the position of objects with respect to their governors, are set by a completely unconscious, autonomic process that is itself part of the innate neural machinery for language learning.

This kind of reasoning was music to the ears of education theorists. It confirmed what they already thought they knew — that child development occurs naturally in the absence of specific intervention. Just stand out of the way, expose kids to lots and lots of interesting language, and *voilà*, they will learn grammar. This theory of language learning we might call a variety of educational naturalism.

So, education professors began teaching their students that grammar textbooks contained nothing but irrelevant skill and drill, that the internal language-learning mechanism was autonomic, that “teaching grammar” made as much sense as teaching breathing, that what one should do was expose kids to language and let their grammar develop naturally.

There’s a problem with that line of reasoning, however. As Alexander Pope famously said, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and the education theorists’ bit of knowledge of linguistics turned out to be very dangerous indeed. Chomsky was right about language acquisition, but the theory developed in Chomsky’s name by some education pundits is wrong in ways that turn out to be crucial. Let’s examine why this is so.

Babies are born with thickets of neural connections, many of which are weeded out over time. Some neural connections are lost through lack of use. Others are weeded out after they have served their purpose — that is, when they became no longer necessary. The innate, or inborn, language-learning device is such a thicket of neural connections. Beginning at about the age of nine or ten and continuing until kids are around the age of fourteen, the internal mechanisms for intuiting syntactic, phonological, and morphological structures start breaking down. So, for example, if a small child is exposed to the liquid / sound in Russian, he or she will grow up being able to produce that sound, even if he or she does not learn Russian until much later in life.<sup>2</sup> However, if a child

is not exposed to that sound, then he or she will never be able to produce it as an adult. The machinery for hearing and producing that sound, that distinctive feature of a possible language, is weeded out. There is a window of opportunity for learning linguistic structures — for setting the parameters of the internal grammar. After that window is closed, it cannot be reopened.<sup>3</sup>


Here's the problem: if a child has "learned" a nonstandard version of his or her grammar, it is difficult or impossible for that child, past the age of ten or so, to learn a different, standard version using only the innate language-learning machinery, for that machinery has to a large extent stopped working by that time. (That's why, by the way, it is much harder for an adult to learn a new language than it is for a child to do so and why we should begin teaching students a foreign language in elementary school, not when they



are in their teens. We have it precisely backward!) So, for example, if a child has learned to use the objective case for compound subjects in English ("Jose and me played some video games after school"), the child will have difficulty, after a certain age, unlearning what he or she intuitively "knows," what has become part of the working grammatical machinery in the his or her head.

So, for good or ill, the education theorists ousted traditional grammar based upon a misunderstanding of contemporary linguistic science, and then they compounded their error by not putting anything in its place to address the problem that traditional grammar instruction was attempting (however badly) to address — the problem of how to reduce the number of errors in student speech and writing from the age of nine through young adulthood.

In an ideal world, the linguists who were developing the new, modern, scientific grammars would have applied their insights to the problem of instruction, but such, sadly, was not the case. These days, academics in the



humanities talk mostly to other academics in the humanities. Philosophers write for other philosophers. Critics write for other critics. Linguists write for other linguists. They generally have little concern for (or interest in) practical, everyday applications of their work. And, the work of contemporary linguists is generally not accessible to teachers or education professors who are unwilling or unable to devote the enormous time and energy required to master relevant portions of the subject. There have been some exceptions. Francis Christensen did some superb work in the 1960s to develop pedagogical applications of early transformational grammar. This work gave us sentence combining and extension exercises, which are quite valuable for increasing students' syntactic repertoires. The main problem, however, remains unaddressed: **how, in light of modern linguistics, can we best teach students to correct the nonstandard elements in the grammars that they have already internalized?**

A few sensitive and compassionate individuals might argue that there simply is no such thing as nonstandard grammar. Every grammar of every dialect is, after all, equally complex. The grammar of Black American English (BAE), for example, is more sophisticated in some ways than is the grammar of Standard American English (SAE). To cite but one example, consider the following statements:

He is driving me crazy with all this talk about linguistics.

He be driving me crazy with all this talk about linguistics.

Both sentences are perfectly grammatical within the structure of BAE. The first form is grammatical in both BAE and SAE. In both dialects, the verb *is driving* is the present progressive form and indicates ongoing and present action. The BAE verb *be driving* is also a present progressive form, but it has been modified in order to express what linguists call the **habitual aspect**. It means, basically, “He is driving me crazy, and he does this all the time. He’s been doing it in the past, he’s doing it now, and it’s likely that he will continue to do so in the future.”

Yes, it's true that every dialect and every language is equally complex and equally worthy as a vehicle of communication. However, it is also true that it is valuable, as a practical manner, to learn so-called "standard" grammatical forms. For good or ill, a speaker who routinely uses the BAE habitual aspect is likely, in our culture, to find his or her own speech an impediment to landing high-status, well-paying jobs. That's why successful speakers of nonstandard dialects are generally those who have learned how to **style shift**—those who have become fluent both in the first dialect and in the standard one.

So, returning to the problem at hand, how can we, in light of current linguistic knowledge, address the problem of teaching students how to avoid errors in grammar and usage (or, for that matter, the problem of how to style shift when it is useful to do so)? This remains very much an open question. The field of grammatical pedagogy is still awaiting its Henry Ford—its master of praxis, its practical innovator, who will take the theoretical apparatus of contemporary linguistics and apply it to pedagogical problems like how to increase the syntactic repertoires of children and how to reduce the number of errors in their speech and writing.

A good beginning, of course, would be for linguists to start working with their colleagues in departments of education. We need the linguists and the professors of methods in English to collaborate to create the apparatus for a new grammatical pedagogy. It will be the rare, brave linguist who enters into such a collaboration, but he or she will find the exercise stimulating intellectually and will doubtless leave a more impressive legacy than will be left by colleagues who devote their careers entirely to such matters as solving the remaining technical problems in the theory of barriers to case assignment in Latvian.

For their part, education professors and textbook writers need to stop teaching the half

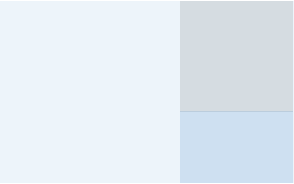


truth that grammar develops naturally through simple exposure to language. They need to recognize that the situation is much more complicated than that — that the internal language-learning mechanism is imperfect — that it breaks down over time.<sup>4</sup> This fact has a couple of major consequences for the teaching of language: First, teachers have to recognize that they have a window of opportunity in which to expose students to syntactically rich language, so it is imperative that such language be put before students early and often. Second, because the unconscious, internal language-learning mechanism breaks down in many respects by the age of nine or ten, teachers must recognize that older students will not learn, simply by reading and writing a lot, to remediate the grammatical errors that they have incorporated into their personal grammars in their early years. For older students, language learning is not autonomic, and for this reason, for those students, grammar, usage, and mechanics have to be explicitly taught. Of course, that teaching would do well to build upon the unconscious grammatical intuitions that students have already internalized.<sup>5</sup>

What can teachers do while waiting for the Henry Ford of linguistics to emerge? I, for one, do not envy teachers' plight. Because of the half-cooked ideas of some education theorists, teachers are often handed grammar-free curricula and textbooks that contain nothing in the way of systematic grammar instruction. (Or, worse yet, they are handed so-called "integrated language arts texts" in which traditional grammar exercises are scattered about randomly, without sequence, rhyme, or reason. The exercises still instantiate the folk theory of grammar, and they are presented in no pedagogically defensible order. In other words, they reflect no overall pedagogical design.) So, conscientious teachers must do a lot of cooking of their own.

If you are a teacher, if you are in the trenches, if you face in your classrooms, every day, students whose syntax rarely exceeds the





complexity of that used to be found in the old “look-say method” Dick and Jane readers, students for whom “Me and Jose love playing video games” is perfectly grammatical, students who sprinkle commas through their writing as though they were salt and for whom commas and end punctuation are interchangeable, what can you do, now, to improve your teaching of grammar, usage, and mechanics?

Unfortunately, contemporary textbooks will be of little help. As I mentioned earlier, the traditional grammar handbooks have all but disappeared, and at any rate, most of those were practically useless anyway because they dealt primarily with taxonomy. In contemporary textbooks, especially those of the integrated language arts variety, grammar instruction is a random, hit-and-miss, willy nilly affair. Typically, in these texts, a few activities employing traditional terminology are scattered, randomly, in exercises appearing at the ends of literary selections. These exercises are not, typically, presented in a systematic, incremental matter, and the learning that results from having students do them is minimal. If you are a teacher of English, there are, however, some things that you can do while waiting for that Henry Ford of modern scientific grammar instruction to emerge. Here are some suggestions:

First, recognize that while traditional grammar is, indeed, little more than a prescientific, folk model of the language, it nonetheless, like other bits of folk wisdom, has its place, and that place is in parts of the elementary and secondary school English curriculum. It’s extremely useful to teach students the basic parts of speech and the basic parts of sentences so that you and your students can have a vocabulary with which to talk about rules of and errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics. Begin with the basic parts of speech: nouns, verbs, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, interjections, infinitives, gerunds, and participles. Then teach your students about subjects and predicates, phrases, and clauses. There’s no need to overdo this. Very few people (editors and linguists perhaps) need to be able to identify nominative absolutes and particles and so-called expletive pronouns. But a basic vocabulary for describing sentence parts is quite useful for discussing with students matters of mechanics and style,

and, of course, a basic familiarity with the terms used to describe language is part of cultural literacy—part of what every educated adult should know. Of course, language is fascinating as a subject of study in and of itself, and that reason, alone, is enough to justify doing some traditional grammar with students.

If you do not yourself have a thorough command of traditional grammatical terminology, and this is quite possible if you went to school anytime after, say, the 1950s, then take the time to make up the deficiency. You owe this to yourself and to your students. The standard reference work for traditional English grammar is *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, by Randolph Quirk *et al.*, published by Longman. Of continuing usefulness are the works of that great twentieth-century scholar of English grammar Otto Jespersen, including his *Essentials of English Grammar* and *The Growth and Structure of the English Language*. If you are less ambitious, you can find an older grammar handbook lying around most middle schools and high schools, or you can order a used one, *Warriner's Complete Course*, say, from an online bookstore.



Once you have yourself attained a basic command of traditional grammar, try in your classes activities of the kinds outlined below. These activities will be enough to get you started on the road to developing your own practical grammatical pedagogy.

1. [Teach students to combine and expand kernel sentences.](#) Begin by teaching your students the basic kernel sentence forms. Here they are:

Noun + Verb: Yolanda dances.

Noun + Verb + Direct Object: Yolanda loves basketball.

Noun + Linking Verb + Predicate Adjective: Yolanda seems happy.

Noun + Linking Verb + Predicate Noun: Yolanda is a trooper.

Noun + Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object: Yolanda sent Jose a book.

Noun + Verb + Direct Object + Objective Complement: The class elected Yolanda president.

Then teach your students how to combine sentences: *Yolanda loves basketball, and she also dances*. Teach your students to add parts such as adjectives and adverbs, prepositional and participial phrases, appositives, and subordinate clauses: *Yolanda dances beautifully*. *Yolanda dances in the park*. *Yolanda dances three times a week*. *Yolanda, my friend, seems happy*. *The class elected Yolanda, who just came here from Paraguay, president*. Teach them how to compound parts: *Yolanda dances and sings*. Teach them how to replace parts with clauses or with verbal phrases: *Yolanda loves Salsa dancing*. *Yolanda loves when you do that*. Teach them how to combine simple sentences to make compound, complex, and compound-complex ones: *Yolanda loves basketball, but when she really wants a workout, she dances*. In short, use sentence combining and expansion exercises to increase your students' syntactic repertoires.<sup>6</sup>

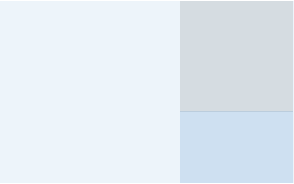
2. Give your students exercises in which they vary sentence openings. Put sentences on the board or on handouts and have your students experiment with different ways of saying them. Have your students experiment with beginning the sentences with different parts. Consider this sentence:

Beethoven tried for years to hide his increasing deafness by avoiding people and not engaging in direct conversation.

This can become

For years, Beethoven tried to hide his increasing deafness by avoiding people and by not engaging in direct conversation. (beginning with a prepositional phrase)

or



Staying away from people and avoiding conversation helped Beethoven to hide his increasing deafness. (beginning with gerund phrases)

or

To hide his increasing deafness, Beethoven avoided people and tried not to engage in direct conversation. (beginning with an infinitive phrase)

or

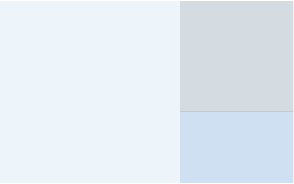
Because he was becoming increasingly deaf and did not want to reveal the fact, Beethoven avoided people and conversation. (beginning with a subordinate clause with a compound predicate)

or

Mortified by the prospect of revealing his increasing deafness, Beethoven avoided people and conversation. (beginning with a participial phrase)

and so on.

You can, of course, do this kind of activity without using grammatical terminology at all. Simply have your students rewrite each sentence, starting it in different ways. Your students will learn from the activity two truths about writing. First, they will learn that a writer always has lots of choices of expression. Second, they will learn that varying sentence beginnings and structure can make writing a lot more graceful and interesting. This activity carries the added bonus that it will give your students practice in extending the range of syntactic forms that they use. In other words, this activity will help to build your students' syntactic repertoires and will help them to avoid the kind of writing that Charlie Brown used to do for his book reports ("I read a good book. It was called *Tom Sawyer*. It was by Mark Twain. It was about Tom Sawyer. It was a fine book. The end.")



3. **Have students model corrections of common errors.** Give your students a sentence that contains an error of a particular kind. Model correcting the error. Then give students additional sentences containing the error, and have them make corrections of the same kind. Again, you can do this activity without using grammatical terminology at all, or, if you need some terminology, you can keep it to a minimum. Here are a couple of examples:

**Incorrect:** Hanging from the ceiling of the cave, we saw some bats

**Correct:** We saw some bats hanging from the ceiling of the cave.

Now, correct these sentences in the same way:

1. Swinging from branch to branch, we videotaped some monkeys.
2. Nibbling at some crackers in the cupboard, we found some mice.

**Incorrect:** We don't hardly have time to sleep.

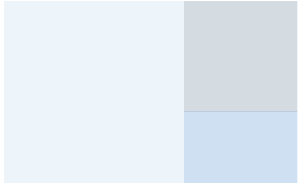
**Correct:** We hardly have time to sleep.

Now, correct these sentences in the same way:

1. Jim and I don't scarcely have any money left.
2. Chandra and I don't barely have enough credits to graduate.

When doing this kind of activity with your students, be very careful to make sure that the sentences to be corrected model the incorrect sentence precisely and that they require precisely the same sort of correction. Modeling corrections is a great activity for giving students practice correcting sentence fragments, run-on sentences, dangling modifiers, double negatives, passive constructions, and other common problems.

4. **Demonstrate sentence structures with tree diagrams.** Use tree diagrams of the kinds found in early transformational grammar texts to show students how the parts of sentences are related to one another. The diagrams make the relationships between sentence parts very clear indeed. Have students build trees from other trees by switching and combining and replacing parts.



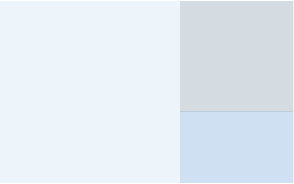
Sentence			
Noun Phrase		Verb Phrase	
Adj	Noun	V	Noun
Young	Wallace	sings	soprano. <sup>7</sup>

5. Have students correct errors orally. Write on the chalkboard a sentence containing an error: Jose and me love video games. Next chose a student to correct the error. Then have students recite corrections of errors aloud, in unison, several times, with emphasis on the correct form: Jose and I love video games.

6. Have students memorize passages to build their active syntactic repertoires. In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, schoolchildren did a lot of memorization of passages. Far from being the awful rote activity that some people think it is, such memorization can be, well, memorable. At the age of 93, the grandmother of the author of this paper would proudly recite for you the passage from Longfellow’s Hiawatha that she had learned when she was seven: “By the shores of Gitchee Gumee./By the shining Big-Sea-Water,/ Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,” and so on.

Kids who memorize passages from poetry and stories and plays typically show justifiable pride in their accomplishment, and over time they learn something of how literature that is truly possessed, in that way, enriches the life of the mind. But there’s another great gain to be had from memorization: When a student memorizes a passage that contains a syntactic form that is not already part of that child’s active syntactic repertoire, then that form becomes part of the repertoire that is readily available for the child’s own use. The automatic machinery for learning syntactic forms goes to work on the snippet of language that the child has memorized, incorporating the structure of that snippet into





the unconscious, internal model of the language. Thus contemporary linguistic science validates the discarded nineteenth-century pedagogical practice.

So, search the poems and stories and plays that your students are reading for delightful passages that are syntactically interesting, and have the students memorize them.

As I was coming up the stair,  
I saw a man who wasn't there.

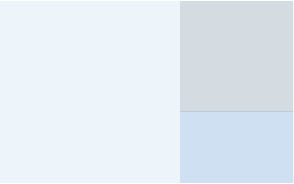
The student who has memorized that little bit from the famous poem by Hugh Mearns will have unconsciously gained some easy familiarity with quite a complex syntactic construction, in this case a sentence that is doubly complex, containing as it does an introductory adverbial subordinate clause and a closing adjectival relative clause.

#### 7. Have students “translate” to and from slang and informal language.

Teach your students about register — about how the language that one uses with intimates or friends differs from the language one uses in formal situations. (An excellent treatment of register can be found in Martin Joos’s classic little book *The Five Clocks*, which deserves to be on every English teacher’s bookshelf.) Have students do translations back and forth between formal and informal statements.

Neither a borrower nor a lender be.  
Don't borrow money or lend it out.  
Keep your hands in your own pockets, dude.  
Don' axe me fo' no dough, an' I won't be axin' u.

Explain that so-called “bad” grammar is really grammar out of place, like snorkels and fins on a bride and groom. You might also explain that one of the glories of language is that it is so various and so infinitely creative. Shakespeare became what he is, the greatest writer in our language, by mastering not only the formal speech of the court and of fine literature but also the argot of thieves and murderers and gravediggers and sailors and carriers (the Elizabethan equivalents



of truck drivers). As Harold Bloom points out in his book *Genius*, Shakespeare used five times as many separate words as did the French playwright Racine. Shakespeare's language is so glorious because it has all the brawling richness and plenitude of language in real life.

8. **Use grammatical terminology in your writing instruction.** Teach your students the basic parts of speech and of sentences. Then, use these terms actively when you discuss writing. Suppose that your student produces this sentence:

The player walked off the field.

Say to the student, "Let's see if we can come up with a verb that's more interesting, that really tells how that player is feeling or what he is doing."

The player sprinted off the field.

The player hobbled off the field.

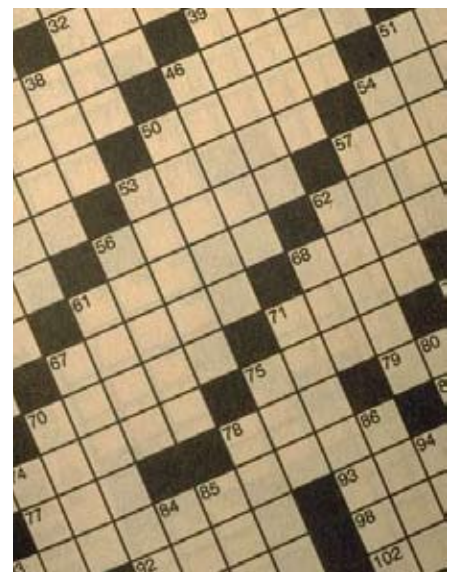
Suppose that your student writes these sentences:

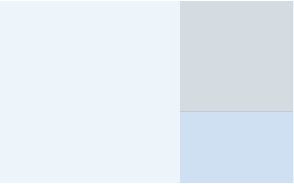
Jeannie tore up her paper. She started all over.

Say to the student, "Let's put those two sentences together. What's the subject of the first sentence? What's the subject of the second one? OK. Let's get rid of the second subject and put the two sentences together." Again, one of the great things about teaching students some basic grammatical terminology is that it gives you part of the vocabulary that you need to discuss writing.

Incidentally, in order to learn to write, kids need to write a lot—much more than you can ever correct or respond to in detail. So, have your kids pile up lots of writing in portfolios. Then, take the time periodically to choose one piece to go over and improve jointly. I'll be having a lot more to say about writing instruction in future essays, but this is the most important thing that I have to tell new teachers: Learning to write is like learning to play the piano. No one who can play the Moonlight Sonata got to that point by sitting at the keyboard for fifteen minutes every couple of weeks.

9. Begin exposing students to increasingly complex sentence structures as soon as they have mastered the basic phonetic code. Contemporary reading programs do children an enormous disservice by feeding them a steady diet of syntactically poor writing. Remember that kids have in their heads astonishing machines for the unconscious learning of syntactic structures. However, in order to learn those structures, students have to be in linguistic environments in which those structures occur with regularity. Once your students have mastered the phonetic code well enough that they can make out words and phrases with some fluency, begin immediately to expose them to texts, both oral and written, that have some syntactic complexity. Reading aloud to students from engaging but not overly simplified texts is an especially effective means for building syntactic competence. If all students ever hear or read are simple declaratives and imperatives, if they are never exposed to sophisticated compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences; to compound predicates; to phrases and clauses joined by correlative conjunctions; to gerundive, participial, and infinitive phrases, and so on, then their innate machinery for learning syntactic structures will not have material on which to operate. Remember, too, that there is a window of opportunity for the students' syntax-learning machinery. It needs to do its work before children are nine or ten years old. So, if you follow the practice of contemporary "scientifically controlled" readers of withholding complex syntactic forms from students until they are older, then you will doom them to lifetimes of linguistic infantilism. They will grow, most likely, into adults who cannot read college-level materials with fluency because something as simple as a subordinate clause will trip them up. If you went to an education school, you were probably taught that students' early reading should be made up of "accessible texts" with simple vocabulary and syntax. If you are a classroom teacher, you know that





the textbooks available today almost all instantiate this idea. But the idea is demonstrably wrong. It is a profound misunderstanding of what is actually known, scientifically, about how language acquisition occurs.

10. Keep informal counts of the kinds of errors that appear in your students' writing, and address the most frequent and egregious ones with direct instruction. Never simply go through a student's paper and mark every infelicity of expression and every error in grammar, usage, and mechanics. Students will be overwhelmed and discouraged and no learning will occur. Single out one or two problems in each paper for special attention, and give the student some exercises related to those. To find such exercises, you can turn to older grammar and composition textbooks, which can be purchased online from Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Textbook publishers would have you believe that new is necessarily better, but that is not, of course, necessarily true of textbooks in literature, grammar, and composition. Older textbook programs to which the author of this essay contributed substantially and that remain useful for grammar, usage, and mechanics instruction include *The Writer's Craft*, from McDougal, Littell; *Elements of Writing*, from Holt, Rinehart, and Winston; and, for challenged students, *English Workshop*, also from Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. However, be warned that the writing instruction in these texts leaves much to be desired (but that is another subject, for another essay, for another time).

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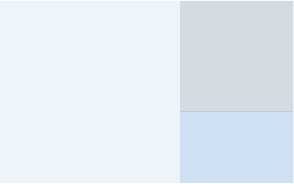
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## Notes

1. Those wishing to pursue these subjects on their own should see the following introductory texts: Andrew Radford's *Minimalist Syntax: Exploring the Structure of English* and Lilianne Haegeman's *Introduction to Government and Binding Theory*. More challenging and definitely more quirky, but a fascinating intellectual romp, is Juan Uriagereka's *Rhyme and Reason: An Introduction to Minimalist Syntax*. All are listed in the works cited at the end of this essay.
2. See Akmajian, Adrian. *Linguistics: an Introduction to Logic and Communication*. 5th ed. Cambridge: MIT P, 2001.
3. For this reason, foreign language instruction should begin in the elementary grades, not in middle school, as is typical in the United States. Furthermore, such instruction should be based upon extended immersion experiences. Kids will not learn a foreign language if their language instruction consists of a district-level instructor stopping by once a week for a few minutes to lead their class in a chorus of "De colores" or "Sur le pont d'Avignon."
4. And, as psychologist Daniel Willingham of the University of Virginia has pointed out in a private communication with the author, the internal language acquisition device (LAD) is suited to learning oral language, not written. Furthermore, the oral language produced



as a result of the learning done by the LAD is error-ridden to an extent unacceptable for most written work.

5. Teachers need, as well, to recognize that the innate language acquisition device that Chomsky and his followers have detailed in their work has nothing to do with learning to encode and decode written symbols. Reading, in the sense of decoding and encoding, is an artificial and unnatural process that has to be specifically taught. But that's a subject for another essay. For brilliant and persuasive treatments of this idea, readers are referred to four outstanding books — *Why Our Children Can't Read and What We Can Do about It: A Scientific Revolution in Reading* and *Early Reading Instruction: What Science Really Tells Us about How to Teach Reading*, both by Diane McGuinness; E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s *The Knowledge Deficit*; and Matthew Davis's *Reading Instruction: The Two Keys*.
6. See the works by Killgallon listed in the Works Cited.
7. This is actually quite an interesting example, grammatically. It has been read here as equivalent to the noun phrase *the soprano part*. However, the noun actually seems to be acting adverbially, telling us how young Wallace sings, and certainly in a construction like “Young Wallace sings the soprano part,” the word *soprano* would be considered an adjective. Finally, the word *soprano* in this construction bears similarities to an objective complement, as in “The choir master made young Wallace the lead soprano.” A simpler, clearer, but less interesting example for students would be “Young Wallace loves music” (Adj + N + V + N).