

THE ROLE AND VALUE OF GRAMMAR KNOWLEDGE FOR PROFESSIONAL
WRITERS

by

Madeline Graham Shaughnessy
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Committee:

_____ Director

_____ Department Chairperson

_____ Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

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Madeline Graham Shaughnessy
Bachelor of Arts
George Mason University, 2016

Director: Heidi Lawrence, Professor
Department of English

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, who taught me how to write and how to think critically. Thank you for raising me in a household where lively debates about participles, followed by sentence diagrams scribbled on dinner napkins, are the norm.

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE AND VALUE OF GRAMMAR KNOWLEDGE FOR PROFESSIONAL WRITERS

Madeline Graham Shaughnessy, M.A.

George Mason University, 2018

Thesis Director: Dr. Heidi Lawrence

This thesis investigates the role and value of grammar knowledge for professional writers. Historically, composition scholarship has questioned the value of grammar knowledge and instruction, with little to no consideration of the specific needs of professionals. Consequently, professional writing programs lack research to justify the inclusion or exclusion of grammar instruction. To provide this needed research and define the role and value of grammar for professional writers, this thesis surveys composition and technical communication scholarship on grammar and presents interviews with 14 professional writers concerning their practice and perception of grammar in their daily writing and editing tasks. The participants describe how formal grammar knowledge enables them to better navigate complicated writing tasks and explain writing choices to others—particularly important abilities given the distinct needs, demands, and expectations of professional writing contexts. Therefore,

professional writing programs should empower students with formal grammar knowledge by featuring grammar instruction in their curricula.

CHAPTER ONE: DISPARITY BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE VALUE OF GRAMMAR

As a student and professional writer, I have witnessed vastly contrasting perceptions of grammar knowledge and its value. I personally have found grammar knowledge to be essential to my career as a professional writer. I rely on my knowledge of grammar to decipher meaning, defend editing choices, achieve consistency, and more. For example, my manager recently sought my assistance to edit the sentence, “The goal today is sustainability—sustainability of presence in Earth orbit, sustainable exploration around the Moon and on its surface, and challenging the footprint of future exploration missions beyond the Moon.” My attempts to simply “rework” the sentence led to changes in meaning, while my manager’s attempts to do so only perpetuated the confusing grammatical errors. So, to effectively collaborate with my manager, I explained to her that the root of the issue was the lack of parallelism: The first two items of the list are noun phrases and the second item is a participial phrase. Moreover, this lack of parallelism then makes it impossible to determine what the participial phrase is modifying. Armed with this understanding and language for communicating our editing process, we were able to focus our attention and address those two issues. If not for my grammar knowledge, I would have struggled to clearly identify the issues with the sentence and been completely unable to then articulate those issues to my manager. We

would have continued to simply rewrite the sentence until it “sounded right”—an approach that had proven to be both counterproductive and time consuming.

However, as I have continued my education through an MA in English, I have found that not everyone shares such a positive view on grammar. The humanities (and particularly the field of composition) tend to focus most heavily on the historic problems with grammar instruction—to the extent that one scholar observed in 1994, “Formal instruction in grammar and the use of formal grammatical terminology is forbidden” (Hagge, p. 412). Consequently, my fellow students and some professors seem to distance the connection between grammar knowledge and their writing education and practice. In my own professional writing program, grammar has received only cursory attention in a single editing course, and other students in the program have reported feeling insecure about their grammar skills.

To investigate this disparity between perceptions of grammar’s role and value to writers, I conducted a preliminary literature review in the fields of composition and English pedagogy. This review, which I expand upon in a later chapter, led to the following discovery: The dominant literature on this topic fails to take into consideration the value of grammar knowledge for professional writers specifically. The literature primarily refers to needs of or requirements for “writers” or “student writers” without taking into account the different kinds of writing and writers that exist, particularly in the types of professional environments that I have found grammar knowledge to be most beneficial. Consequently, little to no research currently exists within composition scholarship that explicitly argues why grammar is or is not a necessary skill for

professional writers to have. This research would have implications for how grammar should be taught to professional writing students, if at all. As I delved into literature in technical and professional communication to see if this issue had been investigated within a field expressly devoted to the issues of professional writers in work environments similar to mine, I found some limited scholarship that referenced the value of grammar knowledge for professional writers. However, of these, few were published after the mid-1990s and none explicitly recommended grammar instruction for professional writers. As a result, even professional writing programs that do offer courses on grammar are doing so with little to no justification or guidance from scholarly research.

As I continued my search, I thought it might be possible that technical and professional communication scholarship on this topic does not exist because the value of grammar in professional writing programs is implicitly understood and established. To investigate this possibility, I reviewed the curricula of 25 professional writing programs in the United States to determine how consistently grammar is included or excluded in the coursework. I reviewed both course titles and descriptions for mentions of grammar. My research revealed that 36% of programs surveyed offer a course that incorporates grammar: Three out of the 25 programs offer courses explicitly about grammar, and six offer editing courses that mention grammar in the description. Interestingly, the program that offers “Rhetorical Grammar” as a core course is the highest ranked program in the country: Carnegie Mellon’s MA in Professional Writing (Universities.com).¹ Those

¹ Established in 1996, Universities.com uses government data, in-depth surveys, college graduate interviews, and editorial review for their ranking methodology.

programs offering some grammar instruction were split between graduate (4) and undergraduate (5). Table 1 lists the reviewed programs and their inclusion of grammar.

Table 1. List of professional writing programs reviewed for inclusion of grammar

University	Program	Features Grammar
Carnegie Mellon University	MA, Professional Writing	✓
Northeastern University	MS, Technical Communication	✓
Texas Tech University	BA, Technical Communication	✓
Michigan State University	BA, Professional Writing	✓
Portland State University	MA, Technical and Professional Writing	✓
San Francisco State University	BA, Technical and Professional Writing	✓
West Virginia University	MA, Professional Writing and Editing	✓
Utah University	BA, Technical Communication and Rhetoric	✓
University of Houston Downtown	BS, Professional Writing	✓
James Madison University	MA, Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication	✗
James Madison University	BA, Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical	✗
Texas Tech University	MA, Technical Communication	✗
New Jersey Institute of Technology	MS, Professional and Technical Communications	✗
Clemson University	MA, Writing, Rhetoric, and Media	✗
Miami University	BA, Professional Writing	✗
Virginia Tech	BA, Professional and Technical Writing	✗
University of Wisconsin	MA, Professional and Technical Writing	✗
University of Wisconsin	PhD, Professional and Technical Writing	✗
PennState	BA, Professional Writing	✗
George Mason University	MA, Professional Writing and Rhetoric	✗
Texas State	MA, Technical Communication	✗
Utah University	MA, Technical Communication and Rhetoric	✗
Utah University	PhD, Technical Communication and Rhetoric	✗
University of Houston Downtown	MA, Technical Communication	✗
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth	MA, Professional Writing	✗

Evidently, over one-third of professional writing programs, including the highest ranked, have deemed grammar instruction to be necessary. Yet, the other two-thirds have chosen to exclude grammar entirely. This disparity between programs' curricula supports the notion that the field of professional writing does not currently have a consensus on the role, value, and necessity of grammar knowledge for professional writing students. Therefore, research is needed to determine if professional writing programs should in fact include or exclude grammar instruction.

Research Question

To attempt to close this gap between what is currently known and taught about grammar in professional and technical writing programs, this research examines the role and importance of grammar to working professional writers and editors. The primary research question guiding this study is "What is the role and value of grammar knowledge for professional writers?" The answer to this question addresses a second question created by the problem identified above, "Should professional writing programs require courses dedicated to teaching grammar, and if so, how?" Insight into the role and value of grammar knowledge for professional writers is valuable knowledge because professional writing curricula should cover skills and knowledge that professional writers actively value and apply. Likewise, curricula should not waste time on skills and knowledge that professional writers do not actively value and apply. Moreover, a thorough investigation of this question may yield new, useful characterizations of grammar knowledge that can guide educators as they reconsider or tailor their approach to grammar instruction for professional writers.

Defining Grammar: Tacit and Formal Grammar Knowledge

Many different theories and conceptions of grammar exist: Prescriptive, descriptive, traditional, functional, generative, transformative, and so on. Theories of grammar can be cultural, pedagogical, or linguistic in nature. This thesis conceptualizes and addresses two kinds of grammar knowledge: Tacit and formal. These terms are meant to describe the manner in which one knows and navigates grammar in writing; they are epistemological in nature, rather than cultural or linguistic. Examining grammar from an epistemological angle places the focus on the utility of language—the ways that we know grammar and the operationalization of that knowledge. This focus on utility is especially appropriate for professional writers, whose relationship with grammar is typically pragmatic, rather than theoretical.

Tacit grammar knowledge is the implicit or unconscious knowledge of the construction of language. Encompassed within tacit grammar are notions of descriptive grammar as taken up and operationalized by scholars in linguistics and composition, which value the ways in which grammars are used, constructed, and make meaning in the world by real-life speakers in real-life situations. Tacit grammar knowledge is informed by the way we naturally acquire and understand language. In contrast, formal grammar knowledge is the explicit or conscious knowledge of the rules and terms describing the written construction and representation of language. Given that formal grammar knowledge describes written language primarily, it encompasses not only parts of speech and syntax but also the mechanics we use to orient language on the page, such as

punctuation. Formal grammar knowledge is informed by formalized or standardized conceptions of grammar and the accompanying language to articulate those conceptions.

I chose to use the terms tacit and formal, rather than two binaries such as tacit and explicit, because these two kinds of grammar knowledge are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As this thesis later describes in greater depth, formal knowledge does not replace tacit as a grammar knowledge but instead supplements it: Formal knowledge provides a language that clarifies tacit knowledge, allowing us to expand and articulate our grammar knowledge. The term “formal” also places emphasis on the origin of such knowledge, capturing the way in which it is recognized and constructed by official sources, rather than derived from personal intuition. Moreover, the term “formal” does not carry connotations of correctness as heavily as a comparable term such as “prescriptive” does. Formal grammar knowledge is not necessarily a prescription of correct or incorrect usage but chiefly an explicit, “formally” derived framework for discussing and understanding language and its written construction.

Lastly, “tacit” and “formal” both originated from the interviews and appeared to resonate the most with participants. The term “formal” was used in the interview questions to describe grammar instruction, and participants independently applied that modifier to grammar knowledge as well. For example, one participant talked about “knowing the rules in a formalized way.” In pairing the words “knowing” and “formalized,” this quote reinforces the epistemological conceptualization of grammar in this thesis. Moreover, in response to early questions about grammar knowledge, participants would often ask for distinctions of what I meant by “grammar knowledge.”

Over the interviews, I found that participants grasped the concepts the most easily when we introduced the terms “tacit” and “formal” to the discourse. Given that this thesis is meant to represent the perceptions and experiences of professional writers, it seems appropriate to use their language to define key terms.

Overview of Thesis

This thesis recognizes a problematic disparity in professional writing programs’ treatment of grammar knowledge and its instruction. I address this disparity by investigating the question, “What is the role and value of grammar knowledge for professional writers?” To answer this question, I conducted interviews with professional writers and analyzed their responses for themes. I also investigated the research problem and question by conducting a literature review, provided in Chapter 2. This literature review surveys scholarship in the fields of composition and technical communication to gain insight into the reasons behind professional writing programs’ treatment of grammar. Chapter 3 describes the methods used to conduct the study presented in this thesis, and Chapter 4 shares the results of the study by discussing the themes that emerged from the interviews with professional writers. Finally, Chapter 5 closes this thesis by discussing the answer to the research question and implications for the treatment of grammar in professional writing programs.

CHAPTER TWO: SCHOLARSHIP ON THE VALUE OF GRAMMAR

The purpose of this literature review is twofold: 1) to identify the roots of the tensions surrounding grammar and its instruction and 2) to investigate the treatment of grammar in the field of technical communication.² This literature review surveys scholarship on the value of grammar in two parts: The first part covers scholarship on grammar in the field of composition, and the second part covers scholarship in the field of technical communication. The review begins with composition scholarship because the field of composition, one of the oldest fields in English studies, has historically spearheaded discourse on grammar and its instruction. Consequently, prefacing with foundational composition scholarship on grammar provides necessary context for understanding the technical communication scholarship presented in the second section. A side-by-side overview of the scholarship in composition and technical communication also allows us to see how one field responds to and influences the other.

Following this section, the literature review surveys scholarship on grammar in technical communication. In addition to investigating this field's attitudes towards

² It is important to note that while I use the term "professional writing" in this thesis, most of the journals about professional writing use the term "technical communication." I chose to use the term professional writing because my research pertains to writing and editing in particular, whereas technical communication can encompass other forms of communication such as programming or design. The term "professional" is also less limiting than "technical." "Professional" can encompass any kind of writer that is employed by an industry, whereas "technical" is sometimes limited to particular genres (e.g. "manuals") and industries (e.g. engineering).

grammar, this section also investigates the prevalence of the topic in technical communication scholarship. The preliminary literature review suggested that technical communication has limited scholarship addressing grammar, and this review seeks to determine the extent of that gap.

The findings of this literature review reveal why professional writing programs appear to lack consensus on the inclusion of grammar in their curricula. The review shows that technical communication scholarship on grammar is positive overall; however, it is also sparse and outdated. Consequently, it is likely that many professional writing programs are taking all guidance from the mainstream and influential composition scholarship detailed in the first section of this literature review. However, entirely deferring to the field of composition is inappropriate, considering that the field of composition does not consider the distinct contexts, needs, and requirements of professional writing specifically.

Theories of Grammar and its Instruction in Composition

The field of composition has been engaged in a controversial and unresolved grammar debate—or battle, as one scholar vividly analogized in 1980 (Basset)—for the past 50 years. This “battle” began in earnest in the 1980s as a response to “traditional” grammar instruction. Lindblom and Dunn (2006) described traditional grammar instruction as the kind “in which students are exposed to lists of ‘the rules’ of ‘proper’ or ‘good’ grammar and are expected to produce writing that fits within those constraints” (p. 71). Their use of quotations shows that scholars question the validity of a “proper” or traditional grammar in general as much as the validity of traditional grammar instruction.

Following this statement, Lindblom and Dunn (2006) highlighted the two broad objections to this kind of traditional grammar further explored in this literature review: that traditional grammar is discriminatory and that grammar instruction is useless, ineffective, and a waste of time. To illustrate the heated and bipartisan nature of this controversial topic, Basset (1980) noted those who resist these views of grammar are often seen as “reactionary pedants who insist upon a purist traditional standard of language propriety” (p. 55). However, by the 1990s, some composition scholars began responding to both opponents and proponents of formal grammar by calling for a rhetorical grammar.

Discriminatory Grammar

The first perspective on grammar instruction argues that enforcing a standard English discriminates against groups with non-Standard dialects by suggesting that their way of speaking is “incorrect.” By teaching—and, by extension, enforcing—standard English, education systems privilege one social group over another while also criticizing other groups’ home dialects as improper and in need of correction. Such exclusion and criticism disenfranchises students whose home dialect is not standard English. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) first articulated this argument in the much-cited “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” in 1974:

Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim

leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. (p.

1)

This statement effectively condemns grammar instruction as a form of institutionalized discrimination, leading one technical communication scholar to describe the CCCC as “the professional vehicle for [the] movement away from composition as learning and following rules of grammar” (Hagge, 1994, p. 410). As a solution to discriminatory grammar instruction, “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (1974) proposed that English teachers be familiar with modern linguistic principles and the English language in social and cultural contexts (p. 19). This knowledge enables instructors to discuss language in such a way that does not disempower students—although it is unclear from the article what actual grammar content instructors should teach, if any at all.

Over 40 years later, scholars continue to put forth this argument. In 2003, Dunn and Lindblom explained how in teaching a “standardized, handbook grammar as if it is the ‘correct’ form of grammar, we are teaching in cooperation with a discriminatory power system” (p. 44). They elaborate three years later that formal grammar “perpetuate[s] cultural prejudices regarding class and race that are mirrored in what is often referred to as the difference between ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ or between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ language use” (p. 71). In 2015, Orzulak discussed how “ideologies about language and race can stymie or support teachers’ desires for equitable teaching” (p. 177). In 2017, Pattanayak argued that “Standard Written English is deeply rooted in white upper/middle class culture” and “espousing the ideology that there is one correct way to speak and write disenfranchises many populations who are already denigrated by

society” (p. 83). She concludes with a call to “start teaching and envisioning writing as a cultural and social activity” (p. 85), making both her argument and conclusion closely aligned with the CCCC’s call for educators to amend grammar’s “attempt of one social group to exert dominance over another” through enhanced linguistic and cultural awareness of language.

Useless and Ineffective Grammar

The second perspective on grammar points to empirical studies that show instruction of grammar is ineffective. These studies typically show either that students do not learn grammar at all after grammar instruction, or even if students do, their overall writing has not improved (Hartwell, 1985; Weaver, 1996; Wyse, 2001). In 1963, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Shoer concluded that grammar instruction is not only ineffective, but it is also harmful because it detracts from more important concerns and wastes valuable class time (p. 37-38). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) made a similar resolution in 1985:

...use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students’ speaking and writing...

NCTE urge the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction.

As recently as 2006, Lindblom and Dunn referred to these empirical studies to argue that formal grammar instruction is ineffective (p. 71).

Note, however, that some scholars have questioned the validity of such studies, describing their results as “grossly exaggerated” (Basset, 1980, p. 58) or “based on

dubious research and on distorted conclusions and inferences” (Kolln, 1996, p. 29-30). Moreover, a few empirical studies, with two as recent as the past two years, have shown that students actually desire grammar instruction (Ferris, Eckstein, & DeHond, 2017). Other studies showed a correlation between grammar competency and literacy (McNaught & Shaw, 2016) as well as success in a business course (Waltman & Smeltzer, 1988).

Hartwell (1985) put forth the foundational argument for why formal grammar instruction is ineffective. In “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar,” he argued that grammar knowledge is tacit and cannot be improved through knowledge of formal rules. Thirty years later, Rule (2017) echoed Hartwell’s argument that grammar is a tacit knowledge, describing it as something we “mysteriously acquire and continuously reshape through experience” (p. 153). Harris (2017) argued that knowledge of grammar terminology has no bearing on the quality of one’s writing. To solve the problems they identify with grammar instruction, all of these scholars recommended “any kind of language activity that enhances the awareness of language as language” (Hartwell, 1985, p. 125). They propose “discovery and dialogue” (Rule, 2017, p. 153)—but do not specify tools to achieve that enhanced awareness or discovery.

Rhetorical Grammar

As Wolfe, Britt, and Alexander (2011) describe, these arguments against grammar resulted in a decline of scholarship on grammar in composition studies. Macdonald (2007) charted this decline, stating that “the more elite parts of the profession still consider language study, grammar, or work on style to be remnants of the past rather than

vital subjects for current professional research” (p. 612). Yet, 21st century scholars Connor (2000) and Myers (2003) both lament this decline, arguing that grammar is, in fact, critical to composition pedagogy and to acknowledge its importance does not diminish the importance of other aspects of composition.

In an effort to remedy this decline and address popular arguments against grammar and its instruction, scholars began calling for a “rhetorical grammar,” as coined by Kolln in 1996. Kolln (1996) recognized that scholars such as Hartwell fixate on formal, traditional, sequential grammar instruction and fail to take into consideration other approaches to grammar. MacDonald (2007) also identified how opponents to grammar operate in binary: She showed how the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” argument is “conceptualized as binary: whether to teach EAE or affirm a student’s existing dialect of English” (2007, p. 601) and how the Braddock et al. argument described above also offers only the option either to teach or not to teach grammar (p. 612). As a result, these opponents to grammar fail to take into consideration the different approaches to grammar or contexts in which grammar knowledge can be applied.

To provide a middle ground, MacDonald (2007), Kolln (1996), and Dunn and Lindblom (2003) all argue for consideration of grammar as a tool for making writing more effective, rather than simply “correct.” Dunn and Lindblom (2003) connected grammar to rhetoric, proposing that writers follow the conventions that are “grammatically correct with [one’s] audience” (p. 48). Meanwhile, MacDonald (2007) recommended that the study of English should include “enabling writers to go beyond

simplistic rules... and be able to alter their styles for different audiences and purposes” (p. 617). These recommendations show that grammar choices are not arbitrary or merely conventional but have rhetorical effects given one’s purpose and audience. To teach this “rhetorical grammar,” both Kolln (1996) and Weaver (1996) have proposed teaching grammar within the context of writing, rather than in isolation or sequentially.

MacDonald (2007), as well as other scholars, also claimed that the actual rules and terminology surrounding formal grammar enable writers to communicate more effectively. She stated the need to be able to recognize “parts of sentences and how they function—without being overwhelmed by metalanguage but also having the metalanguage required for understanding and choosing options to communicate” (2007, p. 617). Basset (1980) agrees that “teaching prescriptive rules of standard English... give[s] to all students a flexibility to conduct a discourse in whatever terms the specific situation requires...” (p. 60). He explained the value of having a common terminology when discussing writing at the sentence-level. Similarly, Graff (2003) noted that “formulas can enable creativity... if we refuse to provide such formulas on the grounds that they are too prescriptive or that everything has to come from the students themselves, we just end up hiding the tools of success” (p. 11). These recommendations address the grammar opponents’ failure to take into consideration the need for tools—in this case, metalanguage in the form of grammar terminology—to achieve the “discovery” and enhanced language awareness Rule (2017) and Hartwell (1985) called for.

Treatment of Grammar in Technical Communication

A review of technical communication scholarship on grammar reveals a generally positive but sparse and outdated body of literature on the subject. For this review, I searched five technical communication journals for articles on grammar and found grammar to be a niche topic only consistently discussed in one journal and over a particular period of time. Yet, a few technical communication scholars do indirectly address some of the arguments composition scholars have made. These scholars argue—primarily implicitly—that grammar is rhetorical and that formal grammar instruction can enable a greater understanding of language.

Grammar is a Niche Topic

My preliminary literature suggested a significant gap of technical communication scholarship on grammar. Such a gap would mean that professional writing programs are making decisions about grammar without guidance from scholarship in their field. To investigate this extent of this gap, I reviewed every accessible issue in five esteemed technical communication journals: *Technical Communication* (volumes 1995-2018), *Technical Communication Quarterly* (volumes 1992-2018), *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* (volumes 1971-2018), *Journal of Business & Technical Communication* (volumes 1987-2018), and *IEEE Transactions on Professional Writing* (1972-2018). I excluded commentary, such as notes to the editor or other correspondence. I searched the titles in each issue for keywords relating to grammar

including “grammar,” “syntax,” “mechanics,” and specific grammatical terms such as “pronoun,” “conjunction,” “verb,” and so on.³

I found a total of 61 articles containing a keyword across 219 volumes. Consider that a typical volume contains four issues that each includes five articles, yielding a total of 4380 articles in 219 volumes. In that case, articles with grammar keywords in the title comprise 1.4% (61/4380) of the total number of articles reviewed. Of these articles, almost half (29, or 48%) came from *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*.

Table 2. Articles collected by journal.

Journal	Volumes	# of Articles	% of Total	Average Year of Publication
<i>Journal of Business & Technical Communication</i> (1987-2018)	32 (1-32)	3	5%	1998
<i>Journal of Technical Writing and Communication</i> (1971-2018)	48 (1-48)	29	48%	1988
<i>Technical Communication</i> (1967-2018)	51 (14-65)	15	25%	1988
<i>Technical Communication Quarterly</i> (1992-2018)	27 (1-27)	1	1%	2010
<i>IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication</i> (1972-2018)	61 (1-61)	13	21%	1988
Total:	219	61	100%	1989

Sixty-four percent of the articles were published in the 1980s and 1990s alone, with only 16% published in 21st century. Clearly, grammar in technical communication journals—

³ I recognize that titles alone cannot fully capture the content of an article. These journals likely include some articles that discuss grammar but do not include related keywords in the title. However, titles are written to a) inform and b) attract readers. Therefore, if few articles appear with keywords related to grammar in the title, that indicates that the articles either a) do not contain information about grammar or b) that the author did not think keywords related to grammar would attract readers. Consequently, reviewing the titles of articles can indicate the overall prevalence or popularity of a topic in a given journal.

already rarely featured—steeply declined in relevance by the end of the 20th century.

Figure 1 visualizes this decline.

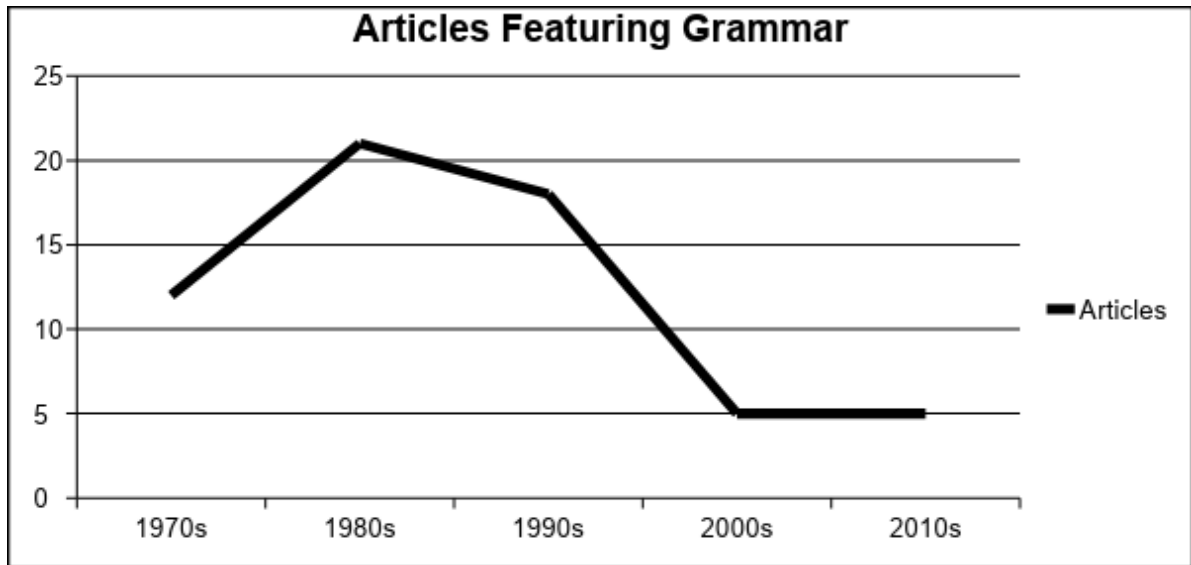


Figure 1. Number of articles featuring grammar between 1970 and today.

Of the 61 articles identified, nearly half (28, or 46%) of the articles are about the use of a particular grammatical feature in the context of technical writing. Table 3 below provides a representative sample of these articles across decades and journals.

Table 3. Articles discussing particular features of grammar.

Journal	Title	Author	Year
<i>Journal of Technical Writing and Communication</i>	"Besides Moreover However and but" Conjunctions—Order Out of Confusion	M. Jordan	1974
<i>Journal of Technical Writing and Communication</i>	The Use of Quotation Marks and Italics to Introduce Unfamiliar Terms	D. Farkas	1983
<i>Journal of Technical Writing</i>	Technical Writing and Terminal	W. Pixton	1992

<i>and Communication</i>	Modification		
<i>Journal of Technical Writing and Communication</i>	A New Look at Infinitives in Business and Technical Writing	M. Myers	2002
<i>Technical Communication</i>	AND—The Simplest Connective	W. E. Britton	1981
<i>Technical Communication</i>	Usage of the Passive Voice	K. Porter	1991
<i>IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication</i>	The Impact of Passive Voice on Reading Comprehension	L. J. LoMaglio, V. J. Robinson	1985

As shown in Table 3, these articles span four decades and three journals. The majority (22 out of 28) of these articles are from *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, with all but three appearing between 1974 and 1998. Five of the remaining appear in *Technical Communication* between 1979 and 1991, with only one appearing in *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* in 1985.

These articles about particular grammatical features all indicate that grammatical features have stylistic and rhetorical influence in professional writing in particular. For example, in “Plain Comma Sense” Foley (1975) explains how “correct punctuation makes writing meaningful” (p. 287). Another early article that did not include grammar keywords in the title also explicitly argues for the relationship between grammar and style: “Style and the Effective Engineer” begins its explanation of how to write an effective report with a section titled “Problems with Grammar,” which discusses items such as parallelism, ambiguous pronouns, dangling modifiers, and so on (Borger, 1978). Evidently, scholarship in technical communication has promoted the view that particular grammatical features have stylistic effects and should be discussed in context. However, this scholarship is primarily restricted to a single journal, *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, and nearly ceased to appear in any publications after the 1990s.

Despite its supposed stylistic influences, grammar appears to be a niche topic in technical communication that largely withdrew from scholarship after the 1990s.

Grammar is Rhetorical and Contextual

While the articles above implicitly indicate the rhetorical nature of grammar, only one technical communication scholar, John Hagge (1994), has explicitly argued that grammar is rhetorical in “The Value of Formal Conventions in Disciplinary Writing.” While Hagge (1994) discussed formal conventions in general, he highlighted grammar standards in particular, noting that one prominent scholar referred to grammar as “the most common type of formalist value theory” (p. 408). In this article, Hagge countered “antiformalist” scholars who argue that formal conventions “inhibit writers” (Hagge, 1994, 411) and are “‘accidents,’ not ‘essences,’ of good writing” (412). Hagge shows how antiformalists “repeatedly and deliberately separate formal writing conventions... from supposedly higher level rhetorical concerns” (412). This antiformalist stance echoes scholarship discussed above that argues formal grammar is an arhetorical practice that constrains writers (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Shoer, 1963; Dunn & Lindblom, 2003; Hartwell, 1985; “Resolution on Grammar Exercises,” 1985; Rule, 2017).

Yet, Hagge (1994) argued, formal conventions, including grammatical standards, “have been developed as ways to solve the rhetorical problems inherent in the transmission of disciplinary information” (p. 456). Therefore, composition theorists should not “diminish the value of formalism where contextually appropriate and when formalisms have been established for rhetorical reasons” (1994, p. 416). Thus, Hagge (1994) argued that formal standards, including formal grammar, are in fact rhetorical. In

contributing this article to technical communication scholarship, Hagge showed the logic, need, and relevance of technical communication scholarship that addresses composition theory's stances on grammar. However, this article appears to be the only example of such a response to composition theory from technical communication, suggesting such discourse is relevant and needed but not occurring.

Although Hagge's article stands alone as a direct argument for grammar's rhetorical nature, other technical communication scholars have supported one of Hagge's main points, which is that professional writing must be considered apart from other kinds of writing. Hagge (1994) emphasized that formal writing conventions are necessary for disciplinary writing. Formal conventions have "evolved to meet the needs of disciplinary readers who expect writing in a field to reflect fundamental disciplinary practices" (Hagge, 1994, p. 454). Moreover, he argued that antiformalists "represent only mainstream, institutionalized composition thought" (1994, p. 413). They "de-emphasiz[e] the importance of final written products and their conventions" (Hagge, 1994, p. 411) and have "diminished the value of formal conventions in writing based on insufficient or irrelevant occupational writing" (p. 416). Hagge is highlighting the need for scholarship on writing to consider writers' distinct needs and contexts.

Technical communication scholars Hische (1974), Ramsey (1977), and Kellner (1982) all agree that professional writing in particular should be distinguished from other kinds of writing. Hische (1974) argued, "technical writing is a 'different animal' from normal writing. First, the subject matter is of a technical nature. It requires very precise language to describe it" (p. 288). Hische (1974) then recommended combining such

awareness of the differences between technical and nontechnical writing with “good, basic sentence structure and grammar” to communicate with one’s audience (p. 289). Similarly, Ramsey (1977) stated the “precision-minded, objective nature of technical writing requires careful attention to matters of style and grammar” (p. 333). Meanwhile, Kellner (1982) suggested that professional writers have distinct demands and obligations when he claimed that technical writing teachers should focus on “those aspects of grammar and syntax especially relevant to the technical writer” (p. 27). Overall, this claim that professional or technical writing is a “different animal” has two important implications: First, grammar is rhetorical because how one approaches grammar depends on audience and situation. Second, scholarship on writing in general—“mainstream, institutionalized composition thought,” as Hagge (1994) said—cannot fully represent the needs and values of professional writing.

Grammar is Functional and Logical

Technical communication scholarship offers a rebuttal to composition scholarship that argues formal grammar knowledge is a useless and unhelpful skill. As discussed earlier, composition scholars such as Hartwell (1985) argue that a “metalinguistic awareness” of language, rather than a grasp of formal grammar rules, is sufficient for writers to succeed. In direct response to Hartwell, technical communication scholar Snyder (1986) stated the need to “provide a framework within which to develop a keener awareness of how language works” (p. 129). Kies (1985) explained, “functional descriptions of style are more valuable since they offer some understanding of communicative purpose and, thus, explain the use and frequency of stylistic features” (p.

299). Rather than inhibiting writers, such functional descriptions actually “expand the writer’s knowledge about the different language structures available to him and their functions” (Kies, 1985, p. 307). Moreover, Wolfe, Britt, and Alexander (2011) noted that such instruction “need not be inflexible or arhetorical” (p. 123). Students can learn and acquire a framework of functional descriptions—such as formal grammar rules—while also grasping the rhetorical nature and value of such descriptions.

As two scholars describe, understanding the “why” behind formal grammar rules is key to their being useful. Without an understanding of the reasoning behind formal grammar rules, such knowledge appears to simply be a collection of useless, “arbitrary pronouncements” (Foley, 1975, p. 209). As Foley (1975) described, “a great weakness of all such collections of rules is that they seem arbitrary—like rules of card-games—because they never show why” (p. 288). Similarly, Hagge (1994) emphasized that such rules “did not originate arbitrarily, nor [have they] been arbitrarily imposed” (p. 453). In fact, formal grammar rules have logical explanations and grow “out of the nature of our language” (Foley, 1975, p. 209). Consequently, by learning the “why” behind formal grammar rules, writers can gain new insight into the “nature of our language”—they can enhance their “metalinguistic awareness” by learning how language operates through formal grammar rules.

Conclusion: Professional Writing Programs Need More Guidance For the Inclusion or Exclusion of Grammar

Evidently, arguments against the instruction of grammar have pervaded composition scholarship for decades. Composition scholars, including prestigious and

influential organizations such as the CCCC and the NCTE, have argued grammar is discriminatory, inhibiting, ineffective, and a waste of time. An intuitive grasp and metalinguistic awareness of language, they argue, is enough to attain sufficient facility with language. This scholarship likely accounts for the distance from grammar I have witnessed in professional writing programs. Yet, as shown, many scholars have identified flaws in some of these arguments against grammar. Grammar is, in fact, a rhetorical tool that can enable writers to communicate more effectively. Additionally, functional descriptions of grammar—or “rules”—do not constrain writers but rather enable them to both navigate and talk about writing.

Moreover, this literature review affirms the gap in literature explicitly addressing the need for professional writers to learn grammar. Composition scholarship discusses grammar in relation to writers in general only, and never professional writers specifically. Technical communication journals, meanwhile, have limited scholarship addressing the topic. Nearly half of the few articles related to grammar appear in a single journal, showing this topic is not widely discussed in technical communication scholarship. This absence of scholarship on grammar in technical communication substantiates the possibility that professional writing programs are taking guidance from composition scholarship primarily. However, as noted above, composition scholarship does not address or represent the distinct needs and situations of professional writers. Therefore, although professional writing programs should certainly consult composition scholarship, composition scholarship should not be the sole guidance to professional writing programs.

In addition, the technical communication scholarship that does address grammar does not explicitly argue for the value of grammar or the inclusion of grammar instruction in professional writing programs. Most articles that do treat grammar simply discuss how to use particular grammar features. Such articles only indirectly suggest the value of grammar to professional writers and do not present arguments for the instruction of grammar. Articles that do discuss the value of grammar as a rhetorical or functional tool do so indirectly, referring primarily to formal conventions or standards as a whole. Moreover, much of the limited scholarship on grammar that does appear in technical communication journals is decades old. Finally, any of the technical communication scholarship that discusses grammar captures only the perspective of the author and does not represent the value and role of grammar for the general population of professional writers, as the study presented in this thesis intends to do.

The one exception to this gap in the literature is the article “Breaking the Rules: Teaching Grammar ‘Wrong’ for the Right Results in Technical Communication Consulting for Engineers,” published in *IEEE Transactions on Professional Writing* in 2010. Unlike any other technical communication article, “Breaking the Rules” acknowledges the tensions surrounding grammar instruction in relation to professional writing and claims that grammar instruction can, in fact, enrich writing instruction in particular contexts. This article describes the design, delivery, and outcome of a writing workshop for engineers that incorporates grammar, as requested by the client. The authors found that, contrary to their pedagogical training, the inclusion of formalist grammar actually improved the workshop. Opening with a formalist grammar segment

gained participants' engagement and established credibility. Grammar, they argue, can serve as a "gateway" for engineers into broader, more rhetorical concerns because it acknowledges the existing values such writers have and meets them at a familiar and comfortable point. The authors conclude by inviting technical communication teachers to consider how students might respond to "situated use" (p. 67) of grammar instruction in the classroom.

This article validates several of the claims I build about grammar in this literature review. First, the authors confirm my observation that grammar instruction is marginalized and "disdained" (p. 64) in both composition and technical writing pedagogy. The authors, who are English professors at the University of Wyoming, acknowledge their conditioning to "regard direct grammar instruction with suspicion" (p. 59). To emphasize grammar and mechanics would be to "abandon—or at least reconceive—some fundamental tenets of contemporary composition and technical writing pedagogy" (p. 59). Yet, the authors show that grammar can, in fact, facilitate communication about writing and engender rhetorical awareness: "Grammar... can provide a familiar and accessible language for practitioners and consultants alike to examine complex rhetorical abstractions and applications" (p. 59). They also support the argument that such grammar instruction has value depending on the context, role, and needs of the writer—in their case, engineers with particular preconceptions about writing.

However, even with this relevant article, important gaps still remain regarding the role and value of grammar instruction for professional writers. The study in the article only considers the needs and context of engineers, rather than professional writers.

Moreover, the authors describe engineers as having “strong disciplinary roots that foreground skills-based concerns” and often “encounter[ing] loosely positivist writing paradigms” (p. 61). This experience with writing, which is integral to the authors’ argument about grammar serving as a gateway, is less likely to apply to professional writing students with a humanities background. Therefore, the authors’ argument about grammar as a gateway might not pertain to professional writers at all. Most importantly, the authors consider only how the inclusion of grammar can facilitate writing instruction. They do not discuss how grammar knowledge itself may be of value to writers. Finally, according to Google Scholar, this article has only been cited two times since its publication in 2010. This absence of citations supports my earlier claim that, despite this relevant and unique article, discourse on the role and value of grammar in technical communication is rare. Research on the value and role of grammar for professional writers is still needed to provide guidance to professional writing programs.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This research study used likert scale questions and semi-structured, recorded interviews to collect data on the role and value of grammar knowledge for professional writers. The study analyzed the participant discussion for themes and outcomes related to the research problem and question.

Interviews

I chose semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection because this method would best capture the perceptions and experiences of professional writers. The conversational nature of semi-structured interviews opens the dialogue that has been missing with professional writers on their real-life experiences with grammar. I included likert scale questions to provide consistency and structure across interviews. Likert scale questions allowed me to quantify my findings in addition to analyzing themes that emerged.

Interviews could be conducted in-person, over the phone, or through Skype/Google Hangouts, at the convenience of the interviewee. Of the 15 interviews, I conducted 13 over the phone. Interviews were predominantly over the phone because the majority of interviewees were geographically dispersed, too busy to meet in person, or both.

Interviews consisted of 14 questions, provided below. The first three questions ask about the participant's work experience, allowing me to determine possible patterns between participants' work background and their experience with grammar. The following four questions ask about the value of grammar knowledge and the value of grammar instruction. I asked about these two topics separately to prevent conflation of knowledge and instruction. By asking about knowledge and instruction separately, I clearly differentiated between the two and ensured discussion of both. For each of these topics, I asked participants how important they perceived grammar to be for writing and editing jobs in general and for their own jobs specifically. I made this distinction between writing jobs in general and their own specifically to see if grammar was deemed more or less important depending on one's particular field, industry, or writing tasks. The following two questions, 8 and 9, ask about writers confidence in their grammar and writing skills, allowing me to discuss how the participant achieved that confidence or ways to improve confidence. I used a likert scale for questions 4-9 for two reasons: 1) to generate quantitative, generalizable data about professional writers' value of grammar and 2) to ground participants' answer to the question before opening a broader, more complicated discourse on the rationale behind their answer. The remaining questions, 10-14, ask about participants' past experience with grammar instruction, provide an opportunity for further comment, and gather demographic data necessary to characterize the sample of participants in this study.

1. How many years of experience do you have writing professionally?
2. Where do you currently work and what is your job title?
3. What kind of writing and editing do you do for your job?

4. On a scale of 1-5—one being not important at all, five being extremely important—how important would you say knowledge of grammar, including syntax, mechanics, and punctuation, is for writing and editing? Why?
5. On a scale of 1-5, how important would you say knowledge of grammar is for your job, specifically? Why?
6. On a scale of 1-5, how important would you say training—any informal or formal instruction—in grammar is for jobs that involve writing and editing?
7. On a scale of 1-5, how important would you say training in grammar is for your job, specifically?
8. On a scale of 1-5—one being not confident at all, five being extremely confident—how confident would you say you are about your grammar skills?
9. On a scale of 1-5, how confident would you say you are about your writing skills?
10. Where and how have you learned or acquired your knowledge of grammar?
11. Do you have any other thoughts to add about the value or role of grammar knowledge for professional writers?
12. Can you please state your age and gender?
13. How do you describe your race?
14. Can you describe your educational background?

I personally transcribed all interviews without relying on outside services or software. I did not transcribe introductory or closing remarks, or the review of the consent form. To simplify the transcriptions, I did not transcribe every instance of speech dysfluency, such as stuttering or filler (e.g. “um”). I justify excluding speech dysfluency because the linguistic features of my data are not informing my analysis.

Participants

Criteria

Participants had to meet the following criteria to be eligible for this study:

- Participants needed to be 18 years of age or older.
- Participants needed to be professional writers with at least one year of experience. Professional writers are defined as those employed by industry

or government and for whom writing and editing is a primary job responsibility.

- Participants needed to have at least a bachelor's degree.

Participants confirmed their eligibility prior to the interviews.

Recruitment

I recruited participants through snowball sampling and by connecting to professionals on LinkedIn whose profiles indicated eligibility for the study. After an initial introduction, I sent participants the official recruitment email. The day before a scheduled interview, I emailed participants a copy of the consent form to review. I also briefly reviewed the consent form with the participant at the beginning of each interview. Participants consented to participate by providing a verbal statement of consent and spelling their last names.

Sample

This study included 15 participants. However, one was determined to not meet the inclusion criteria after the interview began and was excluded from the study. Thus, the final sample size was 14 participants. Table 4 below shows key demographics of the participants.

Table 4. Participant demographics

#	Job	Age	Gender	Race	Years Experience	English Background	Phone/In-Person
1	Task Manager	26	F	White/Caucasian	3	Yes	In-Person
2	Public Relations	22	F	White/Caucasian	3	No	Phone

3	Technical Communication Leader	58	F	White/Caucasian	22	No	Phone
4	Proposal Manager	41	M	White/Caucasian	9	Yes	Phone
5	Technical Writer	34	F	White/Caucasian	10	Yes	Phone
6	Editor Analyst	46	F	White/Caucasian	12	No	In-Person
7	Director of Policy	35	F	Black/African American	13	Yes	Phone
8	Technical Writer	35	F	Black/African American	15	Yes	Phone
9	Proposal Writer	28	F	White/Caucasian	4	Yes	Phone
10	Technical Writer	29	F	White/Caucasian	6	Yes	Phone
11	Associate Editor	27	F	White/Caucasian	9	No	Phone
12	Technical Writer	26	F	White/Caucasian	2	Yes	Phone
13	Project Manager	26	M	White/Caucasian	2	Yes	Phone
14	Technical Writer	25	M	White/Caucasian	2	Yes	Phone

As Table 4 shows, gender, race, and an educational background in English were disproportionately represented in the sample: 80% of participants identified as female, 85% identified as white, and 70% reported having at least one degree in English. Participants with higher education outside of the field of English held degrees in Communication, Biology, General Humanities, Music, Liberal Studies, and Engineering. Approximately 65% of the participants held a Master's degree or higher. Age, years of work experience, and professional background were more evenly represented. In addition to the wide range of titles shown in the table above, participants also worked in a wide range of fields, to include information technology, engineering, security, intelligence,

construction, public relations, and journalism. Half of the participants worked for government contractors, while the other half worked in the commercial sector.

Analytical Approach

Thematic analysis was the primary analytical approach for this study. An initial round of theory-driven coding informed this thematic analysis. To balance the theory-driven, or deductive, nature of this process, I also conducted a separate round of analysis using inductive, or data-driven, descriptive coding to identify any potentially significant repeated concepts across the interviews. Finally, I used spreadsheet software to calculate averages across the likert scale questions.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was the primary analytical approach for this study. This thematic analysis entailed analyzing the data for themes and outcomes related to the research problem and question. Saldana (2009) provides the following explanation of this analytic approach:

...themes are statements qua [in the role of] ideas presented by participants during interviews, or conceptual topics developed by the researcher during a review of the data.... These themes are discerned during data collection and initial analysis, and then examined further as interviews continue. The analytic goals are to winnow down the number of themes to explore in a report, and to develop an “overarching theme” from the data corpus or an “integrative theme” that weaves various themes together in a coherent narrative. (p. 139)

To arrive at themes, I conducted an initial analysis of the data using a variation of theory-driven coding. According to Boyatzis (1998), theory-driven coding involves beginning with a theory and then deriving code elements from that theory (p. 33). The resulting code is often “in the language of the researcher’s field” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 33). For this study, I drew from theories and concepts encountered in the literature review to code the data. In particular, I analyzed the data for comments relating to tacit and formal grammar knowledge and the value of formal grammar instruction. From this analysis, themes such as “Formal grammar rules provide a shared language,” “Formal grammar knowledge helps writers defend decisions,” and “Formal grammar instruction covers information writers did not know there were lacking” emerged. The emerging themes were then collectively analyzed and organized to arrive at a representative, coherent, and meaningful response to the research question.

Descriptive Coding

I attempted to balance out the deductive nature of the theming process by conducting an additional round of analysis using data-driven, descriptive coding. This descriptive coding entailed surveying the data for any repeated topics in general, limiting the code elements to single words. As a result of this inductive coding process, I discovered trends in how participants conceptualized the nature of grammar in relation to professional writing. Initially, these trends involved repeated concepts such as accuracy, clarity, professionalism, image, audience, and standards. For the purpose of analysis, I organized these concepts into the themes of audience, standardization, ethos, and quality control.

Likert Scale

Finally, in addition to coding the data, I also used spreadsheet software to calculate the averages for the answers to the likert scale questions. I also studied the data to determine if patterns existed between answers. For example, I compared the data to determine if participants with a particular educational background gave certain likert scale questions higher or lower responses. Note, this comparison did not yield any significant findings and, consequently, is not reported on later in this thesis.

IRB Approval

This study qualifies as research and involves interaction with human subjects. Therefore, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was required. Effective June 11, 2018, this study received approval and qualified for Exempt status.

Limitations

This study was limited by size. A larger sample would yield more generalizable findings. A more diverse sampling, particularly in regards to gender and race, is also needed. Reliance on snowball sampling contributed to this limitation, as it resulted in a sampling in which many participants came from the same geographic or educational background.

Using only one method of analysis and one means of data collection is another limitation of this study. Following up with other methods and analytical approaches to triangulate the findings would provide more accurate, reliable, and in-depth results. For example, I could triangulate my research by observing participants editing documents and explaining their edits live. These observations would allow me to see and hear how

participants think through and approach their edits, yielding insight into their approach towards grammar when editing and their operationalization of tacit or formal grammar knowledge.

Reflection

Snowball sampling, or friend of a friend referral, proved to be a highly effective recruitment strategy. Within two weeks of receiving IRB approval, I had conducted six interviews and recruited three more participants. Being a member of George Mason's Student Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) proved to be an advantage. In addition to having access to a large network of dedicated professional writers, I could also leverage my association with the STC to recruit professional writers who I had not yet met.

Although less effective than friend of a friend referral, recruiting participants via LinkedIn was also a fruitful strategy. Out of my initial 15 participants, I recruited 4 from LinkedIn. Recruiting through LinkedIn has the additional benefit of diversifying your sample, since friend of a friend referral can result in many participants from the same school or field, for example. However, my experience showed that LinkedIn users are more likely to respond if they have a mutual connection or association with the researcher. For example, I was much more likely to get a response from a fellow George Mason alumnus. Young professionals with only a few years of experience were also more likely to respond, possibly due to the solidarity shared between recent graduates.

My actual interviewing style and process evolved greatly over the first few interviews. Given the semi-structured nature of my interviews, I was deeply concerned

about potentially leading participants into the answers I desired. Consequently, in my early interviews I failed to press my interviewees sufficiently, passing over underdeveloped or even irrelevant answers for fear of not letting the data “speak for itself.” However, as I developed an effective interview style, I realized that one’s analytical approach should shape the interview style. In my case, my approach was to open a discourse on grammar from which I could identify themes. Therefore, it was appropriate for me to expand upon or complicate responses to enable that discourse to take place. This level of engagement was especially necessary given that many of my participants responded to questions at a surface level, and further discussion was needed to help them think more deeply on the topic (without leading them to change their existing opinions). Simply introducing terms like “tacit” and “intuitive” into the conversation was frequently enough to enrich the discussion, without leading participants into desired answers.

Another takeaway from the interview process was the importance of considering the order in which one asks questions. For example, my instinct was to put demographic questions at the beginning. However, my chair recommended I put them at the end, since the personal nature of demographic questions can be awkward. As I began interviewing, I quickly agreed with this assessment. Moreover, I found that ending with demographic questions provides excellent closure, ending the interview with short, easy questions. Likewise, opening with questions about professional background was also an excellent way to begin the interviews. Such questions are easy to answer, generate momentum, and allow the participants to introduce themselves.

As noted earlier, the majority of my interviews were conducted over the phone. Surprisingly, I found I was more comfortable doing phone interviews than in-person interviews. I found my ability to focus and think quickly was much stronger during phone interviews. I presume this enhanced focus was a byproduct of not having to mediate my facial expressions and note taking. The only drawback from the phone interviews was the recording quality. I conducted phone interviews by putting calls on speaker and using the recorder built into my laptop. While the sound quality seemed sufficient at the time, I later discovered some recordings to be barely adequate for transcription.

That said, if I could have done one thing differently in my study, I would have begun transcription earlier. If I had begun transcribing earlier in the process, I may have sought more in-person interviews or considered alternate recording options. I would have also asked participants to repeat themselves when I failed to hear them clearly. Finally, I may have also adjusted my interview style slightly to be more concise.

CHAPTER FOUR: PROFESSIONAL WRITERS' PERSPECTIVE ON GRAMMAR KNOWLEDGE AND INSTRUCTION

This chapter reports on and discusses prominent themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews. I begin by sharing the results of the likert scale questions about the importance of grammar knowledge and instruction to professional writers. I then discuss the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. I organize this discussion into three sections: The first section discusses distinct features of the professional writing context that were discussed repeatedly across interviews and how those features affect professional writers' relationship with grammar. The second section discusses how participants distinguished tacit and formal grammar knowledge and how each of those operates in a professional writing context. The third section discusses participants' perception of formal grammar instruction and its value for professional writing students.

Overall the findings of these interviews reveal that the professional writing context has distinct features that require professional writers to engage with grammar in particular ways. Professional writers characterized formal grammar knowledge as a useful "framework for language" that enables professional writers to both communicate and write with greater facility. Meanwhile, participants characterized tacit knowledge as a type of "pattern recognition" that is insufficient for the demands of professional writing.

Finally, participants were in favor of formal grammar instruction and described how it affects confidence and provides professional writers the opportunity to enter the field with the same skills and knowledge.

Likert Scale Responses

Overall, the likert scale responses revealed that professional writers highly value both grammar knowledge and formal grammar instruction.

Table 5. Ratings of the value of grammar knowledge and training

Topic	Rating
Grammar Knowledge - General	4.8
Grammar Knowledge - Specific	4.8
Grammar Training - General	4.3
Grammar Training - Specific	3.9

On average, professional writers rated the value of grammar knowledge high: A 4.8 out of 5. This rating was the same for both writing and editing jobs in general and for the participants' specific jobs. Only three participants provided different ratings for this question: Two participants rated grammar as being slightly less important for their jobs, while one rated grammar as being slightly more important. The consistency of these ratings suggests that grammar knowledge is equally important for professional writers across fields, industries, and work environments.

On average, professional writers rated training in grammar to be high in importance, but slightly less important than having the knowledge itself. Participants rated training in grammar for general writing and editing jobs a 4.3, and they rated

training in grammar for their jobs specifically a 3.9. Four participants rated training in grammar for their jobs specifically lower than for jobs in general. One of these participants lowered her rating by two points, from a 3 for jobs in general to a 1 for her job specifically. In discussion, this participant indicated that on-the-job experience is the most important consideration. Other participants explained that they rated the importance lower for their jobs because of their specific role. For example, a proposal manager explained that grammar training is not as necessary for him but might be more necessary for one of his editors. Therefore, while grammar knowledge is considered important across fields and roles, the need for formal training may depend on one's specific role.

The Nature of Grammar for Professional Writers

As described in the literature review, much of the scholarship on grammar considers the needs of student writers and writers in general and fails to consider the contexts of professional writers specifically. One purpose of this study was to fill this gap and determine if and how the contexts of professional writers affect their relationship with grammar.

The interviews confirmed that professional writing presents distinct challenges for writers. One participant summed up the unique challenges of the technical writer well:

I work in a field I don't always quite understand, and I'm not the subject matter expert in everything I write, or hardly any of it, and it can be rather challenging sometimes to write in that environment and understand what to write and when to write it.

Similarly, another participant noted “...as a tech writer... there’s a lot of time you’re working with content where you have no idea what the writer is talking about.” As discussed in more depth in forthcoming sections, these distinct challenges require professional writers to cultivate particular skills or knowledge that other writers may not need to succeed.

Meanwhile, some participants expressed how professional writers are subject to particular expectations that require them to have a particular relationship with grammar. These participants described how employers expect professional writers to provide a certain level of grammar knowledge: “Our management... expects for us to be good at [grammar]. They look to us to be the experts.” A few participants argued that this kind of knowledge distinguishes the professional writer and speaks to their value. One participant claimed that grammar is “our particular corner of expertise” and “defines our job niche,” while another stated, “I think in the professional world, I really think to separate yourself as an editor and tech writer, I think knowing grammar at a very deep level is crucial to that.” Overall, these statements affirm that professional writing is distinct from other kinds of writing and as a result, requires particular skills or knowledge.

Participants’ characterization of the nature of grammar and the role it plays in their professional lives illustrates the particular needs, demands, and realities of professional writing. Professional writers engage with an audience and technical content that expects and demands a particular writing style. Unlike those who write exclusively in the realm of academia or literature, professional writers are expected to fill specific roles in their organization and meet their employers’ expectations. The stakes are higher for

professional writers, whose reputations and careers—and therefore livelihoods—rest on their ability to meet these expectations. In discussing grammar in the interviews, four themes emerged that speak to these requirements and the role grammar plays with them: Quality Control, Audience, Standardization, and Ethos. Figure 2 below shows the number of interviews in which each concept emerged (e.g. Quality Control emerged in 11 out of the 14 interviews).

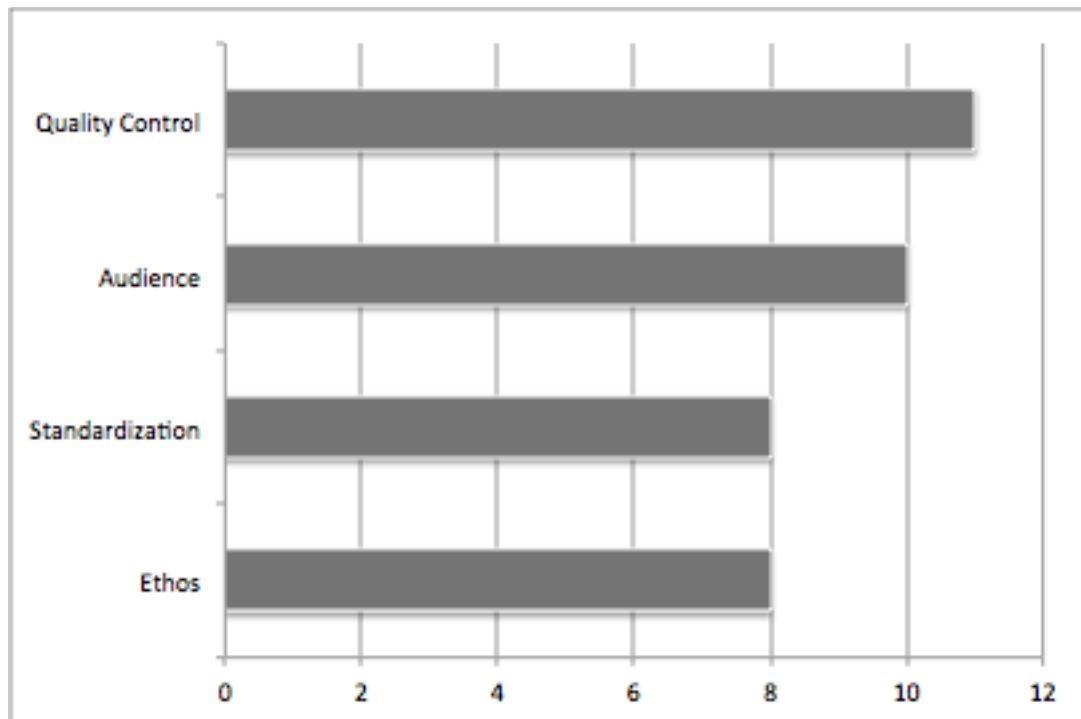


Figure 2. Number of interviews in which each concept emerged.

Quality Control

Participants noted quality control as one of their responsibilities as professional writers and described how grammar plays a role in achieving that quality. The theme quality control encompasses concepts such as accuracy, clarity, and readability. This theme emerged in 11 of the 14 interviews, as writers described their responsibility to maintain quality and the role of grammar in doing so. The dominant theme was the effect of grammar on clarity and message. In general, writers noted the need for grammar in making writing “as clear or as accurate as possible.” One writer claimed that grammar exists specifically for clarity: “the rules of grammar and the rules of speech are really there because they result in clear writing that communicates well.”

Some writers focused on how grammar impacts the message. One writer observed, “if grammar were ignored you’re kind of sacrificing the quality of the message.” Another writer argued that grammar also helps make the message more engaging, in addition to being clearer and readable:

I think as far as making it readable and easy to understand, engaging, I think grammar is a huge part of that. I think that aspect if ignored... the content could be amazing but its grammar, if you’re not winning in that area, you’re taking away from the content ultimately. So the message might be hindered, there might be sentences that don’t make sense.... you need to focus not just on message but how that message is being communicated.

While this writer shows how grammar can make the message more engaging and effective, other writers explained how grammar can impact meaning itself: One writer

stated that “the rules for grammar are just as important, that way you don’t want the writing to be misconstrued,” while another noted that the misuse of grammar features, such as punctuation, “can completely change the meaning of the sentence.” This writer noted that implications of such errors, stating that a client could “come to different conclusions than you intend and it could lead to disastrous consequences.”

Moreover, writers expressed how it is their responsibility in particular to achieve and maintain this level of quality. One writer explained that she is responsible for “making sure the organization doesn’t look bad,” while another stated that she is “the last line of defense” for documentation in her work environment. One writer in particular emphasized that, while others can overlook grammar rules, professional writers and editors should hold themselves to a higher standard. This writer explained that to “produce world class work... it’s important to have some good command of the language in which the writer intends to communicate.” This writer added that, while other professionals may not need to know or even care about correct grammar, professional writers should:

Some government customers reading a white paper might not care if a compound adjective is not hyphenated. But I still think to produce the best document and to make sure readability is at its highest level and that clarity is at its highest level, whether they care or not, we should care, and we should make it the best it can possibly be.... whether they notice or not, we’re hyphenating it for a reason.

This writer and others show that professional writers have the responsibility to control the quality of documents in an organization. As this last writer points out in particular, often

this responsibility is the professional writer's alone and not shared by other roles in the organization. Therefore, it is integral for professional writers in particular to have an especially strong grammar competency to ensure the company's message is clear, readable, and engaging.

Audience

Mentions of audience revealed that professional writers have a particular kind of audience that requires writing to a certain standard. The theme audience emerged in 10 of the 14 interviews. One participant noted, "we're being held to very high standards for documentation.... Because of the audience of technical documents, we have to be writing it to the standard." Another participant made a nearly identical statement: "We're writing for a specific kind of audience and a specific kind of standard we have to meet." One participant summarized the significance of audience for professional writers by saying, "As a professional writer, I think grammar knowledge is a little more important... because a lot of professional writing is meant to be read by other professionals in a work setting or in a scholarly setting." Overall, the participants showed that the audiences of professional writing greatly impact the needs and constraints of professional writers.

Moreover, in describing the value of grammar in general, writers said that grammar is an important consideration when tailoring one's writing to the audience. One writer explained how careful grammar choices help make a "sophisticated, technological issue" understandable to non-experts, such as policy experts. Another writer used punctuation as an example of grammar that allows "the product to be more accessible to all readers." One writer explicitly argued for the relationship between grammar and

audience: “I would say at the end of the day... [grammar is] ultimately for the audience... grammar exists to help them better understand the information you’re presenting.” It is also necessary, as one participant pointed out, to know when “certain rules apply in general and when they’re appropriate for a particular audience.” This attention to audience in relation to grammar shows the rhetorical nature of grammar—clearly, for these writers, audience affects grammar and vice versa.

Standardization

Writers frequently emphasized the importance of standards and conventions in their fields and workplace. The theme standardization emerged in eight out of the fourteen interviews. These writers explained how “certain documents have very specific rules they have to follow” and companies have “[their] own style guide and way of expressing things.” Writers noted standards affecting a range of document features, including punctuation, length, and style.

Some writers explained that this standardization is necessary for technical writing in particular: One writer explained, “Sometimes they seem like picky things but it maintains consistency in our products and it just makes things a lot clearer ultimately because you are dealing with very complex subjects.” Another writer claimed, “you have to have standardized issued information, especially if you’re doing technical terms.” This frequent emphasis on standardization, which encompasses grammar conventions, reveals yet another constraint that professional writers, unlike other writers, are subject to. Considering that grammar conventions are an element of that standardization,

professional writers must therefore be able to navigate standardized grammar to operate in their work environments.

Ethos

Across interviews, professional writers described how grammar affects both their credibility—or ethos—and their employers'. The theme ethos encompasses repeated concepts such as image, credibility, and professionalism. Overall, the theme ethos emerged in eight out of the fourteen interviews. In the majority of these eight interviews, the participants often focused heavily on the relationship between grammar and ethos. Participants explained that, as professional writers, competency in grammar is expected and affects their credibility: One writer stated, “our management and also my management in communications expects for us to be good at [grammar],” while another noted that “other people in the field... will expect that from you as a basic level of knowledge.”

Considering this expectation, participants noted that a lack of grammar competency can hurt one's credibility: “If you don't even know the basic things, it can kind of put folks into worry.” Another participants observed that “people would perceive you as being careless or stupid” if you miss grammatical errors in a document. Other writers reiterated this sentiment, stating “if you have grammar errors you're just going to lose trust... it really just reflects badly on you” and “it doesn't really matter how clever you are, if you make a bunch of grammatical mistakes in your introductory materials, they're going to assume you don't know what you're doing.” One writer summarized the point explicitly: “In professional writing, your credibility rests on writing properly.”

Furthermore, writers noted that their grammar competency affects not only their ethos but their employers' as well. One writer stated that "grammar is usually of the utmost importance" when striving to "professionally present ourselves and our client at all times." Another explained how grammar errors affect the employer in much the same way they affect the writer: "I would say you can't be taken seriously if you have a lot of grammar mistakes... if we want to sell a professional service here at this company, you need to be able to have a professional proposal which requires a good balance of grammar." Another writer made a similar claim, stating, "If you have errors in your documents, people tend to not trust it and then they won't pay attention to the next thing that you write." However, as explained above, it is the writer who is responsible for "making sure the organization doesn't look bad in front of other people." Therefore, these writers show that grammar competency is of particular concern for professional writers, considering that it impacts both their ethos and the ethos of their employer.

Summary: Grammar and the Professional Writing Context

Together, these findings illustrate the unique challenges and constraints of professional writers. All professional writers write to particular audiences that expect a particular standard, both in terms of quality and conventions. To achieve these standards and quality, professional writers are required to adhere to particular grammar rules. Furthermore, professional writers are acutely responsible for controlling the quality of documentation, which requires them to have a stronger grammar competency than would necessarily be required in a different role. Given this responsibility, grammar competency strongly affects the professional writer's ethos. Employers expect professional writers to

have a certain level of grammar knowledge; therefore, a weakness in this area affects the professional writer's credibility in addition to the credibility of the document itself—and consequently the employer's, whom the document is effectively representing.

The findings from these themes also reveal how professional writers characterize the value and role of grammar in a deeply rhetorical way. The writers connected grammar to all elements of the rhetorical situation, either directly or indirectly. Writers explain how subject and audience affect the value of grammar, with grammar being more important when dealing with highly technical content and professional audiences that expect certain standards and sometimes require the content to be translated to meet their level of subject matter expertise. In addition to grammar being necessary for clear communication in general, the writers viewed correct grammar as being necessary to communicate appropriately with one's intended audience. One writer even noted that grammar is less important for other kinds of writing, such as Facebook posts. Finally, as described above, the writers also viewed grammar as a feature that affects ethos, both theirs and their employers'. These professional writers show that they value grammar not merely because they are expected to gatekeep "proper" or standard English but because grammar serves important rhetorical functions both in the text and the workplace.

Formal Grammar Knowledge Vs. Tacit Grammar Knowledge

In the interviews, participants made a distinction between tacit and formal grammar knowledge. For these participants, tacit knowledge was implicit or unconscious knowledge of grammar informed by their own intuitive sense of language, whereas

formal knowledge was explicit or conscious knowledge of formal grammar terms surrounding the construction of language. As they constructed definitions for these two kinds of knowledge, participants made two significant observations: Participants described formal grammar knowledge as *a framework for language* and tacit knowledge as *pattern recognition*. As participants explained these descriptions, they revealed ways in which formal grammar knowledge is necessary for professional writers to succeed and thrive given their distinct needs and constraints. This finding is significant, as it suggests the need for formal grammar instruction to obtain that knowledge.

Formal Grammar as a Framework for Language

In discussing the value of formal grammar knowledge, participants described formal grammar as a communicable “framework” for language. Formal grammar knowledge, they explained, provides a language with which to talk about language. One participant explained, “the reason I think that it would be valuable to me to know [formal grammar knowledge] is because formally labeling things give me a framework...” Other participant also used the term framework, saying that knowing grammar terminology is useful because it is the “framework” for sentence building. This conceptualization strongly echoes scholarship presented in the literature review that describes how the “metalanguage” and “framework” provided by grammar terminology enables writers to write and communicate more effectively (Basset, 1980; Graff, 2003; Kies, 1985; Macdonald, 2007; Synder 1986). Similarly, participants explained that this framework provides writers with the means to a) have a standardized language with which to

communicate, **b)** make informed, justifiable decisions, and **c)** make sense of unfamiliar content.

Speaking the “Same Language”

First, participants described how formal grammar knowledge allows professional writers to communicate with each other in a standardized fashion—for everyone to be “speaking the same language,” as one writer articulated. One writer explained that not having a language that is “standard across the board” would make it “pretty difficult for us to communicate to... one another,” particularly given that “especially in the field, we have different ideas of how a sentence should be assessed.” Similarly, another participant noted that a standardized way of communicating about language helps during times of disagreement: “Even with... people in our field, there are times even we will disagree with each other. So I think having that knowledge... that’s critical to avoid ambiguity with what we do.”

Justifying Decisions

Participants also asserted that formal grammar knowledge enables them to make informed, justifiable decisions. Participants described the value of actually knowing and understanding the rules being followed rather than simply following one’s intuition:

I think sometimes we’ve read enough and we’ve written enough to where we know the way something should be but we don’t know how to talk about it with the terms themselves. I think being able to do that and say, “Oh, here’s the actual rule, here is the specific language that goes with it,” I think is very valuable. It gives you a lot more credibility rather than just saying, “Oh I’m 90% sure this is

the way it's supposed to be because this is how I've always read it or always written it."

Another writer used very similar language, stating, "Instead of the emphasis being 'oh this is the way it's done,'" having formal grammar knowledge "gives you a bit more background and information to provide people with." As an objective framework for language, formal grammar knowledge helps writers make otherwise uncertain decisions with greater confidence and credibility.

Similarly to the statements above, other participants also discussed how formal grammar knowledge enables them to articulate and justify their grammar choices to others. One participant stated, "You have to not only know it, but to be able to explain when you might be say, questioned or challenged by somebody," while another observed that "having [formal] grammar knowledge gives you the justification for the choices, for the changes that you suggest." In addition to defending one's editing, being able to justify decisions also fosters greater diplomacy. One writer explained how her colleagues felt frustrated by professional writers in the past who could not adequately explain their editing choices: "people... felt that those professional writers or editors were arbitrarily making choices... and that was a really negative stain on their relationship with that professional communicator." This writer explained how, for "relationship building," it's important to be able to say, "this is not arbitrary... and this is why the rules exist." These statements recall Foley's (1975) and Hagge's (1994) observations that formal grammar rules can seem like "arbitrary pronouncements" if one does not learn or explain the logic behind them. Formal grammar knowledge averts this perception of arbitrary editing by

enabling writers to understand the “why” behind their grammar choices and explain that reasoning to others.

Making Sense of Unfamiliar Content

Finally, some participants described how formal grammar knowledge helps them make sense of unfamiliar content. One writer described how she frequently encounters confusing, grammatically incorrect sentences that are made more confusing by their unfamiliar content:

For technical writing specifically, I find [formal grammar knowledge] really useful in making sense of content where I don’t know some of the words to use. That’s something you encounter as a tech writer a lot; there’s a lot of time you’re working with content where you have no idea what the writer is talking about.... sometimes you have a sentence that’s broken somehow and also its made up of ideas you don’t really understand.

She then described how she turns to formal grammar knowledge as an “inroad” to help her to navigate such a sentence. To figure out where the sentence is “broken,” she identifies parts of speech, “there’s three verbs here and I don’t know which noun they’re supposed to be referring to.” By doing so, she is able to determine if she is “misinterpreting one of these things” and she needs to identify the correct definition for a technical term, or if the sentence has a purely grammatically issue. For this writer, formal grammar knowledge provides a framework for analyzing what would otherwise simply be, to her, a mess of meaningless technical jargon.

Tacit Grammar as Pattern Recognition

In contrast, participants described tacit knowledge as pattern recognition. One participant explained, “If your knowledge is all based on an intuitive sense... then what that really means is you’re recognizing patterns in what you’re looking at that you’ve seen before.” Writers then argued that relying on this tacit “pattern recognition” is insufficient for professional writers, given the unfamiliar “patterns” they encounter in their technical documents. Knowing formal grammar rules, however, enables you to write with versatility:

Knowing the rule set prepares you to come up with the correct solution for situations that you have not seen before. If you know the rule, you can expand that into sentences that are nothing like what you’ve seen before.

Another writer agreed that “the people who have a really good knowledge of grammar and an intuition are the best writers. The people who just have that intuition are frankly I think handicapped... if you ask them to write differently they couldn’t. They don’t have a facility with the language.”

Two participants also argued that relying solely on tacit knowledge leads to error. One writer simply stated, “If you rely on tacit knowledge, there’s a lot of margin for error. And the focus isn’t exclusively on grammar and it gets ambiguous very quickly.” Another writer explained in more depth how, “If you don’t know the rules and are just trying to regurgitate things you’ve just seen before, you’re bound to make errors that you’re not going to notice in your own work.” She provided an example of an application she received in which the applicant awkwardly used a common turn of phrase. She

observed that the writer had clearly encountered the phrase before but did not fully understand how it worked syntactically. Commenting on this incident, she stated that they would not have made the mistake “if they had a stronger sense of the rules that they were working with and how the pieces of that sentence needed to connect in order to function properly.”

The Benefit of Formal Grammar Knowledge for Professional Writers

In constructing definitions for tacit and formal grammar knowledge, the participants presented many ways in which formal grammar knowledge is helpful for professional writers to succeed. Only three of the participants argued that tacit knowledge alone is sufficient for professional writers and formal grammar knowledge is unnecessary. These writers argued that “some people are just naturally good at grammar” and that a general understanding of how language is “put together” is enough for professional writers. One writer noted, “I don’t feel that not being able to diagram a sentence is in any way a hindrance to reaching the goal of a solid, well written product,” stating the ability to achieve correct grammar is “something you just know.” Similarly, another writer claimed that grammar is “something that you pick up on your own,” adding, however, that this knowledge accumulates from a combination of “formal training and then your own natural curiosity and observations.”

Notably, two of the three participants who argued that tacit knowledge is sufficient had an extensive amount of professional writing experience. One participant has 22 years of experience in professional writing, while the other has 12. The latter explicitly stated that she acquired her tacit grammar competency through her years of

experience: “It was the constant editing of my own work through a period of years that I figured out how to [correct writing].” She added that she would be comfortable hiring an editor with no grammar training, provided that editor had experience. This trend would suggest that the only way to achieve grammar competency is through extensive experience—an unfortunate perspective for entry-level professional writers. Moreover, one of these participants also stated that she achieved her grammar competency as a result of growing up speaking standard English: “I think largely I was raised in an environment where standard English was the norm.... So I always heard it spoke in the manner that’s demanded by the workplace.” Therefore, it’s possible that tacit grammar knowledge is only sufficient for those whose dialect already adheres to the desired grammatical standard. Therefore, to exclude grammar instruction on that criterion would exclude any writer who did not grow up speaking “in the manner that’s demanded by the workplace.”

Overwhelming, however, participants argued that tacit knowledge is not sufficient to navigate the unfamiliar content encountered in professional writing. As described in earlier sections, these participants expressed that formal grammar knowledge, as a framework for understanding and discussing language, enables professional writers to both navigate their own writing more effectively and communicate with others. Formal grammar knowledge imbues text with an additional layer of meaning, allowing writers to better navigate it. A tangle of confusing technical jargon can be interpreted as noun phrases, subordinate clauses, and so on, providing professional writers an additional lens through which to approach unfamiliar, technical content. Moreover, having terms to

describe language allows writers to articulate and justify their decisions, which is of particular importance to professional writers who must collaborate and debate with colleagues. In turn, this ability to articulate and justify decisions also results in greater diplomacy, as professional writers are able to explain to colleagues why they have made a decision, rather than allowing the change to seem arbitrary.

The Merits of Formal Grammar Instruction

As professional writers discussed the value of formal grammar knowledge, they also described the value of formal grammar instruction. As shown in Chapter 1, few professional writing programs offer formal grammar instruction in their curricula, despite indications that formal grammar knowledge may be useful to professional writers. Moreover, as described in the literature review, some composition scholars have objected to formal grammar instruction as useless and ineffective. However, these scholars were considering the value of formal grammar instruction for general students only and not professional writing students. One purpose of this study was to determine if professional writers' experience with and perception of formal grammar instruction aligned with these scholars'. The interviews revealed that, consistently, professional writers view reading, written feedback, and on-the-job experience as key for building grammar competency. However, writers also expressed that formal grammar instruction would improve their confidence.

When asked what they would have to do to get their confidence up to a five, seven participants responded that courses in grammar either improved or would improve their confidence. One writer stated, "I'm definitely more confident than I used to be after

taking an official class on editing,” noting newfound confidence with her comma usage, for example. A second writer desired to learn more about the “structure of English grammar,” believing that a greater familiarity with “the language around grammar” would improve his confidence. This statement aligns with earlier comments about the value of having a language to talk about language. Meanwhile, a third writer described grammar courses as providing the opportunity to “go through some of the more nuanced, the more complicated things,” while another stated that grammar instruction allowed her “to ask questions and not just try to figure it out on [her] own.” She added that personal research can be unreliable: “whenever I had a question I just did a Google search and you never know what you’re going to get.” For this writer, and the others, grammar instruction provides an opportunity to gain objective grammar knowledge from a credible source, rather than having to rely on intuition alone.

In discussing the merits of formal grammar instruction, writers also made three significant observations about formal grammar instruction that further illustrate its value to professional writers. Namely, writers described formal grammar instruction as **a)** exposing and extinguishing false confidence about grammar, **b)** reinforcing existing knowledge, and **c)** providing a level playing field.

Exposing False Confidence

In addition to explaining how instruction improved their confidence, some writers also discussed how instruction exposed and extinguished their *false* confidence. Many of the participants who have had formal grammar instruction described how it filled gaps of knowledge they did not realize they had. Reflecting on a grammar course she took in

college, one participant stated, “I thought I had a really solid handle and I was blown away by... [how much] I didn’t know.” She later added, “I didn’t know how much I didn’t know until I was there.” Another writer had a similar experience taking an online grammar quiz. This participant described how he felt confident going into the quiz, given his professional and academic background, but ultimately failed it with a 30%. He followed up this story by explaining how simply “getting an understanding of what you don’t know” is important for achieving expert-level grammar competency. Simply becoming aware of the “breadth” and complexity of grammar provides “the groundwork to expand” one’s own knowledge.

Overall, these statements capture the danger of assuming one’s own expertise without ever actually having it tested. As one participant simply stated, “just because someone thinks that they’re great at grammar doesn’t mean they ultimately are.” As described above, tacit grammar knowledge relies on previous experiences with language and may not always reflect the formal grammar standards expected of professional writers. However, writers often simply assume that their tacit knowledge *does* adhere to such standards, resulting in a false confidence. Therefore, as the comments above show, it is necessary to test one’s existing knowledge and by doing so, bolster it. In this way, formal grammar instruction challenges and expands your understanding of grammar—rather than constrain it, as some scholars have argued.

Reinforcing Existing Knowledge

In discussing the merits of formal grammar instruction, multiple participants characterized formal grammar instruction as reinforcing the existing knowledge writers

already have. One writer stated that formal grammar knowledge “reinforced [her] current knowledge,” while another said that quizzes, for example, “can reinforce an understanding of... the proper way to write.” A third participant noted the value of combining “formal training” with your own “natural curiosity and observations.” One writer who had a rigorous grammar education in high school also explained that, while she may not actually use formal grammar terms in her job, the experience of learning those terms helped her to be a better writer:

Do I know all of their names, or could I take an exam right now and feel confident? Probably not. But I think that... being able to understand how these sentences are constructed... beyond just the knowledge of just “well people don’t talk that way” or “that’s not how language goes” or anything like that, I think that’s incredibly important.

These arguments indicate that formal and tacit knowledge are not mutually exclusive. One possible objection to formal grammar instruction is that it discredits tacit knowledge and implies writers have a void of grammar knowledge that must be filled by instruction. However, as these writers show, formal grammar instruction is not meant to fill a supposed void but instead complicate, strengthen, and diversify writers’ existing (i.e. tacit) understanding of grammar.

Leveling the Playing Field

Finally, two participants stated that formal grammar instruction provides a “level playing field,” which counters the argument that formal grammar instruction, as part of the demand that students write in standard English, is discriminatory and marginalizing to

some writers. These participants explained that formal grammar instruction allows all writers to enter the job world with the same level of knowledge and experience. Both writers independently used the term “level playing field” in discussing formal grammar instruction. One writer, who described having a highly privileged educational background, observed that grammar instruction provides a “more level playing field” for students who come from different educational backgrounds in which formal grammar instruction was not featured. The second writer stated, “training is important to make sure everybody on your team is on the same page, for lack of a better term is speaking the same language as you, and just kind of creates one, level playing field.”

In making these statements, these writers acknowledge the great disparity in the level of grammar knowledge with which students enter higher education or the workforce. My interviews only confirmed this disparity, as participants’ description of their history of grammar instruction varied from extremely extensive and thorough to nonexistent. Consequently, formal grammar training at the college level, at least, is necessary to address this disparity. To forgo formal grammar instruction—particularly for aspiring professionals who are expected to adhere to certain grammatical standards—only disadvantages those with less privileged educational or socioeconomic backgrounds.

Summary: Answering the Questions

Together, these findings address three questions underlining this study:

Do professional writers need to engage with grammar differently than other writers?

The findings of this study show that professional writers do, in fact, operate in a context distinct from other writers, the features of which require grammar to play an important role for professional writers. Grammar competency is necessary for professional writers to act as quality control for their employer, communicate appropriately with their audiences, achieve the level of standardization demanded in their field, and maintain both their own credibility and that of their employer.

Is an intuitive grasp of language sufficient for professional writers, or is knowledge of formalized terminology necessary?

Many participants argued that tacit grammar knowledge, as a form of pattern recognition, is insufficient to navigate the unfamiliar content professional writers encounter. Rather, formal grammar knowledge is necessary to empower writers with a deeper understanding of language and equip them with a language to articulate and communicate their writing decisions to others.

Does formal grammar instruction have merit for professional writers, or is it—as some scholars have argued—a waste of time?

In addition to equipping professional writers with this formal grammar knowledge, formal grammar instruction also instills confidence in writers and provides them with the opportunity to enter the workforce with comparable expertise and understanding of grammar.

The following chapter concludes this thesis by synthesizing these findings to answer and discuss the primary, driving research question: **What is the role and value of grammar for professional writers?**

CHAPTER FIVE: A CALL FOR PROFESSIONAL WRITING PROGRAMS TO EMPOWER STUDENTS WITH FORMAL GRAMMAR KNOWLEDGE

This thesis sought to answer the question: What is the role and value of grammar knowledge for professional writers? The findings show that professional writers highly value grammar knowledge overall, with grammar playing an important role not only in their writing but also in their workplace interactions. Unlike other writers, professional writers are subject to distinct demands, needs, and expectations that require them to engage with grammar in particular ways. Because of the contexts in which they write, professional writers benefit from formal grammar knowledge, which they define as a “framework for language.” Tacit grammar knowledge, or “pattern recognition,” is not sufficient for professional writers, who claim that relying on one’s intuition alone can lead to errors, particularly given the unfamiliar content they must navigate. In contrast, formal grammar knowledge provides a framework that professional writers can use to analyze language and test their existing understanding of grammar. Equally important, formal grammar knowledge provides writers a language for talking about language and enables them to articulate their writing and editing choices.

One potential concern about these findings is that professional writers are enforcing formal grammar standards purely for grammar’s sake. However, the complex and rhetorically rich reasons professional writers give to support formal grammar instruction nullify such concerns. The professional writers’ treatment of grammar does

not suggest a motivation to enforce formal grammar standards and instructions because they are “proper” or simply “how things are done.” Rather, their characterization of grammar aligns with Kolln’s theory of rhetorical grammar. As discussed in the literature review, Kolln (1996) conceives of grammar “as a tool that enables the writer to make effective choices” (29). Similarly, the professional writers in this study show how grammar competency enables them to write appropriately to their audience and convey meaning more clearly and engagingly.

Furthermore, the professional writers extended this conception of rhetorical grammar by showing that grammar not only affects one’s writing rhetorically but also serves other rhetorical functions in the workplace, including ones related identity and argumentation. For professional writers, grammar is integral for appealing to both ethos and logos in one’s daily work environment. First, the professional writers expressed that a strong formal grammar competency is necessary for appeals to ethos. Employers’ and colleagues’ perceptions of professional writers’ credibility is influenced by the writers’ formal grammar knowledge. Moreover, professional writers’ formal grammar competency also affected their companies’ ethos, as professional writers are responsible for representing their companies through written documentation. Secondly, formal grammar knowledge enables professional writers to appeal to logos when making and explaining writing choices. Without formal grammar knowledge, professional writers must rely on intuition alone to make their choices, with only “it sounds right” to explain themselves. This ability to explain oneself is particularly important in the workplace, where writers may find it necessary to justify or defend their choices to colleagues.

Formal grammar knowledge provides professional writers with a means to talk about language logically, consistently, and objectively.

Therefore, given that professional writers value grammar knowledge—and for significant, rhetorically complex reasons—professional writing programs should provide grammar instruction in their curricula. If professional writing programs wish to prepare students to work in a professional environment, they should listen to those who are actively experiencing that environment. In this case, the people actively experiencing that environment—professional writers—believe grammar to play a significant role in their workplace activities. Moreover, professional writers explicitly expressed a desire and need for formal grammar instruction. They described formal grammar knowledge as instilling confidence, reinforcing their understanding of language, and filling in gaps knowledge they did not even previously know existed.

Most importantly, the interviews showed that to omit formal grammar instruction for professional writers actually disadvantages those that do not come from a privileged background. Some scholarship argues that formal grammar instruction enforces standard English, which discriminates against those whose dialect does not adhere to that standard. However, the audience for most professional writers communicates in and expects documents written in standard English. While this characteristic of professional writing audiences may indeed be problematic, ceasing formal grammar instruction is not a solution. Omitting formal grammar instruction only makes it harder for those without a privileged background to navigate the current realities of the professional world—and, consequently, presents yet another barrier to a more diversified workplace.

In summary, professional writing programs should include formal grammar instruction in their curricula for three reasons: 1) Professional writers value formal grammar knowledge and rely on it to navigate not only their writing but also their workplace. 2) Professional writers express a desire and need for formal grammar instruction. 3) To omit formal grammar instruction disadvantages writers without pre-existing grammar competency required to meet the demands of professional writers. Such instruction should be taught within the context of professional writers, taking into consideration their distinct needs, demands, and requirements. Formal grammar instruction need not be taught in isolation and as a prescriptive rules dictating correctness. Rather, as this thesis shows, formal grammar instruction can aim to provide writers with a framework for understanding and communicating about language. More research about the concept of formal grammar knowledge and on pedagogical approaches to teaching formal grammar in context is needed to determine how professional writing programs might best provide formal grammar instruction to professional writers.

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BIOGRAPHY

Madeline Graham Shaughnessy received her B.A. in English with a concentration in Writing and Rhetoric from George Mason University in 2016, with *summa cum laude*. Upon completion of this thesis, she received her M.A. in English from George Mason University's Professional Writing and Rhetoric program in 2018. Madeline tutored at the George Mason University Writing Center for three years, the last of which she spent working exclusively with graduate students across fields on their theses and dissertations. She is currently a writer and researcher for a consulting firm that conducts analysis for the space industry, where she has worked since 2015.