Grammar Lessons and Strategies That Strengthen Students’ Writing

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Introduction

Linking Grammar and Punctuation to Writing

When I went to school, an ocean separated my knowledge of grammar and its connection to the writing process. In fourth and fifth grades, I memorized the parts of speech and their definitions, and completed worksheets that asked me to underline a noun, verb, adverb, or adjective. In junior high, I devoted more time to diagramming sentences than to writing. For me and my classmates, grammar was a dull subject that had to be endured.

My first year of teaching, I bristled as I leafed through a sixth-grade grammar and punctuation workbook. Instantly, my memory reclaimed every negative feeling toward those exercises. How surprised I was when students begged to complete the workbooks I had stacked at the bottom of a bookcase. They told me, “It’s easy,” “We like to underline,” and “Once you figure out the pattern, you get a good grade.” Ironically, punctuation errors dominated their writing. They used weak verbs such as get and make and general nouns such as stuff and things. Paragraphing and commas were not evident in their writing. That year I began exploring ways to connect a knowledge of grammar to students’ writing. Thirty-seven years later, it’s still a work in progress, a topic I reflect on annually.

During my second year of teaching, though I continued to explore other ways to approach grammar, I was bound by a grammar workbook, which was a required part of the fifth-grade language arts curriculum. Three or four times a week, students spent 40 minutes underlining nouns, subjects, predicates, adjectives, direct and indirect objects, and predicate adjectives and nominatives; they also added commas, capital letters, and end-of-sentence punctuation—all in ready-made sentences.

Although students did not mind filling in the pages, I soon became weary of grading worksheets that didn’t connect to students’ writing. Most completed the patterned pages well because the sentences were far simpler than the ones they composed. Meanwhile, the grammar issues I observed in students’ writing—fragments and run-on sentences, missing commas and sentence punctuation, and lack of paragraphing—remained unaddressed.

I imagine that many teachers across the country experienced my frustration with these grammar and punctuation workbooks, and still do. Recently, though, the research presented in Constance Weaver’s Teaching
Parts of Speech Create Strong, Specific Images

Actor Kenneth Branagh once said, “The more words one has, the more one understands.” Simple, but profound. Vocabulary shapes our thinking; words build our ability to comprehend. The first words toddlers speak as they learn language are nouns, naming words. Nouns name persons, places, living creatures, things, ideas, feelings, and so on. For some teachers, asking students to learn the definition of a noun is sufficient. For me, it is insufficient because memorizing an explanation does not ensure that students will search for specific nouns to make their writing clearer, more detailed, and therefore, more interesting.

Poet J. Patrick Lewis calls nouns the muscle of writing, and an overload of adjectives, the flab. Nouns that are specific re-create in the reader’s mind images the writer sees. But students tend to write in generalities rather than specific details. Instead of daffodil, students write flower, instead of firefly, they write bug, instead of popcorn, they write snack.

I find that engaging students in experiences that expose them to ways writers use nouns raises students’ awareness of the importance of nouns in writing and provides them with opportunities to learn from a wide range of models. Encourage students to tune in to nouns by inviting them to do the following.

Collect Nouns

Collect nouns and other parts of speech from newspapers and magazines, free reading books, poems by favorite authors, or conversations with friends.

During reading workshop, students can record these unusual words and phrases in personal notebooks. (I have students make 4- by 6-inch notebooks filled with unlined paper, with construction-paper covers.) Some teachers prefer simply to set aside a section in students’ notebooks or response journals for collecting words.
I collect the notebooks daily and store them in a shoe box. If notebooks travel home with students, many forget to bring them back to school. Instead, when I want students to jot down words at home, I give them a sheet of paper that can be taped or stapled into their notebooks.

**Introduce word-collecting notebooks**

I introduce this collecting strategy with a think aloud, explaining how the strategy helps me:

> When I read poems, articles, the newspaper, and books, I keep a small notebook handy. Every time I read a noun that catches my attention, I jot it down. Before and during writing, I reread these lists to stimulate ideas in my mind and to search for a noun to replace one I’ve used. The lists are useful when I’m revising. Compiling lists is enjoyable because I learn so many new words—and words are a writer’s business.

Next, I show students a recent notebook (see below), write some nouns on the chalkboard, and invite them to comment or pose questions.