

GETTING GRAMMAR BACK INTO THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

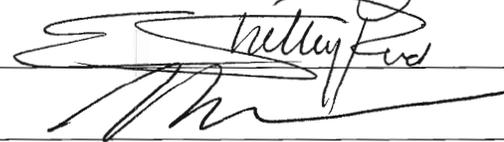
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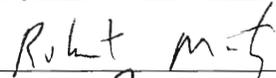
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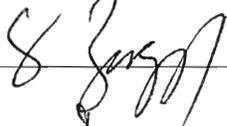
  
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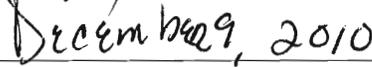
  
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Fall Semester 2010  
George Mason University  
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GETTING GRAMMAR BACK INTO THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

By

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Bachelor of Arts  
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## Dedication

This is dedicated to Brian, to Vicky, and to all of my angels—in Heaven and on Earth.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee—Dr. Rogers, Dr. Reid, and Prof. Nichols—for their invaluable insights into my topic and for their encouragement of and patience with me. I would also like to thank my dear friends and family for their unwavering support of me and their willingness to listen to my digressions on the subject of grammar.

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## Abstract

### GETTING GRAMMAR BACK INTO THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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George Mason University, 2011

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This thesis explores the roles grammar has played with respect to composition instruction to determine what roles it can play and what needs it can satisfy for composition students today. Different types of grammar and the various methods of teaching them are discussed to in order to contextualize the ongoing debate regarding the role grammar should play in the composition classroom. Further contextualization of the debate is provided by tracing the relevant histories of both sides to where they presently stand. Answers to a questionnaire were collected from a small sample size of George Mason University composition instructors to determine their experiences with and attitudes toward grammar as a subject and grammar instruction in their own classrooms. This snapshot depicts a set of instructors willing to teach—and occasionally even enthusiastic about teaching—grammar in their composition classrooms, but ill-prepared to do so. Finally, positive and productive methods of teaching grammar are introduced to provide these current and future composition instructors with solid grounds for the inclusion of

grammar in their classrooms and suggestions for how to incorporate it to the benefit of their students.

## 1. Introduction

When someone speaks the word “grammar,” are you taken back to memories of agonizing language drills and diagrammed sentences? For most people, grammar instruction left a bad taste in their mouths, bitterness that years of removal from the subject doesn’t wash away. What happens when people harboring these negative memories of grammar become educators of the next generation? How does their view on grammar shape that of their pupils? Attitudes toward grammar instruction in the academic world have shifted from the positive to the negative and back again since the age of Plato and the ancient Greek rhetoricians to the present day. The question that educators need to ask themselves is not whether to teach or not to teach grammar, as this question oversimplifies the matter and leads too many to answer in the negative based on outdated definitions of grammar and methods of teaching it. Rather, the question facing educators today should be how can grammar be taught in the composition classroom in a productive way?

In order to answer this question, I will discuss what roles grammar has played with respect to composition instruction to determine what roles it can play and what needs it can satisfy for students today. Drawing from research, I will contextualize and respond to misconceptions about grammar instruction—which have led many students and teachers alike to approach grammar warily, if at all—and distinguish between the

different types of grammar and the various methods of teaching them. I will then build a positive and constructive lens through which contemporary educators can view grammar instruction and suggest methods of instruction that have proven successful in practice. My goal is to provide current and future composition instructors with solid grounds for the inclusion of grammar in their classrooms and suggestions for how to incorporate it to the benefit of their students. Though many handbooks and books on grammar theory are available, a perceived ambivalence in the teaching community about the topic may make an instructor less likely to question and/or explore the methods, theories, or attitudes toward grammar instruction that he or she had or had not been presented with in training to teach composition. By connecting the dots of positive and productive methods of teaching grammar—dots that can be separated from each other by centuries and can be eclipsed or misconstrued by negative vantage points—this project will aid composition instructors in seeing the larger picture of grammar instruction as a necessary instrument for achieving rhetorical goals in composition.

## 2. Chapter One: Some Types of Grammar

Many of the grammar pedagogies advanced in the past century find their roots in linguistic theory. Unfortunately, by the time the linguistic theories were transformed into and adopted as methods of teaching grammar, most linguists had already discounted them as means of bringing about improvement in composition and had moved on to try to find new theories. Over time, linguistics and composition grew increasingly distant from each other, especially on the point of grammar, and have developed into the distinct disciplines they are today. However, linguistic theories of the past century have heavily influenced the incorporation of grammar in the composition classroom and must be discussed in order to establish the bases for many of the grammatical theories and practices that have passed through that classroom.

Traditional English school grammar has its roots in Latin grammar and forms. When schools switched from teaching Latin as the primary language of education to teaching English as such, they retained many of the same rules and drills that were used to hammer Latin into pupils' heads—teaching endless declensions and conjugations, all of which had to be memorized, amongst other mentally torturous methods. When the focus of English instruction shifted in the mid-nineteenth century to include composition, “moved away from the traditional—and classically-based—emphasis on oral recitation to one requiring large amounts of student writing” (Boyd 56), educators and administrators

found traditional, formal grammar instruction to be sorely lacking as a tool for increasing students' writing proficiency. For the first time in this short history, but certainly not the last, traditional school grammar was on its way out. Recognizing the value of grammar instruction, yet still misguided by the influences of formal grammar instruction, Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg developed and introduced in their 1877 book, *Higher Lessons in English*, the sentence diagram. The introduction of this new, concrete and visual approach to grammar instruction at the sentence level reinvigorated the study of traditional school grammar. The deep and persistent impact of the sentence diagram is not to be underestimated: as late as the 1990s for elementary school students such as myself and several composition instructors interviewed for this project, sentence diagrams still played a role in early language instruction.

Linguist Leonard Bloomfield, with his publication of *Language* in 1933, effectively separated linguistic grammar from English pedagogical grammar. By the time composition instructors turned to linguists for input in the wake of many studies and essays proving the ineffectiveness of traditional grammar instruction, “few teachers were even aware” that “linguistics had hardly concerned its investigations with writing at all, assuming that writing was secondary to oral speech” (Connors 17). So formal grammar instruction carried on in the composition classroom for much longer than anyone, including some of the instructors teaching it, thought it should have, due in part to a classic error in communication: many composition instructors were waiting for linguists to give them a more effective grammatical theory for composition while linguists weren't concerning themselves with teaching grammar or writing at all.

Recognizing this miscommunication, Charles Fries, whose background consisted of training in both English and linguistics, attempted to bridge the gap between the two subjects, to reconcile the teaching practices of composition with the advances being made in the field of linguistics, particularly with those of the Bloomfieldian school of structural grammar. He published two books in this effort—*American English Grammar* in 1940 and *The Structure of American English* in 1952—but neither book reached any appreciable level of pedagogical significance in and of itself. However, the structural grammar that Fries tried to translate into a linguistically sound yet accessible grammar pedagogy came to serve as a basis for a “new grammar” that emerged in the late 1950s and gained traction into the 1960s as a challenge and alternative to traditional grammar. Structural grammar, according to Samuel Levin, is a truer and more precise way of analyzing the English language. In his 1960 article in *College English*, “Comparing Traditional and Structural Grammar,” Levin points out some key fallacies of the traditionalist approach to grammar, among them “the fallacy represented by discussing the grammar of English on the basis of preconceptions derived from the grammar of another language (say Latin), or the fallacy represented by the misuse of historical considerations in discussing present-day English grammar, or the fallacy represented by extreme purism” (262). Structural grammar, Levin argues, rises above these fallacies of traditional grammar by approaching language in a more scientific way, deriving its knowledge about a language by only making

“vulnerable” statements about grammar...statements whose claim to being true can be either verified or disproved. In order that statements may have this

property of vulnerability, their terms and predicates must be open to everyone's inspection. This is a way of saying that structural statements are made only about observable, formal features of a language. (260)

Structural grammar, therefore, was presented as a precise yet fluid grammar that was more in tune with the English language, as traditional grammar based its prescriptions and norms off those applicable to Latin. Teaching structural grammar, in Levin's view, would allow teachers to eschew the "normative fallacies" of traditional grammar—"[t]he perennial questions of shall/will, of ending sentences with prepositions, of the split infinitive" (262)—and allow them to instead make decisions of correctness based on structural analysis of any given composition assignment.

Change in the composition classroom comes but slowly, however, and before structural grammar was able to make any real curricular inroads, Noam Chomsky and his transformational-generative grammar arrived on the scene. William S. Palmer offers the most boiled-down yet complete and relatable explanation of transformational-generative grammar:

In transformational-generative grammar, sentences have both a deep and a surface structure. One may think of the generation of an utterance at the phrase structure level as a series of steps, governed by a small body of rules, which tell what order the steps should take, and what options and obligations are open to the writer. Phrase structure rules clarify the constructions of basic sentences, often called kernel sentences, which can be combined in various ways. Transformational rules explain how kernel sentences are transformed into more complex ones. (257)

In other words, transformational-generative grammar lays out the framework for an infinite number of grammatical sentences that can be generated by inserting words into the kernels, and there is yet another infinite amount of transformations that can be applied to a set of kernels to generate more, and more complex, grammatical sentences. While transformational-generative grammar had far-reaching implications for the fields of linguistics, psychology, and foreign language education (to name a few), the most significant application of it to the teaching of grammar in the composition classroom is the practice of sentence combining—taking two or more kernel sentences and creating from them one complex sentence by applying grammatical transformations. The breadth and complexity of pure transformational-generative grammar made it extremely difficult and unrealistic to teach as a “new grammar” in the composition classroom, but the contribution of sentence combining is still regarded as one of the most effective applications of grammar to improve writing skills (Graham & Perin 18).

The existence of so many different, valid, complex, and competing grammars should be evidence to the instructor of composition that no one grammar is complete or completely correct for that matter. There are important advances made, theories formulated, and practices designed that an instructor can pull from each type of grammar in order to construct some sort of approximation of how the English language works and how best to teach this to their composition students. From traditional school grammar, we can pull the useful terminology to describe parts of sentences. From structural grammar, we learn to question what these parts of speech do in our sentences and how they act based on their place in the structure. From transformational-generative grammar, we

learn about the order of our sentences and how it can be manipulated to generate new meanings and shift emphasis. Not one grammar is complete or correct, but taken together, they can each add something constructive to the composition classroom.

### 3. Chapter Two: The Debate, Part 1—Grammar Does Not Belong in the Composition Classroom

The publication in 1963 of a report by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer entitled *Research in Written Composition* changed the climate for grammar instruction with one statement:

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (37)

Perhaps no other sentence has had as much influence on the grammar debate as this “harmful effect” sentence. Nearly all of the research and reports from both sides of the debate cite this sentence, so it is necessary to explore the context from which the sentence has been taken and the information upon which the conclusion is based.

There are several important points to elucidate in the Braddock, et al. report. Most noticeably, the authors are careful in their application of the modifier “formal” to grammar in their discussions of grammar instruction. Braddock, et al. note that “study after study based on objective testing rather than actual writing confirms that instruction in formal grammar has little to no effect on the quality of student writing” (37). Not only does this statement once again address only formal grammar, but it admits that most

studies are based on objective tests and do not reflect on the students' ability to compose. Braddock, et al. go on to discuss objective tests versus actual writing as measures of writing in a section so titled. The authors determined that "in general, multiple-choice tests of composition suffer from a number of shortcomings" (40), of which "the most serious charge against [them] is their lack of validity" (42). Objective, multiple-choice tests involve no actual writing and therefore are inadequate measures of whether a student has made any gains in composition ability based on a method of instruction. Though they cite the arguments made for multiple-choice testing, to avoid any confusion as to their verdict on the subject, the authors rule that "if a teacher or chairman wishes to evaluate the writing performance of students after instruction, he should plan carefully to use several papers written by the students...if the teacher has been emphasizing rhetorical matters as well as grammar and mechanics, objective tests simply are not valid" (42). Based as they are on objective testing, the conclusions of the multiple studies that Braddock, et al. rely on to come to the conclusion of the harmful effect sentence should be approached with due caution and questioning, since they do not use adequate measures of writing to come to conclusions about methods of composition instruction. While flawed studies—whether flawed in methodology or in measures of improvement used—cannot prove or disprove anything, they can suggest useful directions for future research to take.

The one study summarized in the report that relies on actual student writing as a measure of composition improvement, the Harris study, actually ends up supporting alternative methods of grammar instruction. Braddock, et al. note that "although the

investigator refers to the two groups of pupils as the ‘Grammar’ and the ‘Non-Grammar’ groups, actually grammar and composition were taught in each group” (70). To avoid misrepresenting the instructional methods used in the study, the authors of the report rename Harris’ groups as the “Formal Grammar” and the “Direct Method” groups. This renaming reveals that the study addresses methods of teaching grammar rather than whether or not grammar should be taught at all. While one group, as their new name suggests, was taught formal grammar, “the Direct Method group evidently used no textbook or grammatical terminology but considered the elements of ‘sentence building and structure’ which came to the teachers’ attention as they read the children’s writing, treating common errors in the classroom and in compositions ‘by means of example and imitation’” (71). At the end of the two-year experiment, Harris noted significant differences between the two groups, all favoring the Direct Method group, the group that taught grammar in the context of the students’ own writing. Seeing the gains through the lens of “non-grammar,” Harris concludes only that “it seems safe to infer that the study of English grammatical terminology had a negligible or even a relatively harmful effect upon the correctness of children’s writing,” to which Braddock, et al. add the caveat that “based as it was on the use of traditional grammar, the Harris study does not necessarily prove, of course, the ineffectiveness of instruction based on structural or generative approaches” (83). The report’s authors’ recognition that “Grammar” and “Non-Grammar” are misleadingly general names for the groups in the Harris study and their unwillingness to generalize the results of Harris’ study as true for all types of grammar shows a high degree of commitment to truth in reporting research and of responsibility to

the students who will ultimately be affected by the decisions made based on the research they summarize in their report. Contemporary composition instructors should have taken from this report—and present-day composition instructors can take from this report—that while traditional or formal grammar instruction is ineffective in the composition classroom, other methods of teaching grammar have shown promise (albeit in flawed studies) and need to be explored and researched further. Present-day composition instructors have the benefit of temporal removal from the publication and can, outside of the immediate polarizing effects of the harmful effect sentence, more carefully scrutinize the conclusions and contexts of the Braddock, et al. report and the studies examined therein. A closer look at the Braddock, et al. report reveals no wholesale condemnation of grammar instruction and actually shows a call for more research into emerging, alternate methods of grammar instruction, a call that should not be droned out by repetition of the harmful effect sentence.

In his 1986 version of the NCTE report *Research on Written Composition*, George Hillocks emphatically cites the harmful effect sentence from the 1963 report. Though Hillocks had already introduced a curriculum with very little, if any, emphasis on formal grammar by the time the Braddock, et al. report was published, he notes that the teaching world had not been as quick to abandon traditional school grammar instruction. Research continued to focus on formal grammar in the composition classroom, but also began to explore the pedagogical possibilities offered by the new types of grammars that were being offered by linguists, namely transformational and structural grammar. Hillocks notes that “the availability of the more precise and sophisticated linguistic

grammars made reasonable the question of whether using a more sophisticated grammar might have a more powerful effect on writing” (134). For Hillocks, the answer to that question is no; however, the research is not so conclusive. Though most of the studies Hillocks’ cites contain some flaw in methodology—“inadequate teacher controls” or a lack of actual student writing to measure improvement of composition ability—the gains reported for experimental grammars should not be discarded so quickly on these grounds alone. The studies do not decisively eliminate the possibility of benefits to innovative grammar instruction and they provide necessary groundwork and points of reference and departure for further research into new grammars.

The White study (1965) and the Mulcahy study (1974) both found that those groups studying linguistic-based grammar outperformed groups studying traditional school grammar and, in the case of the White study, a non-grammar group. While Hillocks guards against inferring much success from the gains observed in these studies because of a lack of adequate teacher controls, the results should not be discounted completely on the basis of a methodological flaw alone. As in the Braddock, et al. report, flawed studies that show gains for any method of grammar instruction should rather prompt a call for further research into those methods. Gale (1968) and Morgan (1971) tackled “the effects of studying structural or structural-generative grammars to the effects of teaching traditional grammar,” and though Hillocks notes that “they found no significant differences except for some gains in syntactic complexity for the groups studying linguistically based grammars” (135), the gains in syntactic complexity can be regarded as possible signs of gains in syntactic maturity that beg further exploration.

Achievements reported by Smith and Sustakowski (1968) are discounted because of a lack of a writing measure. As was pointed out in the discussion of the Braddock, et al. report, actual student writing is the only adequate measure of improvement of writing. The lack of this measure detracts from the validity of the results, but the “large gains for students studying a descriptive (structural) grammar on the Modern Language Aptitude Test” should indicate a need for research into this type of instruction using appropriate measures of writing.

Hillocks lists study after study lacking adequate methodology to substantiate their results, but finally finds a diamond in the rough in the Elley study (1976). The Elley study stands out for the large sample size assessed—248 students at the beginning of the study and 166 by the time the study was completed (136)—the length of time the students were studied (three years) and the quantity and quality of the measures used to assess the students’ improvement. Elley, et al. divided the students into eight classes, and then assigned each of these eight classes to one of three groups, each assessing a different teaching method. The first group of three classes studied “the Oregon curriculum, which included transformational grammar, rhetoric, and literature strands” (136) The second group of three classes studied “the same rhetoric and literature strands as the first group,” but their grammar sections were instead replaced with “extra reading and creative writing” (136). Finally, the third group of two classes studied “largely traditional and more functional grammar than the transformational grammar group” (137). The results of the Elley study showed no improvements in the writing of the students in the grammar groups over the writing of the students in the groups not studying grammar. It is

important to note, however, that only transformational grammar and traditional grammar were studied and it cannot be extrapolated from those results that other types of grammar or methodologies of teaching (such as isolating and emphasizing the sentence combining aspect from transformational grammar, a method which will be discussed shortly) would produce the same results.

Based on the negative evaluation of the types of grammars researched in the studies he assessed, Hillocks finds two questions “infrequently addressed and largely unanswered by the research...what constitutes adequate or inadequate performance in mechanics,...[and] what are the best instructional techniques for reducing error rates in mechanics and usage?” (139). In asking these questions, Hillocks acknowledges that some instructional method must be used to increase the correctness and overall quality of students’ writing. The questions serve as a segue into Hillocks’ discussion of instructional methods involving the manipulation of syntax. Sentence combining studies, with the exception of 10 percent of the studies reviewed, consistently show increases in syntactic maturity and often show gains in the quality of student writing (Hillocks 143). However, some studies also note increase in errors when students engage in sentence combining exercises: “Maimon and Nodine (1978b, 1979) reported that sentence combining practice produced more errors on a rewriting passage (but not in free writing)” (Hillocks 144). This finding points to a transferability to actual writing of the skills acquired from sentence combining exercise, though it reflects a lack of understanding of how to produce effective revisions. Sentence construction “asks students to observe some phenomenon, generate a basic sentence, and add details about the phenomenon using

various syntactic structures but particularly final free modifiers” (Hillocks 146). Hillocks notes that while only a few studies had been conducted on this method of instruction, it showed promise as a way of increasing syntactic maturity and overall quality in students’ writing. Faigley’s study of sentence construction, the best-designed to that date, “suggests a reciprocal relationship, at least for final free modifiers, between structure and content. The structures taught demand content; content demands structuring” (Hillocks 147). Also cited is the 1964 Bateman and Zidonis study, which Hillocks affirms to have found “a statistically significant difference between the number of well-formed sentences written by the experimental [transformational grammar, sentence combining] students and their control group counterparts” (136). These instructional techniques of manipulating syntax laid a promising foundation for new and productive methods of incorporating grammar within the contexts of students’ own writing and achieving rhetorical goals in their writing.

Despite the emergence of new linguistic theories and methods of teaching grammar for writing and promising results from studies into the application of these theories methods, Patrick Hartwell begins his article “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar” with the harmful effect sentence from the Braddock report, saying that this sentence settled “the grammar issue” for him (305). The problems with Hartwell settling his grammar questions with the Braddock report can be found simply by rereading the discussion of that report earlier in this chapter. Hartwell focuses his assessment of teaching grammar on formal grammar and the teaching thereof, and he only acknowledges a different way of teaching grammar in his discussion of what he

terms “Grammar 5: Stylistic Grammar” (325). Earlier in his article, Hartwell draws a distinction between “those of us who dismiss the teaching of formal grammar” and “those who defend the teaching of grammar” (308). An important discrepancy that must be pointed out, even at the risk of being repetitive, is his use of “formal” to describe the grammar opposed by the first group and the lack of that modifier in his description of the second group. This distinction suggests that the two grammar camps cannot overlap—a suggestion invalidated by the majority of modern proponents of grammar instruction who dismiss the teaching of formal grammar.

To continue with Hartwell’s distinction, however, those in the anti-formal grammar camp teach composition in such a way as to make grammar “‘uninteresting’ in a scientific sense” and those in the pro-grammar camp “tend to have a model of instruction that is rigidly skills-centered and rigidly sequential” (308). Though Hartwell firmly plants himself in the anti-formal grammar camp, he does believe that writers need to develop “skills” at two levels:

One, broadly rhetorical, involves communication in meaningful contexts (the strategies, registers, and procedures of discourse across a range of modes, audiences, contexts, and purposes). The other, broadly metalinguistic rather than linguistic, involves active manipulation of language with conscious *attention to surface form*. This second level may be developed tacitly,...it may be developed formally, by manipulating language for stylistic effects, and such manipulation may involve, for pedagogical continuity, a *vocabulary of style*. But it is primarily

developed by *any kind of language activity that enhances the awareness of language as language* [emphases mine throughout]. (326)

While Hartwell's description of two levels of skills could have been paraphrased for brevity, it has been included here nearly in its entirety to illustrate the great lengths to which Hartwell has gone in order to say, without using the word grammar, that students need grammar instruction. His second level of skill develops through instruction that focuses on surface form (sentences and their structures); manipulation of language, such as sentence combining and construction; a "vocabulary of style" that may encompass the vocabulary of grammar, including subordinate clauses, modifiers, adjectival and adverbial phrases, etc.; and activities that focus on the awareness of language, such as exercises that focus on the rhetoric possibilities of sentence structures. In other words, while arguing against direct, formal grammar instruction, Hartwell argues for indirect grammar instruction focused on rhetorical considerations. Hartwell's point of the too often misused, misinterpreted, and/or misunderstood use of the term "grammar" leads him to seek a higher degree of specificity in his discussion of skills. While his precise language is useful for his readers to understand what he has found to be the vital language skills necessary for composition students, it is also important to point out that these skills exist within the purview of grammar. Hartwell's avoidance of the word "grammar" in his discussion of grammatical skills is useful for him and for composition instructors to avoid the negative connotations and associations that inevitably arise when the word is used, both inside and outside of the classroom; however, in doing so, he adds confusion to the discussion by dissociation and then elevating certain parts and skills of grammar while

concurrently allowing and even propagating the negativity associated with grammar in general.

Though many studies in the twentieth century have demonstrated that formal grammar instruction does not benefit students of composition, they have not discounted the usefulness of alternate methods of grammar instruction in the composition classroom. Braddock, et al.'s even-handed approach toward and encouragement of research regarding innovative instruction such as sentence-combining urges researchers and instructors alike to continue to try to find productive method of teaching grammar to composition students. Hillocks's diligent examination of studies regarding the teaching of grammar calls into question assumptions regarding the utility of formal grammar instruction as well as instruction in some of the linguistic grammars that were being tested in the composition classroom at that time. The flaws identified by Hillocks in the available grammar studies can serve as points of departure for prospective research both into the methods researched in those studies and into new alternate methods that arise in the future. Finally, Hartwell's careful parsing of the grammatical skills necessary in the composition classroom without calling them grammar skills demonstrates the deep-seated issues surrounding the use of the word "grammar" at all, at least in discussions regarding composition instruction. Grammar however, as the next chapter will show, is not a bad word and is not a bad subject—especially in conjunction with composition.

#### 4. Chapter Three: The Debate, Part 2—Grammar is a Necessary Element of Composition Instruction

Knowledge of grammar involves more than just an ability to name parts of speech and diagram a sentence; there are cultural and societal assumptions that are made based on one's ability to communicate effectively and appropriately. These assumptions can follow students out of the composition classroom and have powerfully affect their daily lives—at home, in the workplace, and in any situation in which they are called upon to express themselves in writing with clarity. Instructors' positions toward grammar instruction must, therefore, take into account the far-reaching implications that students will have to contend with should they leave the composition classroom without a firm grasp on how to form their thoughts and opinions into accessible and rhetorically effective pieces of writing.

##### *The Question of Power*

The adoption in 1972 and publication in 1974 of the Conference on College Composition and Communication's (CCCC) "Students' Right to Their Own Language" resolution (SRTOL) highlighted the question of power in the composition classroom. While the thrust of SRTOL was to mandate equality among and respect for all cultures and their respective languages in the classroom, it fueled discussions regarding the existence and validity of teaching a standard English at all, and raised questions about the

political and racial implications of teaching such a language. The hope of SRTOL seemed to be that by not always forcing students to speak or write in standard English, instructors were allowing students freedom from oppressive educational tactics in place only to perpetuate the status quo (i.e., white supremacy). However, this hope is misguided; students unwittingly trade instruction in effectively correct usage—a valuable skill for applying for and obtaining internships and jobs, for example—for a semester of linguistic freedom in their composition classroom. What can be viewed as an oppressive trade-off is made worse by what may come to be viewed as an insidious encouragement of this trade-off by composition instructors. Indeed, encouraging students’ to retain their own language can lead to a backlash from exactly those students SRTOL was meant to empower: Gerald Graff reported that in some SRTOL classrooms, “students and parents complain that they are being patronized, that the more relaxed, more personalist pedagogy fails to teach anybody how to write” (119). Lisa Delpit also encountered this sentiment in her research experiences, where students expressed feeling that “the teacher has denied them access to herself as the source of knowledge to learn the forms they need to succeed” (288). While the intentions of instructors are most likely as far away as possible from oppressing any one class of students, they effectively do so when they neglect to teach standard English.

Even the phrasing of the statement, “their own language” is problematized by its implication that standard English does not belong to the “non-standard” student and suggests that composition instructors should not reconcile “non-standard students” into standard English communication. In a contemporary response to the publication of

SRTOL, William Pixton points out the Catch-22 of the resolution: “If students are taught to retain the dialect of their nurture under the delusion that it is as effective as Standard English for their attaining higher education and business success, then they are being denied that right” (69). Pixton does not argue with the general sentiment of the resolution insofar as respect for students’ own language and cultures goes, but he points out that neglecting to teach all students—regardless of class, race, gender, religion, or any other factor—that “standard English is for all Americans to use according to their needs desires, and abilities” (70) is a step backwards that only increases the disparities in diverse classrooms.

Inherent in the question of teaching standard English is the question of teaching grammar, and both questions involve a transfer of power between the teacher and the students—manifesting itself in varying and fluctuating degrees along a spectrum from a harmonious sharing to an ongoing struggle. By teaching students the compositional norms of what Lisa Delpit terms “the culture of power” in her essay “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children” (282), instructors empower their students. Giving students the tools to participate in the culture of power allows their voices to be heard and understood. To not equip students with the tools to communicate with the culture of power ensures that they will not be granted access to that culture. James Sledd sees the “real reason to teach grammar” in this way, as a key to equal access to intellectual, not material, success:

To teach the standard language as supposedly a means to upward mobility in the mainstream culture is to fight on the wrong side of the class war, to teach students

to put their neighbors' noses out of joint by getting and wasting more than their neighbors can get and waste. It is wiser to teach the standard, and to teach its nature, as a tool, a weapon which the dominant have too commonly used for purposes of domination but which the dominated can use for purposes of resistance and of access to the best of multiple cultures and traditions. (62)

The struggle does not exist in the classroom in which the instructor freely shares the norms for communication in the culture of power. The struggle presents itself when one side is unwilling to let go of its power, as when instructors do not teach their students how to communicate effectively. Teaching grammar for writing puts teacher and student on the same team, working toward the common goal of an empowered society.

The SRTOL resolution forces composition instructors to once again question how they teach grammar and Standard English usage, but it does not change the answer to the question of whether or not it should be taught. It also once again reinforces the need to view grammar and usage in terms of appropriateness and inappropriateness, effectiveness and ineffectiveness, based of the rhetorical situation rather than viewing it in reduced, black-or-white terms of correct or incorrect. Mark Blaauw-Hara suggests that “perhaps what is called for is a way to teach students how to understand the rhetorical reasons behind grammatical guidelines, so that they can make their own informed decisions about when and when not to follow them” (169), and cites Steven Tchudi and Diana Mitchell’s suggestion that “rather than devaluing students’ native dialects with notions of correct and incorrect, we need to make the benefits of learning an academic dialect plain, and then provide students with the resources...to acquire it” (168). In teaching students how

write rhetorically effective compositions, instructors need to include standard English, its grammar, and usage in order to give students another option in their arsenal of available means of persuasion.

*Error: Process and Product*

Error in the composition classroom is almost as contentious as grammar in the composition classroom. On one hand, instructors need to recognize that errors are a part of the learning process—especially when dealing with grammatical concepts. They need to create a classroom environment in which students are not afraid to try or discouraged from trying new forms or adding complexity to their writing through clauses just because they aren't sure exactly how to construct or punctuate them. On the other hand, error in the final product can lead an audience to discredit a piece of writing and make negative assumptions about the writer's competence. While an error-centric view should not be the sole motivation for grammar instruction, it is irresponsible to downplay the effect that errors in composition have on students' audiences. Whether an instructor's pedagogical focus is on process or product, the fact remains that there is always an end product in composition and, in most real world cases, correctness will play a sizeable role in both the rhetorical effectiveness and clarity of that end product. Students need to learn to frame error as an acceptable part of the composition process, but never a part of the finished, edited product; and to see error not as a question of right or wrong, but as a question of effectiveness or ineffectiveness.

As Mina Shaughnessy points out about the basic writer in her book *Errors and Expectations*, “error is more than a mishap; it is a barrier that keeps him not only from writing something in formal English but from having something to write” (11). To such students, grammar represents opportunity, “one last chance to understand what is going on with written language so that they can control it rather than be controlled by it” (Shaughnessy 11). Teaching students ways in which they can control language, ways in which they can manipulate it to say what they are thinking, allows them to focus more on the content of their writing. But to get to that point, where students are comfortable enough with using and controlling language, students have to be encouraged to take chances in their writing and feel that the “process” is a safe time and place for them to try new things that will make their writing more rhetorically effective. Instructors need to create an environment in which they “replace their [students’] notion of grammar as rules for avoiding error with a focus on the linguistic resources available to them as language users” (Kutz, Cornog, and Paster 65). Such an approach to error allows instructors to allot more time for grammar instruction not only without sacrificing time spent writing in the classroom, but also by encouraging increased opportunities to practice new forms.

Instructors also benefit by creating more frequent and more effective teaching opportunities that can be based on the students’ own work, giving instructors a chance to “[listen] to what the student[s] say about punctuation, and [create] situations in the classroom that encourage students to talk openly about what they don’t understand” (Shaughnessy 40). In asking questions and openly discussing concepts that are not understood, the entire class benefits from hearing the answers and also from seeing the

work of their peers as an audience. When they are able to take on this role, David Bartholomae points out, students can transfer the readerly perspective to their own work, “see the decisions made and the options lost, they learn the key to controlling and experimenting with their language” (45). At the same time, instructors gain more opportunities to learn what areas of writing and language their students need them to focus on, so that the time they spend working on grammar instruction is targeted and tailored to their students’ unique patterns of error.

It remains important, however, for composition instructors to continue to impress upon their students that there is always an end product of the writing process and that end product needs to be free from error. As discussed above, a distinction needs to be made between errors in the process of writing—usually signs of learning, growth, and areas for development—and errors in the product of writing—usually perceived as signs of carelessness, ignorance, or incompetence. Several studies have been carried out regarding error and its perception by the world outside of the composition classroom and academia. Maxine Hairston addressed the question of how nonacademic readers respond to errors in written communication by asking professionals to rate how strongly they objected to various grammatical and usage errors in a set of sixty-five sentences. Her 1981 sample was wide-ranging and diverse, with other sixty respondents including: “business executives...and attorneys...state legislator, computer program designer, architect, travel agency owner, county commissioner, bank president, newspaper columnist, realtor, oil company president, stock broker, federal judge, and a state educational commissioner” (Hairston 796), to name a few. Hairston finds that overall, professionals held

conservative views about errors in grammar and usage in business writing and the qualities they valued most in such writing were “clarity and economy” (799). This split in priorities prefigures the split in priorities that the composition instructor must balance in the classroom. While Hairston does not want to “risk having our students become so anxious about rules that they over-edit while they are trying to write and neglect what is really basic, that is, content and organization” (794), her study shows that instruction in grammar and usage with the goal of correcting sentence-level mistakes does need to be a part of the composition classroom if instructors want their students to be prepared to meet the expectations and standards of the world outside the classroom, a world in which they will inevitably have to participate.

While Hairston’s study reflects the climate for error in 1981, Larry Beason’s 2001 study exposes similar sentiments. Beason’s sample is considerably smaller (14 subjects), but he chose them specifically based on the high frequency of contact with business writing as well as a high demand for their own writing in their workplaces. Not only does he find that businesspeople are bothered by grammatical mistakes, but such errors also lead them to judge poorly the writers themselves. Another important insight into error revealed in Beason’s study is that businesspeople’s perception of “error gravity is affected by extra-textual features that more directly go beyond the language of a text” (47). His subjects were bothered more by errors committed in formal writing contexts such as letters, memos, and white papers than they were by errors committed in informal writing contexts such as on sticky-notes or correspondence with colleagues (perceived intended audience also played a role in weighing the gravity of errors). Beason’s findings

highlight the importance of teaching grammar not only *in* context, but also *for* different contexts.

Instructors of composition need to remain constantly aware of the cultural and societal implications of grammatical correctness. They must remember, whether or not their students are aware of this fact, that the skills learned in the composition classroom are not only being taught for the students to meet an institutional requirement, but more importantly they are taught in order to meet the requirements of a demanding and scrutinizing society. Though societal norms, values, and hierarchies have shifted since the publication of SRTOL and some of the error studies cited, indifference to the realities presented in those reports and studies can leave students at a serious disadvantage.

## 5. Chapter Four: Rethinking the Way We Think About Grammar: Teaching the Teachers

According to the work of Irene Brosnahan and Janice Neulieb, most of the reasons new composition instructors cited for the exclusion of grammar instruction or the joylessness with which they approached it in their classrooms centered on their own experiences as students, at all levels, including in their own pedagogical instruction:

We have asked these teachers why they do not teach grammar in the same exciting and engaging way that they teach literature. The answers vary from ‘I hate teaching grammar’ to ‘The school administration demands that we do it this way.’ Teachers tell us that they remember their own school grammar learning without pleasure or enthusiasm and tend to reinscribe that pattern in their own teaching. (207)

They hypothesize that attitudes toward grammar trickle down from teachers to students—if composition instructors have a negative attitude toward teaching grammar, students will sense this attitude and it will impact their willingness and therefore their ability to learn. I sent out a questionnaire (attached as Appendix I hereto) to 42 English 101 (first-year composition at George Mason University) instructors regarding their incorporation of grammar in their classrooms, as well as their own experiences with grammar as students and about their personal levels of comfort with grammar and usage. I received nine completed questionnaires and, as a whole, the information gathered from these

instructors provides a small, localized snapshot of current attitudes toward and trends in grammar instruction at the university level. The instructors' answers to the questionnaire show a much more positive attitude toward teaching grammar, regardless of the instructors' on backgrounds with the subject, than the Brosnahan and Neulieb study had shown. The problem facing most first-year composition instructors today is a lack of preparation in exactly how to teach grammar to their students.

Most instructors surveyed felt positively toward grammar and toward teaching it, though almost all of them came from the notoriously negative traditional school grammar backgrounds, with the exception of one instructor who could remember sentence combining exercises. All but one instructor stated that their own education as far as grammar was concerned stopped after middle school. What was surprising about the instructors' responses was that most were caught off-guard to some degree by just how necessary such instruction would be in their composition classrooms. Below are a few reasons instructors gave for incorporating grammar in their composition classrooms (note that many only realized the need after seeing their students' work):

- "My students were making grammatical errors too frequently for me not to teach a brief lesson on their more glaring mistakes."
- "I believe that it is important for students to write clearly and effectively and that grammatical issues can interfere with communication and persuasion."
- "I saw many common grammatical errors on papers and wanted to address these in formal lessons"

- “I wanted to emphasize to my students that correct grammar is integral to good writing. I wanted then to understand that excessive grammatical mistakes can both distract and confuse the reader.”
- “After reviewing only a few of my students’ written assignments, I knew I needed to use those [three built-in ‘writing workshop’] days for grammar because Lower Order Concerns dominated their work across the board. Since that first semester, I have always incorporated at least three class periods for grammar instruction alone.”

As a result of being unprepared to handle the level of grammatical instruction needed by their students, some instructors were still falling back on what was familiar to them from their own educations, on the drills and worksheets from which they were taught in elementary and middle school, as their methods of remedying their students’ grammatical problems. Many of the instructors noted that they taught grammar through mini-lessons—short, targeted lessons on a grammatical issue—based on the patterns of error that they noticed in their students’ papers. While the concept of mini-lessons is a recommended way of incorporating grammar instruction, several instructors employed worksheets or drills, which have been proven to be generally ineffective in teaching students how to use grammar. One instructor, in defense of using drills, said “I feel that lecture is not useful [for grammar] and students need to learn by doing and practicing.” While actually using the skills being taught is important, this instructor’s approach toward errors in her students’ compositions seems to imply that she is stuck in an error-centric mindset, rather than seeing grammatical elements as rhetorical tools. She noted

that while she feels positively about grammar and teaching it, she has started to categorize grammatical issues as “patterns of error that I see as fixable and problematic versus patterns of error that I feel are difficult to teach students and that I’ll fix on a paper, but won’t formally teach.” Lacking proper tools and background to teach certain grammatical elements, this instructor is unable to equip her students with the knowledge they need to use grammar effectively.

Another instructor was dually disadvantaged when it came to handling the grammatical errors encountered in the composition classroom: not only did her “vague recollection of being specifically taught grammar” consist of sentence diagramming and other trappings of traditional school grammar, but since her parents spoke “a close approximation of Standard Written English (SWE) at home...the basics of SWE came so easily to me [and] grammar instruction always seemed to be for someone else.” As a result, this instructor admits to having a poor understanding of grammar rules and an indifference toward grammar instruction. After her experience in the composition classroom, however, she says “my attitude is changing now...I’d like to have a better technical understanding of usage, if only for the power it gives one as a writer.” This instructor experienced an important lesson that Delpit points out, that “schools must provide these children [the instructor’s ‘someone else’] the content that other families from a different cultural orientation provide at home” (286). The instructor recognized the often taken for granted fact that not every student will come from a linguistic background based in Standard English and with this realization, she recognized the need for grammar instruction in the increasingly diverse composition classroom.

So it seems that the exclusion of grammar instruction that Brosnahan and Neulieb noted in composition instruction does not seem to be as much of an issue for these GMU instructors. Indeed, it's possible that the changes for which they had hoped are starting to occur: "For new teachers to find a meaningful, experiential way to instruct their students, they must first experience new learning patterns themselves" (204). Some GMU instructors' responses illustrated the importance and beneficial effects of such continuous grammar instruction. One instructor stated that while his formal grammar education stopped after middle school, he sought further instruction at his university's writing center as an undergraduate in response to his professors' comments on his papers and said that he also relied on style guides to improve his writing. This instructor was able to then apply these personal learning experiences in his classroom, spending some time lecturing on grammatical concepts, illustrating them with example sentences mostly pulled from his students' own writing because "the class felt most invested when we worked on sentences from their own papers." Another instructor who spent time working at the university writing center as a graduate student incorporated rhetorical grammar instruction in her section on structure and organization, emphasizing the importance of sentence-level organization—the correct structure, use, and placement of clauses and their effects on the focus of the students' ideas—in addition to the regular emphasis most instructors place on paragraph-level organization.

It is important to note that these instructors had an urge to seek out more information—whether it was prompted by their own writing performance or by the performances of others—and they did not state that they learned their methods of

grammar instruction in their composition instruction classrooms. While Brosnahan and Neulieb's hope of an inspired attitude toward grammar instruction seems to have caught on at GMU, their concern, that "until professors who instruct those future teachers improve their instructional methodology, classroom teaching will not change" (204), is still relevant, evidenced by the feeling of a lack of preparedness to teach grammar expressed by many of the instructors interviewed for this project. We do still have to rethink the way we think about grammar, but research suggests that emphasis on this rethinking may need to be placed at a different level of the instructional spectrum.

Another sign of positive change is the institutionalized emphasis being placed on grammar instruction in the Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement. One of the stated outcomes for first-year composition students in the WPA Outcomes Statement is a "knowledge of conventions," under which category falls developing "knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics" and controlling "such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling" (*WPA Outcomes Statement*). Contrary to what may seem to be the case based on some of the survey responses, first-year composition instructors and writing program administrators have not found it safe to assume that all of the grammar and usage and mechanics that students need to learn are taught to them before they reach first-year composition. Additionally, more nuanced applications of grammar—for rhetorical purposes and with genre considerations in mind—are also part of the WPA outcomes statement. If it is a stated outcome of writing program administrators that students should exit a first-year composition course with a knowledge of conventions that includes

grammar and grammatical considerations, then it should also follow that first-year composition instructors need to teach grammar in their classes in a integrated and productive way that does not detract from the achievement of the rest of the outcomes stated. In the introduction to the WPA Outcomes Statement, it is noted that “it is important that teachers, administrators, and a concerned public do not imagine that these outcomes can be taught in reduced or simple ways. Helping students demonstrate these outcomes requires expert understanding of how students actually learn to write” (*WPA Outcomes Statement*). In achieving the outcome of knowledge of conventions, then, it is crucial that composition instructors possess an “expert understanding of how students actually learn to write” and that they be not only equipped the teaching methods that are based on the findings of research into how to teach the grammatical conventions of the English language, but also that they be familiar with these grammatical conventions themselves.

## 6. Chapter Five: Theoretical Approaches to Productively Reintroducing Grammar into the Composition Classroom

### *Grammar of the Greeks*

One option available to composition instructors is to teach grammar in the context of the original trivium of ancient Greek education, restoring balance among the three elements of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Rhetoric and logic have gained some ascendancy in the trivium because they have a ready applicability to writing and the teaching of writing. Few people in academia or beyond would question the importance of teaching composition students about avoiding logical fallacies or about maintaining a logical progression of their ideas. Rhetoric, a bit more abstract in its focus on style, has gained further ascendancy in the composition classroom in the past several decades with the explosion of new technologies, and along with them, new vehicles of persuasion. Edward P.J. Corbett considers the pervasiveness of rhetoric in our daily lives to be reason enough—though not the only reason—to become well-versed in the “basic strategies and principles of this ancient art,” so that we will be prepared to “respond critically to the rhetorical efforts of others in both the oral and written forms” (25). Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* proposes a program of instruction based on the practices of the ancient Greeks and Romans, emphasizing the elements of classical rhetoric as they apply to composition. He highlights the processes of invention, thesis formulation, argument building, and style. Corbett leans of the Greek notion that there is “an integral

and reciprocal relationship between matter and form [that] is the basis for any true understanding of the rhetorical function of style” (338). Cheryl Glenn further extends this view of style to include grammar instruction in her observations that “because grammar and style are two sides of the same linguistic coin, those programs that obviously and purposefully fuse the study of grammar with the study of style better meet the goal of improved writing performance” (10). Corbett agrees that rhetorical style and grammar do overlap, but is wary of abandoning his distinction between the concerns of grammar (“correctness”) and the concerns of rhetorical style (“effectiveness”).

The problems with viewing grammar as a matter of correct versus incorrect have been discussed at length in an earlier section, but Corbett’s distinction also highlights another fallacy common in arguments about grammar instruction: that correctness and effectiveness (or appropriateness, etc.) are mutually exclusive terms. Gina Claywell, in her argument for “Reasserting Grammar’s Position in the Trivium,” reminds instructors to maintain a balanced perspective toward each part of instruction: “If the ‘failure’ of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modal composition was to deemphasize purpose and audience in the quest for superficial correctness and appropriate form, we may be succumbing to the opposite trend of emphasizing to whom and why students are writing but ignoring the fact that those same readers may be highly critical of flawed writing” (51). It is important, then, to remember that while teaching the rhetoric of the ancient Greeks, that instructors must be careful to not overstate the importance of any one element of the trivium. The elements of grammar, rhetoric, and logic are most beneficial

to composition students when they are presented as elements that balance each other and will create balance in the writing of the students.

Citing a typical syllabus of a class taught by Corbett, Cheryl Glenn outlines just a few of the exercises that students can do to increase their grammatical awareness. One such exercise is a “close, grammatical analysis of another’s prose, a stylistic analysis informed and made possible by grammatical knowledge” (12). This exercise is mainly a modeling exercise, in which students are given rhetorically effective grammatical models to identify and the later to incorporate into their own writing. Corbett’s program also includes exercises to heighten his students’ awareness of their sentence structures and their own style and usage. Glenn found that:

when students hand in an assignment, he [Corbett] asks them to count the number of words in each sentence, providing information for the average sentence length,...their longest sentence, and their shortest sentence; then he asks them to provide the same kind of information about the average number of sentences in a paragraph...He regularly asks students to provide information about the ‘types’ of sentences they use and the frequency of their use...And he wants students to account for the types and frequencies of ‘sentence openers’ they use. (14-15)

Borrowed from ancient rhetoricians such as Plato and Isocrates, Corbett’s sentence-level focus of the elements that make up his students’ styles leads his students to concentrate on and be deliberate in their choices of words and grammatical structures. In providing the information required of them for each writing assignment, students learn about

various types of clauses and phrases, as well as how to appropriately include those elements into their writing.

### *Grammar in Context*

Another pedagogical option for instructors trying to teach grammar to their composition students is to look no farther than their students' own work for source material. Traditional, formal grammar instruction relies heavily, if not entirely, on drills and decontextualized example sentences that present no relevance to the students and breed feelings of indifference toward grammar. Using students' own work as the example material gives grammar instruction a sense of immediacy and gives students a reason to be invested in the subject. It gives the instructors ready material stripped of the artificiality of grammar workbooks and drill sheets. There are methods of incorporating this pedagogical strategy that have been tested with successful results and the theories of several of these methods will be outlined in this section.

In her seminal 1996 book, *Teaching Grammar in Context*, Constance Weaver recognizes the futility of traditional grammar instruction and she tries to find a productive method of teaching grammar to writing students. While Weaver concludes that "it is still by no means clear that 'application' [of grammar] cannot be done just as effectively, and a lot more efficiently, without detailed explicit grammar study" (*Teaching Grammar* 16), she also supports a "more focused treatment of grammar" and encourages more research to be done based on the alternate views and dissenting voices (*Teaching Grammar* 104). After reviewing the literature on grammar instruction and delving into the world of

cognitive development and early childhood grammars, Weaver comes to the conclusion that “students revise their sentences and edit their writing more effectively when sentence revision and editing skills have been taught in the context of their own writing” (*Teaching Grammar* 180). Weaver argues that teaching grammar in this way makes grammar instruction far more relevant and interesting to students than the old traditional grammar instruction tools of detached example sentences and drills. When the teacher uses students’ writing as examples, the students are already aware of and familiar with the rhetorical situations. Students are invested and engaged in creating meaning and ensuring that their ideas are clear and understandable to their intended audiences. In guiding students to finding the most effective rhetorical choices available to them in their work rather than presenting students with errors to correct or drills to complete, instructors can avoid the feelings of dissociation and indifference that students can begin to experience through traditional or formal grammar instruction.

Weaver’s teachers’ guide, *The Grammar Plan Book: A Guide to Smart Teaching*, provides effective, practical methods of introducing grammar into the composition classroom. In this teachers’ guide, Weaver sticks to her plan to teach grammar only in the context of students’ writing. The contexts in which grammar instruction is most often appropriate usually also happen to coincide with times when employing different grammatical structures would help achieve a stronger rhetorical effect. Weaver consciously highlights rhetorical outcomes in all of her discussions of grammatical constructions and ways to introduce them into the writing classroom. One of her “Five ways to Make Editing a Positive Experience” echoes a premise of Martha Kolln’s

rhetorical grammar, to be examined in greater depth in the next section: “Make grammar about meaning. There is a purpose for the marks we use, and writers are responsible for knowing why they do what they do. Then, sometimes, we can break the rules” (Weaver, *Grammar Plan Book* 30). Even more explicitly, she notes that “when we begin to consider which options are best, we are slipping from grammar to rhetoric, which deals with making effective choices in a given context...Good teaching of writing encompasses both (Weaver, *Grammar Plan Book* 43). From sentence-combining activities drawn from students’ actual writing to short and concentrated mini-lessons focusing on particular grammatical structures such as the introduction of modifiers to add interesting information, Weaver’s teachers’ guide provides writing instructors with methods of facilitating productive rhetorical grammar instruction in the composition classroom.

In *Everyday Editing: Inviting Students to Develop Skill and Craft in Writer’s Workshop*, Jeff Anderson keeps in mind the concepts of teaching grammar in context as he offers suggestions and ideas for teaching grammatical elements and structures to his students. Anderson is driven by the goals of creating positive attitudes toward editing and of ridding both students and teachers of the misconception that editing is about finding and eliminating errors. Even the most well-intentioned teacher mark-ups of students’ work cause students to “develop a fear-driven need to sidestep looking stupid, and often they try to sidestep editing altogether. Kids get the message that, if the teacher’s going to edit the paper anyway, why bother doing it yourself?” (Anderson 4). Anderson’s questions point out how much of a disservice teachers may be doing their students when they commit to error-focused, correctional methods of trying to teach grammar and usage

to writing students: “And what about the next mistake? How will they know how to fix that? And how will we fix students’ attitudes once red-pen thinking takes its toll?” (10).

After posing those difficult questions that would trouble any teacher who marks any writing, Anderson’s book provides guidance for positive grammar and editing instruction. As Weaver does, Anderson writes for writing teachers rather than for the students. Not only does this allow him to speak directly to the people planning the lessons and running the classroom, it allows him to avoid the explicit grammar instruction that diminishes the value and effectiveness of other textbooks and handbooks on the subject that are written to a student audience. In Part I of his book, Anderson describes his method of inviting students to participate in each part of the lesson: to notice, to imitate, to celebrate, to collect, to write, to combine, to revise, and to edit. Inviting students to each part of the editing process shows them that it is in fact a process with many parts, all of which require attention and work, and Anderson has found that “editing taught using a more invitational approach deepens students’ comprehension of surface features and their significance. And this understanding gives them the power to shape meaning, which is what editing is all about” (23). In other words, understanding grammar and “surface features” of writing gives students rhetorical control over their writing; students’ writing is strengthened by their “power to shape meaning,” their awareness that grammatical choices do, as the subtitle of the next book to be examined here suggests, produce rhetorical effects. Anderson’s methods include sentence-combining exercises (mainly with examples pulled from student writing) and he advocates introducing grammatical terms to the point where his students have familiarity with the terminology of the subject

and can recognize the structures, but he does not require students to memorize terms. As long as his students grasp the presented concepts, the students can refer to them in whatever manner helps them remember and use them correctly and appropriately.

### *Rhetorical Grammar*

Rhetorical grammar is “grammar in the service of rhetoric: grammar knowledge as a tool that enables the writer to make effective choices” (Kolln, “Rhetorical” 29). Rhetorical grammar responds to many of the questions and issues that Weaver brings up in *Teaching Writing in Context*. Weaver surmises from her experience that “students are less likely to be interested in the grammar of their language per se than in various appealing aspects of language *use*, such as the language of advertising, the ‘double-speak’ of government, the language of sexism, and various ethnic and community dialects” (Weaver, *Teaching Grammar* 8). Based on the definition above, rhetorical grammar clearly accommodates students’ interests in the aspects of language Weaver lists, as all of the usages depend on stylistic language structures particular to each form. All of the usages listed are responses to specific rhetorical situations, which dictate what forms will be most effective and appropriate, and the stylistic structures of each form are inextricably linked to grammar.

Methods of teaching rhetorical grammar also minimize the marking of errors, addressing the negative reactions to the over-marking of errors that characterizes stereotypes of grammar instruction. In her discussion of error in student writing, Weaver observes that “Traditionally, the reading of students’ papers has been an ‘error hunt,’ not

an attempt to appreciate what the writer has said and how he or she has said it (75). Likewise, rhetorical grammar does not make a point of error correction, as it is not all about what is right and what is wrong; rather, the focus of rhetorical grammar instruction is to help students use language effectively and appropriately. The use of comma splices and fragments in professional writing across all genres prompts Weaver to ask, “Why, then, should we fervently try to eradicate all fragments from our students’ writing? Wouldn’t it be better to become more aware ourselves of what makes a fragment effective, and to help students eliminate only those fragments that are genuinely unclear or ineffective?” (80). The instructor teaching rhetorical grammar will answer the latter question in the affirmative.

Martha Kolln lays out her theory of rhetorical grammar in the article “Rhetorical Grammar: A Modification Lesson,” which appeared in *The English Journal* the same year (1996) in which her book (and, incidentally, Weaver’s book as well), *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, was published. The section of the article entitled “Using Rhetorical Grammar” serves as an appetizer for educators looking into methods of teaching rhetorical grammar. Using the example of noun modification, Kolln offers her method of seeing parts of the noun phrase as a series of slots as an alternative to the detached, drill-like exercises of traditional grammar instruction. Her method comes across as similar to the short, pointed “mini-lessons” that Weaver recommends instructors utilize when engaging in any explicit or direct grammar instruction, which, when paired with her theory of teaching grammar as a rhetorical tool, offers composition instructors with a productive method of instruction.

Readers should recognize the basis of the theory of rhetorical grammar from the promises of the earlier-published article in the preface to Kolln's student textbook, *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*:

Too often the grammar lessons that manage to find their way into the writing classroom are introduced for remedial purposes: to fix comma splices and misplaced modifiers and agreement errors and such. As a consequence, the study of grammar has come to have strictly negative, remedial associations—a Band-Aid for weak and inexperienced writers, rather than a rhetorical tool that all writers should understand and control. (xi)

Kolln makes a legitimate assertion that “it’s important to recognize that there are times when direct instruction works best” (*Rhetorical Grammar* 29); however, by writing a grammar book intended for a student audience, Martha Kolln turns these “times” for direct instruction into any time students are assigned her book as their grammar instruction book. Many of the issues Kolln tackles in *Rhetorical Grammar* are addressed well in theory: her discussion of reader expectations (28), her discussion of the use of the passive voice to shift focus (35), her discussion of levels of generality in sentences, paragraphs, and whole essays. However, the exercises introduced in the book as means of putting these theories into practice tend to slip into a decontextualized tedium reminiscent of traditional grammar instruction. Not surprisingly, few instructors have the time or the will to sift through the entirety of *Rhetorical Grammar* to discover the productive and useful methods and ideas scattered throughout. A simple search of the method luckily

shows that much of this legwork has been done for the composition instructors who know to search for it.

Laura Micciche's 2004 article "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar" does just what the title says. Micciche writes:

[T]he examinations of language made possible through rhetorical grammar pedagogy encourage students to view writing as a material social practice in which meaning is actively made, rather than passively relayed or effortlessly produced. In this sense, rhetorical grammar instruction can demonstrate to students that language does purposeful, consequential work in the world-work that can be learned and applied. (718-19)

How does this transfer to the classroom though? It is one thing to write about what is needed, but another, more difficult task to actually satisfy that need in the classroom.

What kind of exercises and formal assignments can be used to teach rhetorical grammar, without them turning into nothing more than the drills that seem to make everyone cringe?

Micciche anticipates this question and makes an important distinction between the goals of formal grammar exercises and those of rhetorical grammar exercises. When teaching grammar, composition instructors generally frame it as correcting errors, leading students to perceive grammar as applied to their work as "self-conscious correction...finding and fixing errors rather than...active choice making for a purpose" (720). Micciche employs a commonplace book, much like the ancient Greeks did, to document quotes and phrases from not only their readings for her class, but also from any

real world example that they come across in their daily lives. Students are asked to analyze these passages based on “how grammar and content work together to convey meaning” (725). These exercises help students recognize how sentence structure, punctuation, word choice, and other elements of grammar are used in everyday life to achieve diverse rhetorical goals. In addition to these analyses, Micciche has her students produce imitations of forms in their commonplace books, which enables students to demonstrate an ability to identify grammatical structures and to put them to use in similar rhetorical situations. She cites three benefits to the use of the commonplace books: students’ increased awareness of “what makes [writing] tick,” increased awareness of the role of grammar in the production of writing, and providing students with a place to explore “writing as reflecting intentional choices that have consequences” (Micciche 728).

Overall, grammar instruction is most effective when it is seamlessly integrated into the rest of composition instruction. It does not need to be taught separately from style or discussed outside of the realms of audience considerations or those of logic and rhetoric. And just as there are many useful pieces to be pulled from the many types of grammar, there are many ideas that can be pulled together from the various methods presented above to create a customized program of grammar instruction for composition. Using students’ own writing as an instructional tool in teaching grammar is a common thread in each of the recommended essays. Using students’ writing as Corbett does to teach them to be aware of their stylistic choices is an individual, personalized way of teaching grammar. Pulling example sentences from students’ writing to discuss

grammatical choices as a class or within peer groups takes the use of students' writing to a different level—students become increasingly aware that their work will be subject to an audience's evaluation. Other methods that prove to be useful are modeling grammatical and stylistic choices with example readings and requiring students to keep commonplace books, double-entry learning logs, or any sort of log that requires students to pay attention and notice the grammatical choices made by themselves and others and the effect those choices have on the rhetorical effectiveness of the piece of writing in question. Direct instruction in grammar can be generally avoided by using the indirect methods of instruction introduced in this chapter; however, where such instruction is necessary (i.e., in cases of persistently occurring errors involving certain grammatical concepts) Weaver's and Anderson's examples of how to incorporate mini-lessons about those concepts provide useful guidelines for approaching such situations.

## 7. Conclusion

Grammar—the term and the subject—is not as monolithic as a cursory review of the arguments for and against including grammar instruction in the composition classroom may lead one to believe. There are many theories of grammar, and while no one theory in isolation is useful for composition instruction, parts of each theory can be cobbled together, as recommended at the end of the preceding chapter, to form a powerful and purposeful set of ideas and methods for teaching grammar for composition. Grammar must be taught in the writing classroom in order to teach students how to communicate effectively for all rhetorical exigencies, including interactions with the “culture of power.” In teaching students how to communicate with more clarity, composition instructors empower their students, rather than engage in a power struggle with them by withholding the keys to the culture of power.

Before attempting to teach grammar to students, however, composition instructors must themselves learn how to approach grammar positively. If they have had experiences with grammar ranging from negative to neutral or indifferent, they need to acknowledge that those experiences, not grammar itself, may impede their capabilities to teach grammar positively. If they have had limited experience with grammar and do not feel as though they know it well enough to focus on it to any extent in their classrooms, they need to demand education for themselves and then learn from that experience how to

teach grammar to their students. Ed Vavra admits that “as a profession, we have recognized this problem for a long time. But nothing has been done about it, and nothing will until teachers begin to realize that what they were not taught is not their fault. What is their fault is the failure to demand better preparation” (37). There are ways to teach grammar to benefit composition and there are people and materials available to teach composition instructors just how to go about doing so. The best place for composition instructors to start is with themselves: by becoming comfortable with grammar themselves so that the task of teaching how to create a well- and correctly-formed sentence, paragraph, and composition by manipulating grammatical elements doesn’t seem as daunting.

Most importantly, instructors of composition (and instructors of composition instructors) must remember to constantly contextualize the information being presented from both sides of the debate, whether from the “harmful effect sentence” camp or from the “latest and greatest new grammar fresh from the mouths’ of linguists” camp. While some people focused on the sentence from the Braddock, et al. report, others were busy answering the authors’ call from the same report for more research into alternative ways of teaching grammar. They have found more than answers; they have found valid and important reasons for the inclusion of grammar instruction in the composition classroom and ways to get it there. Peer-reviewed research remains to be done, namely into the pedagogical methods suggested in Chapter 5 of this project, in order to confirm the best practices from each method introduced and to offer composition instructors with the most

up-to-date and effective theories and practices regarding the instruction of grammar in the first-year composition classroom.

Appendix I

*The Place of Grammar in the First-Year Composition Classroom at  
George Mason University*

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

BY RESPONDING TO AND RETURNING A COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE, YOU ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU HAVE ALSO READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE **INFORMED CONSENT FORM** THAT HAD BEEN SENT TO YOU ALONG WITH THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.

Question 1

Do/did you teach grammar in your English 101 class? For the purposes of this study, teaching grammar includes anything from explicit, traditional grammar instruction to sentence combining/rearranging work and alternative methods of grammar instruction.

Question 2

If you do/did teach grammar, please briefly state your reasons for doing so. If you do/did not teach grammar, please briefly state your reasons for doing so.

Question 3

If you have taught English 101 for multiple semesters, have you always taught or not taught grammar? If you have changed your incorporation of grammar in this class, please briefly state your reasons for doing so.

Question 4

If you do/did teach grammar, how do/did you incorporate this instruction in your lesson plans

Question 5

Please briefly describe your experiences with grammar instruction as a student, from elementary school through graduate school.

Question 6

Based on all of your experiences with grammar – as a student, an instructor, and in the real world – would you say that you feel positively or negatively toward grammar? Why? If your attitude toward grammar has changed, please briefly state why.

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## Curriculum Vitae

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