

Why Do My Students Hate Grammar and Editing?

Grammar snobs come in two forms: amateur and pro. Amateur grammar snobs are a lot like amateur gynecologists—they're everywhere, they're all too eager to offer their services, and they're anything but gentle.

—June Casagrande, *Grammar Snobs Are Great Big Meanies: A Guide to Language for Fun and Spite* (2006)

Do you watch reality shows and correct the participants' grammar, adding the missing *ly*'s to their adverbs?

“My garment fit my model perfect!”

“LY!” you yell out at the TV.

Do you silently—or aloud—correct subject-verb agreement? Do you react in glee when you see a sign above a bar door that says *ENTERANCE*?

Why is it that when you tell most people you're an English teacher, they cover their mouths and continually apologize for “probably saying that wrong”? Do your friends constantly apologize for bad grammar in their emails? Hmm. Go figure.

It's doubt-grammar.

It even plagued TV's Marge Simpson: “In an episode of *The Simpsons*, mother Marge says she wishes she were going to a grammar rodeo. Then she

pauses and wonders aloud, ‘Or is it, I wish I was going to a grammar rodeo?’” (Casagrande 2006)

Is it subjunctive? Subordinate? What creates all this doubt? It’s enough to make a person insubordinate, and more than enough to make kids want to escape editing as much as politicians want us to correct it.

Are students backed into a corner? Are they corrected at every turn, frustrated by their inability to “do it right”? Who wouldn’t be turned off to editing? Who *can* catch all of their own errors?

Most adults aren’t drawn to things that they don’t do well; neither are kids. If you know you have a strong possibility of being corrected, isn’t it easier to quit while you’re ahead? Do students simplify their writing to avoid making errors, writing only simple sentences?

I recall my French class in college. When I dabbled with more complex constructions or vocabulary, I received many corrections. In fact, the professor took off points for each mistake. If I wrote only simple, banal sentences, I received fewer corrections and higher grades. We don’t want to teach kids to cower from complexity, to recoil from risk, to evade experimentation, to pass up play. I don’t want to fan the flames of my students’ fear that they will never hit the mark for their English teacher.

At the same time, we know editing is testable, even though it may be detestable to our students. But before we decide what we should do to teach editing, we need to ask ourselves an important question: What do standardized tests *really* require? Are we assuming kids will be tested on things they will never be tested on?

We hear the new SAT includes more grammar. Does that mean we teach the parts of speech in the eleventh grade? The seventh grade? Not at all. In fact, editing questions on the SAT, as on most standardized tests, are not based on parts of speech. They don’t consist of sentences riddled with errors. They don’t include the labeling of grammatical structures.

Standardized tests do ask students to make choices about grammar and editing to make sentences clear and correct. Usually there is only one error to address in each answer choice—there can be only one correct multiple-choice item. Yes, students need the ability to spot errors. Yes, they need to develop the visual acuity and an ear for the flow of language to do so. But how can we do that without making students hate grammar?

And it’s not only about what kids are being asked to do on tests. It’s also about creating effective writers. *Writing Next* (Graham and Perin 2007), a Carnegie report, summarizes current research on composition instruction. The report specifically addresses the issues of editing and grammar:

Grammar instruction in the studies reviewed involved the explicit and systematic teaching of the parts of speech and the structure of sentences. The meta-analysis found an effect for this type of instruction for students across a full range of ability, but surprisingly, this effect was negative. . . . Such findings raise serious questions about some educators' enthusiasm for traditional grammar instruction as a focus of writing instruction for adolescents. (21)

Writing Next not only tells us what *not* to do, but also advises us what research says does work.

A recent study (Fearn and Farnan 2005) found that teaching students to focus on function and practical application of grammar within the context of writing (versus teaching grammar as an independent activity) produced strong and positive effects on students' writing. Overall, the findings on grammar instruction suggest that, although teaching grammar is important, alternative procedures . . . are more effective than traditional approaches for improving the quality of students' writing. (21)

To keep correctness in its place, some still rely on the pedagogy of the 1800s: Teach editing by correcting and memorizing. The “if-it-worked-for-me” method is often referred to as the traditional approach—a disciplining and training of the mind; teaching correct and socially prestigious forms; memorization and recitation of rules and definitions (Weaver 1996).

Today we associate traditional teaching with sentence diagramming and studying parts of speech. Should we memorize parts of speech? Let's take the word *iron*. Is it a noun or verb? I left the *iron* on yesterday. It's a noun. I *iron* my clothes once a year, whether they need it or not. Now it's a verb. I closed the *iron* gate. Now it's an adjective. This is why many consider the parts of speech “merely notional” (Bryson 1990). This is also why the research tells us to teach function rather than the memorize-and-diagram-and-parse-till-you-drop method.

Tradition.

Whether in the 1800s, 1900s, or the 2000s many think we must focus the bulk of our energy on errors: Look at them, marinate in them, avoid them, fix them, eradicate them. Vicki Spandel (2004) comments on this fervor for faults—this editing-at-all-costs or tough-love mentality: “In their zeal to make everything right, some teachers offer so many corrections and suggestions that all but the most energetic writers feel buried alive.” As Dr. Phil would say, “How's that workin' for you?”

What does a traditional approach teach kids about writing? What does a focus on error communicate about the writing process and one's overall success as a writer?

Have you ever gotten back a paper marked up with red-pen marks—or even green-pen marks or another colorful permutation? How did you feel about yourself as a writer? Did you want to write more? Did you immediately, or even later, sit down with a style guide and review your patterns of error and make an action plan on how you'd do better next time? Or did you toss it in the trash or hide it in a folder, since the attempt was obviously a failure? Face it: When students' writing has fallen victim to the red pen, the doubt begins.

The other day my student Ralphie ran up to me in the hallway. "Mr. Anderson, Mr. Anderson, I can't write." Ralphie is a struggling student. I had worked hard to nurture his writing ability, and he was progressing. He had turned an essay in to his developmental reading teacher. She had marked it with more than thirty errors in red, a traditionalist through and through.

"Wait a minute, Ralphie. I know you can write. Let me see it." He handed me the paper. "I like your lead, Ralphie; this is good. You can too write." But Ralphie wasn't having any of it.

"Look!" he said, as if I were dense. "Look at all the marks. I can't write."

"Ralphie, I make errors all the time. That's the writing process. This is a draft."

"No," he interrupted, flipping the paper from front to back, showing me all the marks. "See. I can't write."

Crushing Ralphie's inner writer was not the teacher's intention. That was not the message she intended to send Ralphie. She wanted to make sure he knew what he was doing wrong and that he knew how to fix it. She had good intentions, but she laced them with so many *don'ts*, it turned into a sip of water from a fire hose (Anderson 2005), eviscerating Ralphie's sense of himself as a writer.

She was letting him have it with all the errors, so Ralphie would know all he couldn't do. She envisioned running into Ralphie at the grocery store years from now and him thanking her for being so tough because he learned everything he was supposed to learn. She wasn't doing it to be mean; she felt correction after correction was tough love.

Although it is well intentioned, this practice creates doubt in a writer—as perhaps it did you at some point. Kids develop a fear-driven need to sidestep looking stupid, and often they try to sidestep editing altogether. Kids get the message that, if the teacher's going to edit the paper anyway, why bother doing it yourself? Is that the message we want to send? Are we willing to commit to editing for them for the rest of their lives?

Don't get me wrong. Editing does matter. I don't argue that kids don't need to learn to edit—I just think we can do more than correct sentences to teach editing every day.

What follows is the story I want my writing and editing instruction to tell: students think, write, read, discuss, notice, question, and discover—even during editing instruction. Each lesson in this book is a little chunk of the editing story, a digestible everyday chunk, a part of the editing process that interweaves editing, grammar, and writer's craft, creating both writers and editors.

We actually *teach* students to edit by building concepts through immersion in models, applying the concepts to their own writing while students edit their attempts along the way. We teach editing rather than merely practice it.

But first I want to define what I think editing instruction actually is.

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