WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

First, there were the rules. Then, there was a reckoning. And now, this: resonance. This is the book that I needed as a young writing teacher. It's a gift to me now, many decades later. *Good Grammar* affirms and invites us to express our identities. It helps us find our place, our people, and our purpose in this world. Matt Johnson is offering such healing and hopeful ideas here.

—Angela Stockman, Faculty
Department of Education, Daemen University

In *Good Grammar*, Matt Johnson once again proves that he knows what writing teachers need: a boots-on-the-ground, practical guide to teaching what matters in language instruction in a way that matters to students. This book makes grammar warm, welcoming, and doable for teachers and students alike.

—Rebekah O'Dell, Teacher and Author
A Teacher's Guide to Mentor Texts, 6–12

In *Good Grammar*, Matt Johnson pulls off a small miracle: He shows teachers how to incorporate grammar and language study in meaningful and effective ways while connecting the lessons to the larger issues of culture and craft through the use of diverse and compelling mentor texts and methods. This is the book on grammar, language, and great teaching that we teachers have all been looking for—and can use as an essential guide for our students and ourselves.

—Jim Burke, Author
Teaching Better Day by Day, Uncharted Territory: A Reader and Guide, and *The English Teacher's Companion*

Turns out, writing and grammar are fun! *Good Grammar* demonstrates again and again that joy is found in the composition of words. This book is jam-packed with playful yet important grammar lessons, inviting students to explore the writer within while honoring the language they use every day.

—Andy Schoenborn, High School ELA Teacher and Coauthor
Creating Confident Writers: For High School, College, and Life

Every ELA teacher under the sun, if they are honest with themselves, wants to get better at teaching grammar. Specifically, we want to teach grammar in ways that stick permanently in our students' brains. We also want our students to know the "why" behind grammar rules, and even to feel empowered by this knowledge. My friend Matt Johnson has written a book that does all this and more. *Good Grammar* gets right down to business. It is packed with practical lessons, examples of student writing, and plenty of Matt's thoughtful commentary and reflections. It is a valued addition to my professional library, one that is already dog-eared, highlighted, and overall well used.

—Matthew Kay, High School ELA Teacher and Author
Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom

The lessons in this book had my mind crackling with ideas to use in my classroom! It blends what we know about joy and motivation with what we know about language and how to teach it in ways that are fresh, well researched, and practical. *Good Grammar* is the book we've been waiting for to transform the most frustrating part of English class into something that truly helps our students to grow.

—Brett Vogelsinger, High School ELA Teacher and Author
Poetry Pauses: Teaching With Poems to Elevate Student Writing in All Genres

Good Grammar is the grammar, language, and style course we all need. Matt Johnson delivers a thoughtful and joyful exploration of language education, emphasizing empowerment and inclusivity. Through step-by-step lessons that invite play and experimentation, students are encouraged to embrace their unique voices while gaining a deeper understanding and value of grammar.

—Kayla Briseño, Middle School ELA Teacher and Coauthor
Text Structures From Picture Books: Lessons to Ease Students Into Text Analysis, Reading Response, and Writing With Craft

Matt Johnson's ideas came to me at the perfect time. I was looking for ways to reinvigorate my writing unit just before our state exams, and I found his approach refreshing because he makes grammar instruction about opportunity rather than error. *Good Grammar*'s lessons are arranged in perfect sequential order, making them easy to implement and easy for my students to grasp.

—Brian Sztabnik, High School English Teacher
New York State Teacher of the Year Finalist

Not since Constance Weaver has there been such a thoughtful and comprehensive conversation about grammar. Reading Matt Johnson's book is like watching over the shoulder of a master teacher at work, demonstrating so many ways grammar knowledge improves a writer's craft.

—Gretchen Bernabei, Author
Grammar Keepers: Lessons That Tackle Students' Most Persistent Problems Once and for All

Good Grammar

Dedication

For Maya, Wesley, and all of the other young writers—may these lessons help you to bring your voices to the world.

Good Grammar

Joyful and Affirming Language Lessons That Work for More Students

Matthew Johnson

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FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
Unit No 323-333, Third Floor, F-Block
International Trade Tower Nehru Place
New Delhi 110 019
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12
China Square Central
Singapore 048423

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Johnson, Matthew M., author.

Title: Good grammar : joyful and affirming language lessons that work for more students / Matthew Johnson.

Description: Thousand Oaks, California : Corwin Literacy, 2024. | Series: Corwin literacy | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024008889 | ISBN 9781071904176 (paperback) | ISBN 9781071947364 (epub) | ISBN 9781071947371 (epub) | ISBN 9781071947388 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: English language—Grammar—Study and teaching (Middle school) | English language—Grammar—Study and teaching (Secondary)

Classification: LCC LB1631 .J646 2024 | DDC 428.0071/2—dc23/eng/20240611
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024008889

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Vice President and Editorial Director: Monica Eckman
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Proofreader: Lawrence W. Baker
Indexer: Integra
Cover Designer: Candice Harman
Marketing Manager: Margaret O'Connor

24 25 26 27 28 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Acknowledgements

In this book, I discuss the concept of an *idiolect*, which is the term for a personal dialect that all people have. Part of what makes the idiolect so important is that it is one of the most personal things about us. The combination of grammar and usage rules, vocabulary, and pronunciations that comprise our speech is as unique as our fingerprint. No one who has ever come before or will likely come after has or will speak and write exactly as we do.

Yet at the same time, our idiolect is also, in a sense, not ours at all. The strands that make up the gorgeous tapestry of our speech come almost entirely from those around us, especially those closest to us—our parents and caretakers, teachers and mentors, and friends and neighbors.

In many ways a book is similar to an idiolect. It seeks to offer something new when viewed as a whole, but the individual strands that form the book generally come from those who came, thought, and (for education books) taught before. Without those antecedents, no book would exist, as the thinking and teaching of these mentors, muses, guides, pathfinders, and groundbreakers create the grammar with which a new book is written.

Considering that, some effusive, heartfelt thanks are necessary before we get started. It would likely take its own book to fully and properly thank all those who made this book possible, but even still, I wanted to offer some to those without whom I know this book would not be in your hands or e-reader right now.

First, thank you to my many close colleagues and mentors. Don, the Amys, Judith, Lizzie, Robert, Rebecca, David, Kelly, Gretchen, Aletia, Karen, Tracy, Meghan, Gary, Amy, Jenna, Jessika, Jonathan, Gail, Eachan, Carmie, Celinda, and many others—getting to learn from and observe you is why I am the teacher I am today.

And I wanted to give a very specific shout-out to two mentors: Ken and Linda. You two not only taught me about language and how to teach it; you also taught me to love language and writing, and if not for your suggestions for this book, I don't think it would exist, and it certainly wouldn't be what it is.

I also want to acknowledge all of those brilliant educators whose work helped me to understand grammar, language, and writing pedagogy enough that I could seek to build upon their work. A particular thanks, in no particular order, to Jeff Anderson, Gretchen Bernabei, Martha Kolln, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Rebekah O'Dell, Jim Burke, Penny Kittle, Jennifer Fletcher, Tom Newkirk, Geneva Smitherman, Trevor Aleo, Angela Stockman, Brett Vogelsinger, Gholdy Muhammad, Andy Schoenborn, Troy Hicks, Geraldine Woods, Edgar Schuster, and Jennifer Gonzalez.

To my forever partners in good pedagogical trouble, Matthew Kay and Dave Stuart Jr., thank you for the endless inspiration and support.

A massive, to-the-edge-of-the-universe-and-back bear hug for the best editor and person in the universe, Tori Bachman. Thank you for all you do for me and for so many others; our whole profession (and world) is better because of your tireless, brilliant work.

To my students, thank you for the endless inspiration, joy, laughs, and lessons. While I am technically your teacher, no better teacher exists than you all.

Thank you as well to my mom and dad for their endless love and support (and childcare when deadlines loom near), to my brother and his family for always being there for me, and to my amazing collection of family and friends who supported me through the twists and turns of writing this book in particular.

To my children Maya and Wesley, you have taught me more and brought me more joy than anyone else ever has. Whenever I lose my way or get bogged down, it is inevitably you who help me to find myself again.

The biggest of all thank-yous is reserved for the greatest partner, friend, muse, and editor I have ever known: Cat. Your support of my writing has been nothing short of Herculean, and your insights at every turn have invariably been the light that guided me through some of the most tangled and winding paths. This book is for and because of you most of all.

Thank you to all of my readers. Your time is deeply valuable, and I am so thankful that you entrusted some with me.

And finally to every teacher out there building, supporting, inspiring, and cultivating your students. Your work happens quietly and often without fanfare, but never forget that you change the world every single day. Thank you for all that you do!

PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

Lydia Bowden
Assistant Principal
Berkmar High School
Lilburn, GA

Afrika Afeni Mills
Author and Education Consultant
Charlotte, NC

Brett Vogelsinger
Author and English Teacher
Holicong Middle School
Bucks County, PA

Theresa Walter
English Teacher and English Department Chairperson
Great Neck Public Schools
Greenlawn, NY

About the Author

Matthew Johnson is an English language arts teacher from Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is also a husband and father, and over the last decade he has read, thought, and written about how teachers can balance teaching with all of the other important roles they play in their lives. His work has been published by *Principal Leadership*, Edutopia, ASCD, the National Writing Project, and the National Council of Teachers of English, and his weekly thoughts on how to be a better teacher of writing in less time can be found on his website www.matthewmjohnson.com. When not teaching, reading, or writing, he can often be found in the kitchen, in his garden, or out on a run through the gently rolling hills of southeastern Michigan.

Introduction

It was the summer after my fourth year of teaching when I finally realized that I wasn't alone. Until that point, I had quietly grappled with a private classroom struggle so serious that I left teaching for a time in large part because of it, and if not for a Great Recession that left few other options, I'm not sure I would have returned.

The story behind the struggle was this: I sunk endless hours both in and out of the school day into writing instruction. I taught lesson after lesson about commas and clauses and parts of speech, carved out time to conference with students, and assigned lots of papers—papers that I spent a great many late nights, early mornings, and weekends marking and grading. I did this because the core reason I became an English language arts teacher was to help students find and refine their voices when it came to writing. I have since come to learn that a great many ELA teachers come into the profession because they love books, and while I love books, for me it was always about the power of writing—a power that, once realized, changed my own life—and a desire to help my students change their lives with that power too.

And yet at that point in my teaching career, my students weren't meeting the writing goals I held for them. I came into the classroom with visions of ultra-inspiring superteachers like those in *Dead Poets Society* or *The Great Debaters*, but my reality felt stuck in the opening sequence of a clichéd teacher-comedy movie: the part where students stare out the windows, with a look of unfathomable boredom painted across their faces, as the teacher drones breathlessly on and on and on at the front of the room.

At this point, I questioned whether I even could become an effective teacher, and so, in an effort to turn my writing instruction around, I sought out a writing instruction boot camp of sorts. I enrolled in the Oregon Writing Project *and* a graduate program focused on curriculum and instruction. By day I compared notes with other Writing Project teachers, and by night I dug into the history of composition instruction for my graduate work—and during this time, I realized that my quiet struggles and frustrations concerning writing instruction weren't what separated me

from other teachers. In reality, they were what connected me with the fellowship of writing teachers present and past—a fellowship that has long grappled with two well-established problems:

PROBLEM 1: STUDENT STRUGGLES WITH WRITING HAVE LONG BEEN THE NORM, NOT THE EXCEPTION.

There is little positive data when it comes to the writing trajectory of American students over the last half-century. The most concerning and also the most comprehensive data come from the Nation's Report Card on writing, which has consistently found since the 1990s nearly three-quarters of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders tested to have writing skills below the level of proficiency (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Further, the sparse measures we have of student writing trends show a nearly universal downward trajectory. For example, student scores on the SAT writing section during the decade when individual writing data were collected (2006–2016) did not rise once in that span, instead dropping eight of the ten years (Aldric, 2023).

PROBLEM 2: TRADITIONAL METHODS OF LANGUAGE AND WRITING INSTRUCTION—AND ESPECIALLY THOSE CONCERNING GRAMMAR, MECHANICS, AND STYLE—HAVE BEEN SHOWN TO BE MINIMALLY EFFECTIVE OR NOT EFFECTIVE AT ALL.

In 1963, Richard Braddock and colleagues published a National Council of Teachers of English report with a striking claim: "The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing" (pp. 37–38). Research in the 60 years since has regularly supported this finding that many traditional approaches to language instruction don't seem to move the needle on student writing in a meaningful way (Cleary, 2014). At first this all feels preposterous. How can learning more about something have little or no meaningful effect on one's ability to do it? Yet the data—and the classroom experiences of many—are as clear as they are confounding.

Learning about these established issues made me feel at once in good company and in a good deal of trouble. It was a relief to learn that my struggles were not an indictment of me as a teacher, but the fact that these problems remained so omnipresent and entrenched called into question whether my goals were even possible. If the spring of my desire to teach was wanting to help young writers to find and refine their voices, how was I supposed to do that if so many of the practices that proliferated in my own experience and the pedagogical books I had on my shelf didn't work? Was the real key simply a matter of getting students to write more, or to do more reading so they could pick up language through osmosis? Or were there ways out there to teach about language and writing that actually work?

These questions both drove and haunted me that summer and throughout my graduate school experience, and so shortly after graduating I began a newsletter devoted to seeking answers to the problems concerning writing instruction. And now, after nearly a decade of writing that newsletter, I can say yes to everything above. Yes, writing more is essential, especially when we are mindful of the types of writing we ask of our students. Yes, the same is true for reading; students need to encounter many different voices to properly understand how to express their own voices. And yes, cultivating student writing identities and the writing cultures in our classrooms is crucial. Even still, I have come to find that a true key to better writing instruction—one that is critical if we want to build more equitable classes because nothing gets left to chance or osmosis—is also the one that is the most maligned in discussion of writing pedagogy: **direct instruction concerning grammar, mechanics, style, rhetoric, and everything else that fits under the wider umbrella of language.**

Mentors and Models

While I love and deeply appreciate linguists, language theorists, and those who commit their working lives to exploring the gears, sprockets, nuts, and bolts of how language works, I am not one of them. I am instead a language-loving practitioner. I seek to offer a classroom view. For those who want a deeper study of the theory and research behind the topics and concepts covered, this book includes Mentors and Models boxes throughout as potential options for future study. I hope these boxes help with plotting the next steps in your own journey with teaching about grammar and language.

(Continued)

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Here, in no particular order, are the top five writing instruction books that have helped me the most in my near-decade of writing a newsletter on writing instruction pedagogy:

1. *The Confidence to Write: A Guide for Overcoming Fear and Developing Identity as a Writer*, by Liz Prather (2022)
2. *Writing Rhetorically: Fostering Responsive Thinkers and Communicators*, by Jennifer Fletcher (2021)
3. *Creating Confident Writers: For High School, College, and Life*, by Troy Hicks and Andy Schoenborn (2020)
4. *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities*, by John Warner (2020)
5. *Poetry Pauses: Teaching With Poems to Elevate Student Writing in All Genres*, by Brett Vogelsinger (2023)

To understand why direct instruction is so important, let's first examine the "formal grammar instruction" methods that have underwhelmed in the 60 years since Braddock et al. (1963). One common issue with traditional grammar and language instruction is that it tends to be highly disconnected from the wider work of class. Instead, in most ELA classrooms, out of the blue one day, the students do a worksheet on semicolons or diagram some sentences to learn about prepositions and prepositional phrases. Then those concepts recede, never (or rarely) receiving mention again—hardly a recipe for long-term learning. Further, even if the lessons concerning semicolons and prepositions do reappear, they aren't regularly connected to the wider work of the class or the students' own writing, and for many students the gap between learning those concepts and using them is too big to bridge on their own.

Another common problem with traditional grammar instruction is that it doesn't make its value clear. I have seen many, many students actively or unconsciously question its purpose. They can naturally express themselves in speech and writing—often in interesting, impressive ways—without conscious knowledge of what they are doing, so why does it matter? And recent scholarship has also made clear just how unwelcoming traditional grammar and language instruction can feel to

students (Young et al., 2014). Many associate language lessons (sometimes rightly) as connected to negative judgments concerning how they speak and communicate. Given how personal our speech is to us, such feelings can poison an interest in learning more about grammar and language in school before it even begins.

GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Language is so personal because we learn to speak by listening to the people and places that are the closest to us in the entire world: our family, friends, mentors, neighbors, and neighborhoods. We hear that language in our earliest days and weave it into a tapestry of syntax, pronunciations, and grammatical structures that is unique to just us. This might explain why students often have such a strong reaction to being told something about their language isn't correct.

By the time they enter our classrooms, many students also carry with them deep associations of frustration and boredom with all things grammar and language. The mere mention of the subjunctive or a coordinating conjunction can be enough to cause a thick glaze to appear over a great many students' eyes. When I ask students about these types of reactions, many express in one way or another what an impenetrable black box language is. They know that they can communicate without any instruction at all, but when it comes to instructions about how to communicate or where their communication comes from, the concepts rarely stick, and the picture never seems to come into focus.

These issues with grammar and language pedagogy are well documented and represent some of the thorniest and most intractable problems in ELA. But, to spoil the ending of this book, they are solvable. Every year students rate the grammar and language lessons in my classes—where we crack open the black box and pore over, pick apart, ponder, and play with what we find inside—as the most meaningful, most useful, and most enjoyable things we did. And in the process, the students grow comfortable and confident enough with language to begin finding and refining their voices in a way that they never did when I assigned diagrams and worksheets or simply ignored grammar and language lessons in favor of more reading and writing.

It is also worth noting that research has finally begun to recognize the powerful impact that thoughtful, modern grammar and language instruction can have on student writing growth. One of the most compelling pieces of this research is a recent update to one of the most widely cited reports arguing against grammar instruction, 2007's influential meta-analysis *Writing Next* by Steve Graham and Dolores Perin. In a new meta-analysis led by one of the authors, Steve Graham, the teaching of grammar went from having the lowest effect size of any strategies covered in the 2007 report to one of the highest effect sizes (Graham et al., 2023), leading many to wonder if the adoption of more modern practices is at least part of this striking jump.

The goal of this book is to compile what works while unpacking what makes so many language concepts—the ones we seemingly have to reteach every single year like students have never seen them before—so notoriously slippery. It also offers a practicing classroom view of what grammar and language lessons grounded in research can look like.

At the core of the book are six key practices for language instruction that can help educators to inspire both learning and love of language in their students. While many of these practices are time-tested, they are rarely used in the classroom—which may contribute to why grammar and language instruction is so commonly disliked and ineffective. When utilized, though, these practices are key to creating grammar and language curriculums that ignite and inform.

KEY PRACTICE 1: TEACH GRAMMAR AND LANGUAGE CONCEPTS BOTH *IN* AND *WITH* CONTEXT

The 1990s saw a pedagogical shift from teaching grammar and language concepts with random worksheets, diagrams, and problems toward teaching language and grammar in context of a student's own writing. Led by Constance Weaver, Jeff Anderson, and others, this in-context approach sought to correct a long-standing and ironic issue with language and grammar instruction: It is often viewed as one of the most disconnected, esoteric subjects in school, when in reality it is one of the most instantly applicable, practical things one can learn. The point of learning about grammar and language is to learn how to more accurately express oneself, and yet so often in

schools explicit instruction of grammar and language is so disconnected from student writing that it feels to many students like little more than random lessons learned at random times for some unknown reason.

Teaching grammar in the context of student writing was an important and enduring pedagogical shift—one that you will find throughout this book. It comes with a major issue, though: Many students, even when they are taught to use a colon in their own writing, still question why they have to learn about colons at all. They, and many of those around them, may have gotten through their lives just fine without ever using a colon. So why do they need to know how to use a colon again?

This common issue is why this book advocates teaching language and grammar in context in two ways: teaching topics in context of student writing *and teaching the wider context of why the topics are important in the first place*.

Throughout this book you will find terminology, content, and discussions that have historically lived in college-level linguistics classes—things like the history and evolution of the English language and languages in general; what a convention is and where current conventions came from; linguistic terminology like *dialect*, *idiolect*, and *register*; and debates around conventions and code-switching versus code-meshing. The point of all this is to help students to understand the wider context of grammar and language instruction—an understanding that can motivate young people to invest in the content and allow them to better utilize and adapt the lessons learned.

To go back to the example of the colon, this means that discussion of colons isn't limited to what a colon is and its common conventions; instead, the discussion extends to its history, how tools for emphasis like the colon can be used to impress readers and help human writing stand out from generative artificial intelligence (AI) writing, and inquiry concerning the way colons are used by different writers and used by the authors read in class.

KEY PRACTICE 2: TEACHING GRAMMAR AND LANGUAGE FOR TRANSFER

Most of the dozens of grammar and style books on my shelf follow a similar organizational concept: They are broken into classic grammar/language categories like parts of speech, conventions,

syntax, mechanics, sentence structure, and usage. In these books nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions get lumped together because they are parts of speech. Commas, colons, periods, and dashes all share a space because they are mechanical tools. This style of organization goes back to what is often recognized as the first English grammar book, Robert Lowth's (1762) *A Short Introduction to English Grammar: With Critical Notes*, in which Lowth begins with syllables before working through the various parts of speech and then ending with punctuation.

You may have already noticed from the table of contents that this book has a slightly different organization. Specifically, the chapters are organized by *what impact the tools have*, not what they are. This means a blending of the classic language instruction categories. Instead of parsing language instruction into grammar or mechanics or rhetoric, it is presented in different combinations according to the effect the tools and topics discussed have on a piece of writing. This means that the colon appears in a different unit altogether (as a tool for adding emphasis) than its keyboard cousin the semicolon (which is discussed in the chapter on sentence cadence and combination). The purpose of this seemingly minor difference is to correct a long-standing issue for language and grammar lessons, which is that students often understand the lessons seemingly fine on a worksheet and then struggle to transfer those lessons to their own writing or other contexts.

Modern pedagogical understanding has helped to make clear that when students struggle to transfer information from one place to another, one of the first places we should look is at how we organize instruction. So often as experts we forget that students often don't see the connections and applications we so easily do. Thus, when teaching something new, we must always be on the lookout for ways to make the connections and applications concerning whatever we are teaching about as clear as possible. This is commonly called "teaching for transfer," and it is the reason for the somewhat different organization of this book. Before reorganizing my curriculum, I taught my students about dashes in a punctuation unit, but this never seemed to inspire them to use dashes in their own writing, and afterwards they still regularly confused hyphens and dashes. Now they learn about dashes in a unit on emphasis, and while that change might not seem profound, they now, without any particular prompting from me, often use so many dashes after our lesson that sometimes I have to remind them to use them judiciously, unless of course they are mimicking the style of Dickinson or Du Bois (but more on that later).

GRAMMAR SCHOOL

The Difference Between *Grammar*, *Mechanics*, *Syntax*, *Usage*, and *Rhetoric*

Grammar, *mechanics*, *syntax*, *usage*, and *rhetoric* are words so closely linked and used so interchangeably that I've found most teachers don't fully grasp all the differences between them. And while my units often combine them, and I'm not sure all students need to know the specifics of how they differ, as a language teacher it is probably worth understanding the difference.

- *Grammar* has a wide range of definitions. The most common is that it is the collection of the rules that govern an approach to language. One can think about it as the code guiding the language's system and structure.
- *Syntax* is the order of words in a sentence. To discuss syntax is to discuss why one word comes after another.
- *Usage* is the way in which words are used. It is essentially about word meaning, and many word meaning discussions that are commonly lumped in with grammar—like *fewer* and *less*—are technically about usage, not grammar as it is traditionally defined.
- *Mechanics* are the small bits that govern the flow and help it fit together. Punctuation, capitalization, and sometimes spelling are often considered to be a part of mechanics.
- *Rhetoric* is the study of tools that allow a reader to connect, persuade, and move. You can think about it as the study of the tricks, compiled over millennia, for effectively communicating with an audience.

KEY PRACTICE 3: MAKE GRAMMAR ABOUT TOOLS AND OPPORTUNITIES, NOT ERRORS

Teachers often tell students they should learn about grammar and language so they can avoid errors. This rationale goes back to the beginning of English language and grammar instruction

(a history we'll dive further into later), yet for 300 years, this justification has failed to inspire interest and engagement for many students. From a linguistic perspective, it is also not exactly accurate, or at least it's an oversimplification. Every student who comes into our classes already follows internal grammatical rules and conventions. These rules—far from being random or incorrect—are an amalgamation of the rules that exist in the language of those around them. And according to linguistic science (Baker-Bell, 2020; Kolln & Grey, 2016; Pinker, 1994; Young et al., 2014), the rules they follow are just as consistent and logical as any other set of rules that another follows. Students don't fully understand this, and yet many will still feel upset when told that they (and by proxy those around them) are in error because it certainly doesn't feel like an error to them.

Another issue with a focus on errors is that recent years have seen the rise of generative AI and highly accurate proofreading programs. These tools mean that anytime we compose something with a computer, we now likely have a powerful digital grammarian sitting with us who is unlikely to let us do much splicing with our commas or transposing of a *there* with a *their*.

Deeper discussion of conventions and errors comes in Chapter 4, but this book—both with conventions and with all the other lessons—takes a different approach that focuses less on learning language and grammar to avoid making errors and more on learning about language so that we have more tools and better understanding of how to use those tools to accurately express ourselves. It also does this because while we come preprogrammed with an ability to communicate, the study of language is all about learning from those who've come before how to express ourselves better, be clearer, and more effectively entertain, persuade, and connect. Further, our students already come with tremendous linguistic assets and a way of speaking that is singular in the span of human history. When language study becomes about opportunities, their gifts can become inspiration for both others and themselves.

When students realize that the classroom discussions of language and grammar will seek to help them with expressing their thoughts and ideas more effectively—and demonstrate and broadcast their own unique voice—many open up to them with a level of passion and curiosity that grammar and mechanics aren't usually known for inspiring.

TEACHING TIP

A regular feature of my classes that I learned from Matt Kay, the author of *Not Light, but Fire* (2018), is to discuss why something matters before delving too deeply into it. We often assume that students know why learning about a topic, having a class discussion, building a community, or reading or writing about literature matter because we know why it they matter. But students don't always see the point, and if they don't, it becomes another hoop to jump though, meaning they will likely put in just enough effort to clear the hoop—if they decide to jump at all. Investing a few minutes in a conversation, ideally a student-led one, about the importance of the things we talk about can have an impressive return on investment. When students see that we read literature because it is as close as we can get to a handbook for life, we have class discussions because it allows us to stand for a second in the shoes of another, and we learn about language so we can be heard clearer and louder; the impact on engagement can often be striking.

KEY PRACTICE 4: BEING JOYFUL AND CURIOUS

Two weeks before the United States shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I attended what turned out to be an incredibly useful workshop for my pandemic teaching. In the workshop "Teaching for Joy," Ohio Northern University storyteller and professor Kevin Cordi (2020) pointed out that we often think of joy in the classroom as an either–or. We can do something fun *or* something meaningful. We can seek joy *or* do the work. He then spent the entire session disproving this false dichotomy, pointing out that joy in the classroom can

- Improve student work
- Increase student motivation
- Strengthen our classroom communities
- Decrease the stress levels of both students and teachers (Cordi, 2020)

Over the next three years, I thought about that session a lot as I watched joy evaporate from classrooms in the pursuit of

helping students with any gaps that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic as they shifted between online, hybrid, and in-person instruction modalities. In those years, student motivation and work were often absent, communities were often splintered, and stress levels were often teeth-clenchingly high, and yet one of the main tools that could have made a positive impact on these problems—joy—was conspicuously absent.

Of course, there were plenty of legitimate reasons not to feel joyful during those months, and leaning into joy wasn't always appropriate or what we or our students needed in those moments. Even still, in the moments where I remembered the importance of and actively pursued joy—maybe by choosing just the right song to start a Zoom meeting or having students write about superb owls to celebrate the Super Bowl—the response was striking.

In his session, Cordi (2020) pointed out what I found to be true during the pandemic: The biggest positive impact from joy often comes in the areas where it is often the most absent. And grammar and language aren't usually synonymous with joy or its close cousin, curiosity. The approach in this book seeks to correct that and infuse the power that joy can bring to make lessons memorable, interesting, less stressful, and more effective. Gholdy Muhammad (2023) in her book *Unearthing Joy: A Guide to Culturally and Historically Responsive Curriculum and Instruction* reminds us that "joy is the ultimate goal of teaching and learning" (p. 17)—something worth remembering as we craft grammar and language lessons.

KEY PRACTICE 5: THOUGHTFUL REVISITING AND RETRIEVAL

In my early years as a teacher, most of my grammar and language instruction took place in mini-lessons or grammatical corrections on students' work. And time and again I marveled at how little impact both had. When it came to commenting on papers, I often found myself correcting run-on sentences or reminding a student to capitalize the start of each sentence only to have the same students run on and not capitalize the next time like nothing had been said. At times I wondered why I even bothered to correct the students, and I often felt Dylan Wiliam (2017) was right when he called marking of errors in student papers "the most expensive PR exercise in history."

Similar issues arose in my grammar mini-lessons. I would take a day to teach about commas or why students should

use appositives, yet a week later, there would be all the same comma issues and no more appositives than before. All that it appeared like I'd accomplished was burning a day that could have been spent on reading and writing.

As I look back, I realize that one of the chief issues in my approach was the nature of memory. There are some details about human memory that explain where many of the issues with student retention might have come from. Generally speaking, we humans

- Start forgetting things the second we finish learning them
- Forget more and more with each day that passes, with the vast majority of what we learn evaporating from our minds within a week or less
- Forget nearly everything we encounter only once

Our tendency to forget is a major problem, but luckily there is a simple solution that can help turn our memories from sieves to safes: retrieval practice. Retrieval practice is the idea that if you really want to remember something, simply try to recall it on at least a handful of different occasions (Agarwal & Bain, 2019). The act of recalling and revisiting something might not seem flashy, but research consistently confirms it is a high-powered teaching move because the act of seeking to find information and then thinking about that information signals to the brain that it is important. In response to that flag, the brain then strengthens the neural connections where the information is stored, making it more accessible in the future, almost like a thumbnail image added to a computer desktop.

Retrieval practice and revisiting key ideas multiple times and in multiple ways and configurations (this is often called interleaving, and it too is a powerful teaching tool) are far more common classroom practices than they used to be. The one notable exception is language and grammar instruction, which still tends to be marked in a paper or delivered in a mini-lesson once (maybe before a standardized test) and then never visited again, at least not until the next paper or test prep the next year.

If we want grammar and language lessons to stick and real understanding to materialize, we need to treat them like the other central skills and topics in our curriculum and find ways to thoughtfully cycle back. And we need to find ways to clearly connect our grammar instruction to the reading and writing students are doing.

KEY PRACTICE 6: PURPOSEFUL, PHILOSOPHICAL VOLUME

Iconic, canonical language arts texts—texts like Nancy Atwell's *In the Middle* (2014) or Donalyn Miller's *The Book Whisperer* (2009) or Gholdy Muhammad's *Cultivating Genius* (2020)—have something in common: The educators who wrote these texts have a clearly defined philosophical approach that they stick to every . . . single . . . moment. Atwell's students knew that they would be using their trusty notebooks every day. Miller's students knew that they would talk about the books they were reading every class. And Muhammad's students knew that everything they did would be filtered through her four (now five, including joy) pursuits. There is no doubt that the pedagogical approaches of these three women are brilliant and remarkable, but it should also be noted that their brilliance shines so brightly because of their commitment to their respective philosophical and instructional approaches.

In talking to hundreds of educators, students, friends, and family about grammar while writing this book, I have found that those who love language and grammar all could identify at least one teacher who had an enthusiastic, regular commitment to language study—a commitment that helped them to see its beauty and importance, too.

These passionate language teachers stood out from the disconnected, à la carte approach often taken with grammar and language—an approach that is so easy because while studying a novel or crafting a paper or project requires a regular commitment, grammar can be easily broken into bite-sized lessons that are given when there is a moment to spare.

While I don't believe there is one system for regularly revisiting grammar that is inherently superior, there are a few features that are important:

- **Regular practice.** This means coming to grammar and language at the same time each week and showing the importance of that time by not skipping it, even when the inevitable wrenches that come with the school year start flying at you.
- **Regular routines around this regular study.** Gretchen Bernabei (2015) has students record what they learn about grammar in their "Grammar Keepers," notes that track what they've learned. I do something similar where all of the grammar/language lessons go into a specific spot on my classroom page that corresponds with the specific place students put grammar/language notes and practice in their notebooks.

- **Regular interleaving, or mixing together topics and tasks.** For example, while discussing how to write opening lines, the teacher can bring up language tools designed to make a splash, from parallel structure to purposeful fragments. This sort of blending has been shown to improve retention by strengthening neural pathways.

Brock Haussamen (2003) famously stated in *Grammar Alive!* that the study of grammar is "the skunk at the garden party of the language arts" (p. x). This same skunk status could be conferred easily enough to grammar's linguistic cousins like mechanics, syntax, usage, and even rhetoric. And many students when confronted with these things—with discussions of clauses and commas and conjunctions—act as though a real skunk has strolled into the classroom, treading as quietly as possible and actively wishing it away.

There are legitimate reasons for these reactions (that will be explored in Chapter 1), but it doesn't have to be this way. Grammar and language study doesn't have to be harsh, hurtful, or hated. It can affirm who students are, empower them through showing them how language works, delight and provoke interesting thoughts and revelations, and help our students to grow in their ability to write and understand the world and themselves.

In that first English grammar book, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar: With Critical Notes*, Lowth (1762) defines grammar as "the Art of rightly expressing our thoughts by Words" (p. 1). While Lowth and I would likely diverge concerning the meaning of the word *rightly*, I could hardly think of a better definition. The point of learning about grammar, syntax, usage, mechanics, rhetoric, and language as a whole is to learn to express our ideas, our voice, and ourselves as accurately and effectively—or, in other words, as rightly—as possible. And in that pursuit grammar and language study *can be good*. It can be a force for joy, a powerful affirming pursuit, and a life-changing set of skills and knowledge. Let's go find out how.

CHAPTER 1

Learning to Love Grammar and Language Instruction

Humanity has a deep and rich love affair with language. The average person encounters and produces billions of words in a lifetime, yet we still swoon when a favorite poet, writer, songwriter, or rapper conjures forth words in just the right way—even if we've heard it 500 times before. We still glow with pride in those rare moments where our own sounds perfectly capture our intentions. We still love language so much that we often seek it with the same intensity that we seek food or water; we tattoo the words that cause our souls to shudder directly on our bodies; we verbally joust with friends day after day; we preserve our favorite words and sayings from our families by weaving them into our own speech; and even our babies, well before they can speak themselves, are drawn with particular interest to those special sounds that play with sound and rhyme (Ghosh, 2016).

The notable and ironic exception to this outpouring of love for language comes in the very class devoted to it. A sad truth of the language arts classroom is that while we love to hear when a writer uses a beautiful absolute phrase or we get inspired by thoughtful use of anaphora, discussion of those tools is often enough to clear a room before someone finishes saying direct object.

In the Northern Hemisphere, we often use the metaphor of a North Star as an unflinching guiding light. I used it in my writing

a fair amount until it was pointed out to me that the metaphor only works for half the globe. In the Southern Hemisphere, the guiding light is the Southern Cross, which has long helped navigators to find their way through the equally vast other half of the world. The funny thing about the North Star metaphor is that it isn't wrong; it is simply incomplete. The North Star and the Southern Cross are both important simultaneously, even as we only use one at a time.

I bring this up because when it comes to creating powerful grammar and language instruction, we need to keep in mind that two things can be true at once. We can have a great love affair with language while listening to a favorite songwriter or poet and also be bored by a classroom discussion of the very tools the songwriter or poet uses. We can also recognize that there are equally compelling reasons for why some students find certain language instruction uninviting and dull while others are captivated by it.

If we want language study to be a powerful force for good—so good, important, and welcoming that students seriously commit to learning it—we need to examine and then meet both the loving and the loathing head-on. So, before moving any further, let's take a look at what's getting in the way. Then we'll look at the other side of the conversation: what makes language study useful and enjoyable.

WHY DO STUDENTS DISLIKE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN SCHOOL?

MANY STUDENTS VIEW LANGUAGE STUDY AS NOT PARTICULARLY USEFUL.

In his book *The Language Instinct*, famed linguist Steven Pinker (1994) points out that "[even] a preschooler's tacit knowledge of grammar is more sophisticated than the thickest style manual" (p. 6). Pinker's point is that every day, nearly all of our students, from preschoolers to freshmen to undergrads, conjure thousands of words out of thin air in their own unique styles and voices. Many can also write papers that are clear and compelling with strikingly little ability to discuss the grammar they are so effectively already using. By this point in my career, I have seen thousands of brilliant pieces from students who will shrug when asked what a preposition is. I would also wager that if you gathered together a group of noted communicators—authors, CEOs, influencers, celebrities, and dare I say even English language arts (ELA)

teachers—and had them diagram sentences, many of them would struggle mightily.

The formidable language abilities our students already bring calls forth a question in a lot of them: Why is it necessary to learn about parts of speech or parts of a sentence if they can already do so much intuitively?

This question has been further fueled by the rise of generative artificial intelligence, or GenAI. Platforms used for composing, like Google Docs, Microsoft Word, and Apple's Pages, and add-ons used for editing, like Grammarly and Wordtune, all now have AI bots working behind the scenes to add their expansive understanding of language to ours. These GenAI tools have grown so adept at inserting commas, capitalizing letters, and offering spelling suggestions that the likelihood of them missing most issues has dropped to near zero. Further, AI bots can help with far more than spelling and grammar questions. Insert a paragraph stuffed full of passive voice into a chatbot and ask it to make the writing more active, and the AI takes mere seconds to metamorphose the passive constructions into active ones.

So if students come to us preloaded with a thick textbook of language knowledge and a machine can offer suggestions for 99% of comma, capitalization, and colon issues that arise, what is the point of using our precious time to learn about language if we're not planning to become linguists or lexicographers? This is a fair question and one that I've found many students quietly ask themselves.

LANGUAGE STUDY OFTEN DOESN'T FEEL WELCOMING.

During an interactive part of a keynote at a recent conference, a teacher in the audience raised her hand and offered a response to how she felt about language instruction as a student. She said that so many language and grammar lessons left her feeling deflated because she felt the lessons framed how she talked—which was lovingly built with constructions and conjugations she absorbed from her neighbors, parents, and grandparents—as being wrong. She noted that over time these feelings acted as a serious impediment to her wanting to meaningfully engage with language as a student.

This comment came up about halfway through the keynote, but it signaled the end of the speaker's speech. At the conclusion of the audience member's impassioned words, an emotional dam burst, and the room was awash with anecdotes

about moments in which the participating teachers didn't feel welcomed or included by language instruction during their schooling.

The forces that erupted in this conversation exist in our classes as well, even if students are not as consciously aware of them as a room full of teachers. So often language in the classroom is framed as having two answers: correct and incorrect. Using a double negative like "I didn't say nothing," which I heard a student say in the hall yesterday, or not using a period to end a sentence is often framed as incorrect. But when it comes to those double negatives or periods that are likely missing on students' text messages, those students are following rules they've learned from their neighbors, friends, parents, and grandparents—rules that feel plenty correct when they are communicating.

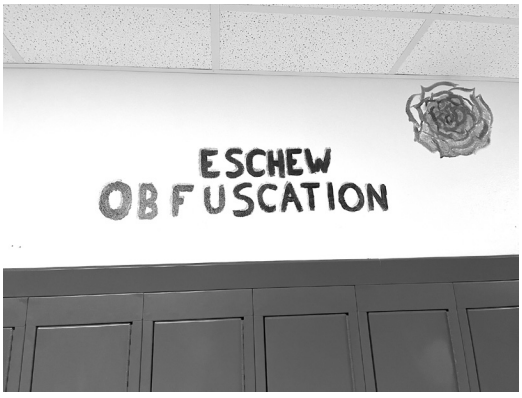
GRAMMAR SCHOOL

When it comes to "correct" rules, there are often some pretty compelling reasons to break them. For example, for the vast majority of my students and students I've met across the country, putting a period at the end of a sentence that ends a text message has a clear meaning: I'm mad. This convention to leave a period off of the last sentence of a text message is likely due to a period being redundant since the text message box also marks the confines of the sentence, but whatever the reason, if students don't want to come across as mad or aggressive, it is generally best to skip the period.

This book will go further into discussion of correctness and conventions and whether something is grammatical later, but for now, let's pause at a key question: Given the deeply personal origins of the grammatical rules that underlie speech, is it any wonder that many students bristle when their use of language gets framed as unequivocally incorrect or uneducated?

LANGUAGE STUDY CAN BE INTIMIDATING.

In my school there is a student-painted mural from decades ago that offers a simple-yet-not-simple message to those passing by: eschew obfuscation.



In other words, avoid making something unnecessarily unclear—written in the most unnecessarily unclear language possible. I smile every time I see it because I love irony and because, as it sits there above a language arts classroom door in student-scrawled bubble letters, it gives voice to an oddity of how we often approach language instruction. We often frame language instruction as being about increasing clarity and connection, yet the terminology used to discuss language is often incredibly unclear and hard to connect to for the modern student. For example, just take a look at the definitions of terms like *antecedent*, *nominative*, and *object complement*:

antecedent (noun)

a substantive word, phrase, or clause whose denotation is referred to by a pronoun that typically follows the substantive

Source: Merriam-Webster.com

nominative (adjective)

of, relating to, or being a grammatical case that typically marks the subject of a verb especially in languages that have relatively full inflection

Source: Merriam-Webster.com

objective complement (noun)

a noun, adjective, or pronoun used in the predicate as complement to a verb and as qualifier of its direct object

Source: Merriam-Webster.com

When the average student will need multiple other dictionary entries to understand a dictionary entry, you know you have an issue with clarity. The reason for this obfuscation is fairly simple. Much of English grammar terminology and instruction is grounded in the dominant, sophisticated scholarly language in the neighborhood when English was in its younger and more impressionable early years: Latin (Horobin, 2016). This approach may have worked just fine when Latin was widely covered in school, but for modern speakers, the grounding of language in Latin terminology can make it feel impenetrable. Like nesting dolls of confusion, each new definition can yield more terminology based in Latin (and occasionally Greek) whose definitions in turn yield more heavily Latin- or Greek-based words to look up.

Further, the terminology is only one potential source of intimidation. Many language concepts are tricky on their own, and many students come into our classes carrying long histories of struggle concerning everything from spelling to punctuation that can weigh on them and make even less daunting concepts feel bigger and scarier—like shadows of objects viewed in the middle of the night.

LANGUAGE STUDY IS OFTEN THE OPPOSITE OF FUN.

The beginning of serious language study in English is commonly marked in a letter Jonathan Swift wrote in 1712 to the Earl of Oxford Robert Harley, called "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue," that begins with the following inscription:

> I do here, in the Name of all the Learned and Polite Persons of the Nation, complain to Your Lordship, as *First Minister*, that our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; that the Pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuses and Absurdities; and, that in many Instances, it offends against every part of Grammar. (p. 8)

Later in the letter Swift advocates for a solution from across the English Channel: an English version of the French Academy, a group of 40 "immortal" intellectuals who have sought to guide the French language toward "perfection" for nearly 400 years. Such an academy in English never came to be, but Swift's call to improve the imperfections of English was picked up by grammarians of future generations, who often referenced Swift's call in their prefaces.

From this seed eventually grew a whole forest of grammar, style, and usage books over the last 250 years whose primary focus is on error identification and elimination. And while avoiding perceived errors, whether in an email or on a standardized test, can be important (for more on errors, corrections, and conventions, see Chapter 4), there are many students and teachers alike for whom it does little to excite or inspire.

WHY DO SOME LOVE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION?

If the previous reasons contribute to grammar and language instruction being the skunk at the garden party mentioned in the introduction, here we'll focus on why for some it can be the rose instead. Let's look now at what inspires many of our colleagues, friends, family members, and, yes, students to love language, at times ferociously.

LANGUAGE STUDY IS ONE OF THE MOST PRACTICAL SUBJECTS THERE IS.

In *Dreyer's English*, the longtime Random House editor Benjamin Dreyer (2019) makes a case for his book in the introduction:

> We're all of us writers: We write term papers and office memos, letters to teachers and product reviews, journals and blog entries, appeals to politicians. . . . We want to make our points more clearly, more elegantly; we want our writing to be appreciated, to be more effective. (p. xvi)

I've read similar points in dozens of grammar and style guide prefaces and heard it from hundreds of language lovers I've talked to in the process of writing this book. And they are right. We are all writers, though I would expand the definition beyond papers, memos, reviews, and other such official things. We also write social media posts, countless text messages, fan fiction, poetry, speeches for weddings, and tens of thousands of lines of speech in our heads each day.

And while my students' language, my language, and your language are beautiful and elegant and grammatical right out of the box, when we understand what we are doing and get a host of tools to do it better, we can do more with our language. We can refine it, increase the likelihood of it having the effect we want and sounding like us, and generally say and do more with each of those hundreds of millions of words we speak, type, and put to paper in our lifetimes.

GRAMMAR SCHOOL

All Language Follows Rules

The term *grammatical* means that something is formed according to rules. And given that everyone's speech and writing follow rules that they have absorbed and learned from the world around them, everyone's language is, by definition, grammatical. Further, the rules we follow as we compose a line of text verbally or on a keyboard are as correct or as logical as any other way of speaking because, in the words of linguist April Baker-Bell (2020), "linguistic science does not recognize any language or dialect as inherently superior or inferior to any other" (p. 15). There is no linguistic or logical reason for why one conjugation of *to be* or pronunciation of *pajama* is better than any other, and while people will speak with different conjugations or pronunciations, they are all following rules—often rules that millions of other English speakers follow as well.

LANGUAGE STUDY HELPS US TO BETTER UNDERSTAND OUR BACKGROUND AND OUR OURSELVES.

If you want to see something remarkable, go outside and walk down the street—any street—and look for people interacting. Those people are, in real time and with almost no effort, conjugating verbs, calling forth nouns and adjectives and prepositions, differentiating between subjects and direct objects and indirect objects, inserting pauses for emphasis and little linguistic flourishes, and instantly pronouncing hundreds of words according to specific dialectical rules they have constructed in their heads.

As established earlier, those rules come from simply listening to the people around them. And they are mostly unconscious. One- and two-year-olds don't generally fill out conjugation worksheets or diagram sentences with their crayons. Instead, their grammar is, in the words of Joan Didion (1984), "a piano [they] play by ear" (p. 7). They listen and soak in speech before stitching together a unique linguistic tapestry with the strands

of language available that fits with our personality and style. In linguistic circles, what comes out is technically called an idiolect, or someone's unique dialect or way of speaking. *Idiolect* is a term I have found that my students, from sixth graders to high school seniors, surprisingly love. I think they love it because it gives voice to something they've already noticed: Each of us has a specific constellation of rules for how we talk and write that is different from that of every person who has ever lived.

James Baldwin (1979) calls language "the most vivid and crucial key to identify" (para. 4), noting that our language shows both our communal background and who we are as individuals. And, while in the wrong context all that language reveals can make discussion of it uncomfortable, in the right context it can make it one of the most exciting and engrossing things to study and revel in.

LANGUAGE IS LIKE A GRAND POEM OR PUZZLE THAT NEVER STOPS.

Patricia T. O'Conner (2019) begins *Woe Is I* with the following:

> The perfect language hasn't been invented. No, I take that back—it has been done. There are so-called rational languages (like the "universal" tongue Esperanto and the computer-generated ELIZA) that are made up, designed to be logical, reasonable, sensible, easy to speak and spell. And guess what? They're flat and lifeless. What's missing are the quirks, the subtleties, the bumpy irregularities that make natural languages so exasperating and shifty—and so wonderful. (p. xix)

O'Conner brings up an important point. The exceptions to the exceptions to the exceptions that can make language study so intimidating, overwhelming, and, as she puts it, "exasperating and shifty" can also be a source of great joy. To study language and grammar is to study humanity, which is to say that it is a puzzle or maybe a poem that can never be fully figured out. These layers can be (and are) intimidating to many in the same way that a 5,000-piece puzzle would be, but once one engages with it, the endless discoveries and challenge to put together something so formidable can be a source of great joy.

Mentors and Models

One of the first to expand my understanding of language was University of Michigan professor Anne Curzan, who now hosts a surprisingly popular weekly NPR show called *That's What They Say*. Each week she explores some funny little wrinkle of the English language: why we are often over- or underwhelmed but rarely whelmed; why we say "beyond the pale"; and how one language can support "not passing muster" and "not cutting the mustard." Language lovers, get ready to lose the rest of the day.

Listen to NPR's *That's What They Say*

LESSONS TO KICK OFF A YEAR OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

These strong reasons why so many love or loathe grammar are why, before we talk about commas or clauses, my classes begin with a concerted push to show students the beauty and joy of language and grammar learning while also countering potential arguments against it. The goal is to actively show students, many of whom have long histories of not succeeding in grammar units or getting low grades on mechanics on papers, that they can do it. To do this, I take three crucial steps:

1. The class comes to a clear picture of what grammar and language study will be and won't be.
2. Grammar and language study is put in context, with a focus on its potential beauty, the knowledge students already bring, and the joy that can come with language study.
3. There are a series of lessons meant to show students what grammar and language study can do for them *and* that they can do it and do it well.

In the following pages, you'll see what those lessons look like on the ground:

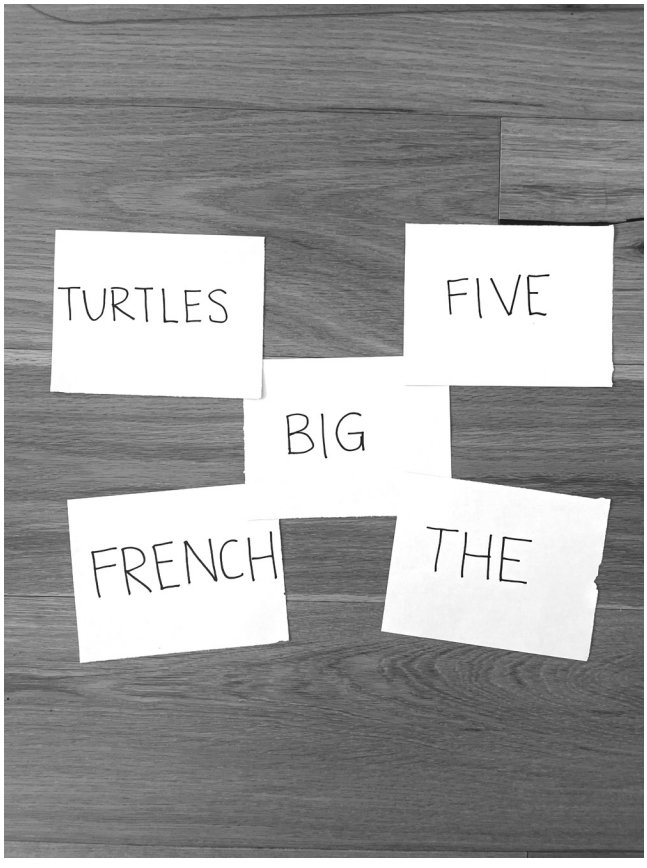
LESSON 1: WHAT GRAMMAR AND LANGUAGE STUDY WILL BE

In *Rhetorical Grammar*, Martha Kolln and Loretta Gray (2016) begin by saying that instead of thinking about grammar and mechanics as outside rules—dos and don'ts from some unknown authority—there is another way:

> Consider another possibility: that YOU are the repository of the rules. You—not a book. . . . Stored within you, then, in your computer-like brain, is a system of rules, a system that enables you to create the sentences of your native language. The fact that you have such an internalized system means that when you study grammar you are studying what you already "know." (p. 1)

There is no dispute about these facts in linguistics. This is the phonebook-sized style manual Pinker (1994) references in *The Language Instinct*, and what it means is the study of the structure of language is quite different from most content areas in school. It is largely a study of what we already know so that we can better use that knowledge to get the effect we want. To make this case, I begin with an adaptation of a lesson from "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" where author Patrick Hartwell (1985, p. 111) shows students the wealth of grammatical knowledge that they already possess by giving them a list of adjectives to describe something and asking them to put the words in an order that feels natural. Here is what it looks like:

1. Start out by giving the students a thing and some words to describe that thing. For example, the teacher could give students the words *French*, *five*, *big*, and *the* to describe a turtle. Then ask them to put the words in the order that feels natural to them. (If students are new to English, this lesson can still work too; they just have to do it using the language they feel most comfortable with.)



2. They will likely do it quickly and nearly universally (with the exception of a few who might begin to hypercorrect; see Grammar School box) put the words into similar, if not the same, order. When it comes to the words listed earlier, the most likely order will be the following:

The five big French turtles

GRAMMAR SCHOOL

I often have a few students who will hypercorrect with this lesson. Hypercorrection is our tendency to overapply grammatical "rules" or perceived rules when we feel nervous, self-conscious, or under pressure. I find that when students are asked to do something like put the adjectives in order, this hypercorrection instinct will kick in for some—which can be useful information to know when talking to students about how they ordered their words.

3. Next, ask why none of them said "The French five big turtles" or "The turtles big French five." Generally students respond by saying that the order they chose just makes sense—which is exactly the point. They might not all be able to define what an adjective or noun is, but they absolutely know what those things are. In fact, they know them so well that they also know that in English we generally put adjectives before the noun they modify and put them in a particular order: **number (*five*)**, opinion, **size (*big*)**, age, shape, color, **origin (*France*)**, material, and purpose. Hence "The five big French turtles."
4. The lesson continues with showing the students the Pinker (1994) quote—"[Even] a preschooler's tacit knowledge of grammar is more sophisticated than the thickest style manual" (p. 6)—and giving them a question to ponder: If they already know more than the thickest style guide, is grammar and language study even necessary? And, if so, why? The students discuss the question in groups and then as a class, and they generally come to it pretty quickly: When we understand more about language, we can wield it better. If they struggle to get to this conclusion, you can remind them that someone can get pretty decent at shooting baskets in basketball if they simply do it enough, but to really have a sweet, smooth shot—the kind that allows someone to take over a game or play at the next level—they need a coach to observe and refine the approach and mechanics.
5. The end of the lesson focuses on sharing a list of rules for how grammar and language instruction will work in the classroom, based on what this lesson shows. For me, this is a chance to establish firmly what grammar and language study will and won't be. Here are my classroom rules:

- All language is rule based, meaning no dialect or way of speaking is inherently correct or incorrect.
- Language largely develops unconsciously from listening to those around us, meaning criticism of how someone speaks is never allowed in here, as you are by proxy criticizing the family, friends, mentors, favorite fictional characters, and community of the speaker.
- You already know enough about grammar and language to fill a book—or more likely a series of books. Our grammar and language study will be about learning to use that knowledge.

TEACHING TIP

The Power of Students Coming to Their Own Conclusions

Throughout this book, I often suggest handing the microphone to students to explain a key idea instead of the teacher lecturing them about it. This is a risk at times because if we give students the chance to think and speak, we need to honor what they say and find (and not just jump in afterward with our "real" answers). What makes the risk worth it is that a wide range of studies have shown that when students come to conclusions themselves, those conclusions stick stronger and longer, especially for students with fraught histories or low expectations in a specific area who are used to receiving teacher lectures about the importance of something (Hulleman et al., 2010; Ramirez & Beilock, 2011; Tibbetts et al., 2016).

LESSON 2: WHERE ONE'S GRAMMAR AND LANGUAGE COME FROM: LANGUAGE STORIES AND THE IDIOLECT

After demonstrating to students what they already know, the natural next question is, Where did that knowledge come from? In *The Source of Self-Regard*, Toni Morrison (2019) wrote, "One's language—the one we dream in—is home" (p. 37). Morrison's *home* here is a brilliant choice because in all senses of the word, home is where our language comes from. As discussed previously, from our very first days on the planet, we absorb the rules for how to pronounce, conjugate, and order our words from those around us. At the same time, we don't just mimic those sources; we curate them, meshing together varied rules from varied sources to create something new that best expresses us. This miraculous, remarkable alchemy is done so quietly and unconsciously that many students have never thought for any length of time about where one's language comes from and how personal it is. This lesson aims to change that, and to help students to better understand their own language and language history, so that the understanding will act as a firm foundation from which to embark on our grammar and language instruction throughout the year.

1. Begin by having the students recall the three grammar and language instruction rules from the previous lesson. Many lessons will begin with retrieval practice because thoughtful revisiting and recalling of key information is one of the most high-impact instructional moves we have. As a reminder, the three rules are the following:
    - All language is rule based, meaning no dialect or way of speaking is inherently correct or incorrect.
    - Language largely develops unconsciously from those around us, meaning criticism of how someone speaks is never allowed in here, as you are by proxy likely criticizing the family, friends, mentors, favorite fictional characters, and community of the speaker.
    - You already know enough about grammar and language to fill a book—or more likely a series of books. Our grammar and language study will be about learning to use that knowledge.
2. Then, to add some depth and clarification to these, teach the following information, which shares nearly universal support from linguists yet is not commonly known by the wider populace:

We all learn language by listening to those around us when we grow up. We listen to our family, friends, neighbors, and teachers and incorporate rules they use for pronunciations, vocabulary, and sentence structure into how we communicate. This process of learning to communicate means two interesting things for our speech. The first is that every human who has ever lived—having had a different blend of family, friends, neighbors, and mentors—has a set of internal rules for how to communicate that is unique in all of human history. It is called an **idiolect**, or an individual dialect, and it is an intersection of those around you and your own individual style. Also, because we spend most of our time with our families and we learn language from each other, most families also have what is called a **familect**, or rules for communication that only exist within family units.

3. After the setup, explain to students what they will be doing: exploring their own idiolects, familects, and personal experiences with language. Doing this isn't easy for many students. Some have never really thought about this before; others may feel uncomfortable because language is so personal and not all of their experiences with language have been positive in school. This is why the first step is to explore the stories of others. The following are some language stories from fellow students and established writers that I share to give students ideas.

LANGUAGE STORIES TO SHARE AND REFLECT ON

Student A

I was born in India. I grew up speaking Hindi, and moved to the United States when I was around 4 years old. I first learned British English, so I was pronouncing and spelling things differently than how they taught English in America. I vividly remember when I said "H" out loud, I pronounced it "Etch" and not "Ah-ch." My classmates were amused by this, and I was confused as to why they were responding in such a manner. They then explained the 'correct' pronunciation of the letter. I also forgot how to speak, read, and write in my mother tongue. I now only am able to understand when others speak Hindi, and now only know a limited amount of phrases in Hindi. With having a culture different from most people who live in America, I have a unique perspective that other people don't have.

Student B

There is really nothing very special about my language/speech. Don't be fooled by my last name, Garcia, because I don't speak anything but English. My father is Spanish but I never really speak, mostly just listen. He will ask me something or tell me something in Spanish, and I will mostly just reply back in English, or a very choppy attempt at Spanish. It's always just "Sí" or "No." Same with my mother, she is Korean but both of us don't speak any. I always feel a bit sheepish when we go to a Korean restaurant and my grandma will have a conversation all in Korean as I just sit there, barely able to pronounce the names of food.

Student C

In my mom's house, where I spend the most time, our language is full of fun phrases or inside jokes that other people don't get, or aren't as used to. One phrase that I can think of is "em-FAH-sis on the wrong si-LAH-ble." That is something my grandpa used to say. Or "purple cookies," which is an inside joke between my aunt and sibling that I know they have bonded over. I know these things and find comfort in different phrases because they remind me of family. I also will feel comfort around different accents, my family is from Canada (mainly Toronto) and New York, which are both pretty strong accents . . . I love my familect, because it brings me comfort. Even the small things where familect show up like, my mom was texting me earlier, and called me "the Mighty Mouse!" Now, Mighty Mouse is an actual character that my mom didn't create, but it's something that my mom and siblings will say sometimes that brings me comfort. In my family, saying "You're the Mighty Mouse!" is like saying "You're a lifesaver!" or "You're the man!" My specific familect is something that no one else has, and that makes it something special and unique to me. My own little bit of home and family wherever I am.

Student D

When I'm with my family I don't speak English for many reasons. One because I enjoy speaking Spanish more than English and two because it makes it easier for my family to understand. But normally when I'm around friends or my cousin, I tend to use words very differently. One of my favorite words to use is "Maje" which generally speaking isn't a "correct word" to use with anyone. But for me it's a way to say "dude" or "friend." Personally I enjoy speaking Spanish more than another language that there is. I believe that being able to speak Spanish is more like a gift. Being able to go

back to your home country and being able to connect with them by language truly is something great.

Mentors and Models

Along with student examples, I also like to share professional examples. Here are some favorites:

- "An Offering to the Power of Language" by Sandra Cisneros (1997): https://bit.ly/3TTgCfu
- "3 Ways to Speak English" by Jamila Lyiscott (2014): https://bit.ly/3O0U4Wy
- "Til the Cows Come Home: Also Known as a Darn Long Post About Appalachian English" by Kristen Tcherneshoff (2020): https://bit.ly/48O13Kg

4. After reading the example stories, have the students take a few minutes to reflect on one or more of them in writing.
5. Then ask students to share their reflections with a group and then with the class. The sharing is important for two reasons. First, it begins the normalization of talking about personal experiences with language as a class. Second, the reflection and conversation scatter some seeds that help students with writing their own language story.
6. Lastly, have the students write about their own language. Generally, we share these as well so students can know about the linguistic communities in the classroom.

Mentors and Models

Over time, the personal and powerful role language plays in our lives can help encourage engagement and conversation. At first, though, it can impede conversations, as going too deep into one's language story in front of a class sort of feels like letting them rummage around in one's room or phone. A way to encourage meaningful conversations from the beginning is to build a strong classroom culture of and strong student skills with dialogue and conversation. When it comes to resources to do that, the best book I've ever read is Matthew Kay's (2018) *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*. Kay is a practicing teacher who unpacks in clear and gorgeous prose how to build a classroom where students feel comfortable communicating and have the skills to do it at the highest level.

THE LANGUAGE STORY ASSIGNMENT

The Story of Your Language

"One's language—the one we dream in—is home."

—Toni Morrison (*The Source of Self-Regard*, 2019, p. 37)

In class we read a wide variety of stories concerning the language that people use. Your job today is to tell your own language story in writing. This story can go anywhere you want, but some things you could write about include the following:

- What linguistic (language) communities do you feel a part of? What languages, dialects, and accents can be found in your language? Also, how have any chosen communities (sports, arts, community groups, friend groups, etc.) affected your language?
- What do you love about the language of your family, friends, and those around you? This can be things you've absorbed, things you haven't, or both.
- What are your favorite sayings and words in your own idiolect?
- What are the characteristics of your familect? What things do your family members say that most don't?
- What major experiences have you had in your life that involve language?
- What kinds of things do you think about when it comes to your language?
- What would you like to learn or to teach to others about your language and the language around you?

LESSON 3: LANGUAGE IN THE WIDER WORLD

Once students understand that they intuitively know a lot about grammar and have a firm foundation concerning understanding their own linguistic background, the next step is for them to understand more about the wider nature of language and grammar—namely the twisty and tangled life that language lives in the world. The goal of this lesson is to help them to see that the study of grammar will be so much more than rote recitation of some dusty rules. It will be a journey to the heart of what it means to be human and what it means to be them.

If I had unlimited time, I would love to teach students everything I know about language and then learn more so I could go even further. But time in the average secondary class is limited, so instead we do an adaptation of a lesson that Linda Christensen (2009) shares in *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, which is to have a "tea party" of sorts where students learn about an interesting language topic and then share it with their classmates in some version of a gallery walk so that they can get a taste for how deep language runs through our world and our lives.

1. To start, once again ask the students what they've learned about language and how we learn it, what an idiolect and familect is, and what it means for how we will talk about language in the classroom. These moments of quick retrieval practice are key for encoding these lessons into long-term memory.
2. Then tell students that sometimes authors and teachers can make the rules they give about language feel like they are chiseled in granite so that neither time nor winds of change can shift them. But, despite how fixed it can feel, language is constantly evolving. Word meanings and spellings change over time; new words grow into languages while older words grow out; pronunciations shift; dialects, creoles, and whole languages appear and heartbreakingly sometimes disappear; and languages themselves, regardless of those who try to stop it, undergo constant metamorphosis.
3. The short research assignment at the heart of this lesson, where students explore some aspect of language and then share it with their fellow students, can help students to get a small sense of how varied and vibrant the lives of languages can be. The next step is to introduce the assignment. Here it is:

LET'S LEARN ABOUT LANGUAGE!

Language is constantly evolving. Over time words change, add, and lose meanings; new words regularly grow into languages while older words grow out of them; pronunciations shift or vary depending on location and the groups one joins or leaves; dialects, creoles, and whole languages appear and heartbreakingly sometimes disappear.

Understanding all of this matters because embedded into language are the personalities, relationships, cultures, and experiences of the speakers, and in their histories are countless stories worth exploring. Your job today is to explore some aspect of language that feels worth exploring and then share its story with the class via a short paragraph, video, audio postcard, or artistic work with a caption.

Potential topics to study include the following:

- The history of a specific word or phrase
- The history of a specific English dialect or creole
- The history of a specific pronunciation or accent
- The history of a language or some aspect of a language that you have interest in
- Anything else that is interesting to you

This will be shared with the class (please let me know if you don't want this). Some potential methods of sharing include the following:

- A video of 1–2 minutes (This video can be more stream of consciousness or edited with a program of your choice.)
- A 8- to 12-line-long paragraph
- An audio postcard/minipodcast where you talk about your topic for 1–2 minutes
- An art piece in a medium of your choice with 4–6 sentences of explanation

And the criteria are the following:

- It will be anonymous, but you will be sharing this with your classmates. Keep that in mind when making it, and if this is a concern, please let me know.

- It should thoughtfully and clearly explain the topic you researched and include the most important information.
- Look for ways to make it interesting. This means using storytelling tools, being creative, and adding your own voice and style. Also, since this is about language, really lean into your voice. We will talk about this more, but your voice is like a cheat code for making interesting writing because no one has ever had a voice exactly like yours!

4. This task is pretty abstract, so examples can be useful to help students prepare. When choosing examples, highlight something of high interest. This last year, I did a quick think-aloud model with the word *bro*, which has gone from common to constant among a huge swath of the student body in our school. Some other examples I have adapted into models include the following:
   - John McWhorter (2022): "What Ever Happened to 'You'?"
   - *That's What They Say* (Curzan & Kruth, 2022): "Ain't Too Proud to Talk About 'Ain't'"
   - Sara Kehaulani Goo (2019): "The Hawaiian Language Nearly Died. A Radio Show Sparked Its Revival"
   - Tracy Mumford (2015): "A Crash Course in the Minnesota Accent"
   - BETNetworks (2021): *"Black English": How AAVE Developed From Slave Resistance and African Dialects*

The online companion (resources.corwin.com/goodgrammar) contains hyperlinks to resources for each of these topic categories. You and your students can jump right in.

I also share previous student examples, which are key too. Here are some of my favorites.

Student A

Haiti has two official languages, French and Haitian Creole. However, roughly 90-95% of Haitians speak Haitian Creole. It is spoken by 10-12 million people worldwide. Nearly 80% of it derives from French, but there are variations in meanings of words, grammar rules, and writing systems. Haiti was a French colony until 1804, and all authoritative figures spoke French. They did understand, however, that the vast majority of the colony spoke Creole rather than French. Many legal and other important documents were translated. The earliest recorded text in Creole, from approximately 1757, is a poem called

Lisette quitté la plaine. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries in Saint-Domingue, Creole was a form of resistance against slavery.

Student B

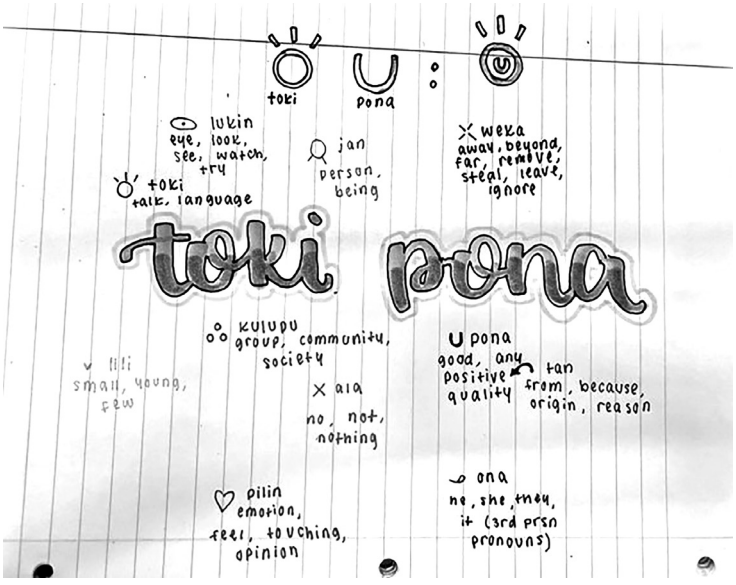
Howdy folks, today I will be teaching you about the word Howdy. The word currently is a verb used to greet people, and you probably hear it sometimes, even though it is mostly used in the southern US, especially at Texas A&M, where it is the official greeting. The word originated from the term "how do ye" which was used in 16th century England as a way to greet someone/ask about their health. By 1600, the term turned into "How dee," and in 1700, the term was morphed into howdy'ee, and by 1720, it was howdy. The term started to trend in the 1880s, and stayed like that until the 1950, where it dropped. The word then hit a huge spike in the 1990s, where it is now remaining at a pretty high level of usage.

Student C

Godspeed. I know this word from plane movies. You know during those intense moments with the dramatic music and you think your favorite character is heading to his death, his friend (or enemy!) will say, "Godspeed." I was wondering what this ment. I thought that maybe it ment fly fast and was just pilot lingo, but it's not actually. It originates in a dialouge between Lancelot and Sir Tristrem (whoever that is) around 1500. It's also a comedy movie, and a [DC Comics] superhero/villan (?) who's actually faster than the Flash!! One interesting phrase including Godspeed is, "Back of Godspeed," which describes a remote or isolated place. Godspeed is a very, very, very, very uncommonly used word. It occurs 0.09 times out of a million words used in written English. I think that means that it happens 9 times out of ONE HUNDRED MILLION!!!!!! It's like ONLY used in the plane movies!!!!! Literaly never anywhere else!!! It's really unfortunate. It wasn't even used alot in 1500 when it was (quote-un-quote) created!! We should use it more. It's a good word.

Student D

This is a drawing with a few terms in the Sitelen (non-Latin alphabet version) alphabet of Toki Pona. Toki Pona is a minimalist language containing only 120 words that was created in 2001 by Sonja Lang. It was made as an attempt to understand the meaning of life and weight of words—why we use the words we do, and if we really need them all to get our point across. It has little to no grammatical language, punctuation, or tenses. For example, there is only one word for every third person pronoun, and only one word for every fruit and vegetable. It currently has a few thousand speakers, and is recognized as an official world language.



5. When students finish, they share their projects with the teacher. The teacher then assembles projects into a shared document, puts them on the walls for a gallery walk, or finds another way to share them. The teacher-as-curator step is key because language is personal and can be sensitive; students who are still learning about it can inadvertently talk about something in a way that might upset another student.
6. Lastly, have the students look at each other's work and find at least one thing shared to bring back to and celebrate with the group.

TEACHING TIP

The Importance of Sharing

One of the hardest things to do in early grammar units is to get students to share their work with each other. Yet it's crucial. Sharing of their language stories from the last lesson helps students to understand how different and similar language stories can be; sharing of these language lessons shows them how interesting language can be; and sharing of later lessons shows them the range of the tools discussed and quietly reinforces the idea

(Continued)

(Continued)

that they are experts in their own language with something to add, even in regard to tools that are fairly new.

When it comes to sharing a norm and helping students get past any early reticence to share (not to mention retrieval practice), I like to collect much of the early grammar work and anonymously share examples over the next few days. When doing this, I always strive to do two things: I let students know in advance and keep a checklist and check off when I share a student's work to make sure all students are celebrated.

LESSON 4: NEW WORDS

Once students better understand the ever-changing nature of language, a natural follow-up question is, Why does it change? And the really satisfying answer is, well, *them*. Former *New York Times* book critic Parul Sehgal said in 2020, "Of all the factors that transform how we communicate, none are so powerful as young people, who have always steered language. They remake it as they learn it" (para. 10). Her point here is that a huge number of language shifts come from the younger generations. They try out new approaches to language—approaches that are often dismissed as slang when they are younger—and some of them ultimately find their way into language as dictionary-sanctioned words and common phrases.

GRAMMAR SCHOOL

What Is Slang?

Slang is language that is considered informal, meaning that it is usually tied to a particular group and hasn't been widely adopted into the larger language yet. Slang is often dismissed as a lesser form of communication, but an argument could also be made that it is the cutting edge—a sneak preview of words and meanings to come, along with plenty of words and meanings that, like any entrepreneurial pursuit, ultimately don't quite get off the ground.

Beyond helping students to better understand language shift, this lesson continues to make the case to students that they can do the grammar and language instruction that will follow. In *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, Linda Christensen (2000) argues that one of our core roles as ELA teachers is that "students must be taught to hold their voices sacred and . . . to listen to the knowledge they've stored up, but which they are seldom asked to relate" (p. 101). Far too many students walk into our classes feeling like they don't know anything about grammar and language. By this point the hope is that many students have learned that they come preloaded with lots of grammatical knowledge, but for many to learn that they not only know a lot but also are at the cutting edge of a language shift can be transformational.

The New Words lesson builds on all of these ideas by giving students a chance to create and use their own new words. It is also

worth pointing out that the core of the lesson itself came from a new teacher—a student teacher in my class named Elizabeth Williamson—who, like the students, was reinventing an approach to teaching about language while learning to teach it herself.

1. Begin by sharing the Sehgal (2020) quote and giving the students an opportunity to react to it: "Of all the factors that transform how we communicate, none are so powerful as young people, who have always steered language. They remake it as they learn it" (para. 10).
2. Then have the students discuss what words they say that other generations don't say. They do this first at tables and then as a whole group. The teacher's role is to record responses on the board.
3. Next, teach the students some of the ways new words form (see Table 1.1). The goal of sharing these with students isn't for them to learn in a long-term way what a clipping or portmanteau is; instead, the hope is for them to see that while new words and language are often maligned when they first come into a language as slang or "youthspeak," new language actually follows specific patterns as well.

TABLE 1.1 ● Ways New Words Form

Portmanteau	The combination of two words, like *hangry* (*hungry* + *angry*) or *doomscrolling*
Acronym	An abbreviation made of the initial letters, like the now ancient but still relevant *lol* (for "laugh out loud")
Onomatopoeia	Words created to capture the sound of something, like *buzz* or *grumble*
Loan words	Words taken from other languages, like *schadenfreude* or *jazz*
Calques	Words translated word by word from another language to fill a gap in a language, like *revenge bedtime procrastination*, a phrase first popularized in China before taking off globally in June of 2020.
Clipping	Where words are shortened to create something new, like *TV* for *television* or *fan* for *fanatic*
Semantic shift	The process of words taking on new meanings over time like *mouse* for a computer mouse
And sometimes words are simply created because we like them.	

4. After looking at how words form, have the students try to invent a word or words as individuals or in pairs. They then put the words they create into a Google Form that collects the words and drops them into a spreadsheet where others can view them. During this time, the teacher can also monitor the words to make sure there aren't any issues.
5. Then give students five minutes to explore the words followed by a short discussion where they get to give a shout-out to favorites.
6. Before they use the words, tell students that word creation isn't just a silly thing to play with. Authors use it all the time. Ross Gay (2015) in his *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* describes "horses *huckle-buckling* [emphasis added] across a field" (p. 85), and Bill Buford (2020) in "Mastering the Art of Making a French Omelette" calls his careful rolling of an omelette "a flashy *cheffy* [emphasis added] touch" (para. 20). And, of course, there is the great champion of made-up words: Lewis Carroll and his poem "Jabberwocky" (see Poetry Foundation, 2024b). It is worth reading a few of these or the many other wonderful pieces where authors insert their own new lexicons so that students can hear how just the right word creation can enhance imagery and meaning, as well as voice.
7. Students then write a piece where they incorporate at least a couple of the class's words—words that showcase the power of their voices, of young voices, and of the knowledge they already bring.
8. To conclude, ask, "Why did we do this?" At this point, the students have a basic working knowledge of things involving grammar and language. They know about idiolects and dialects and language shifts. This makes it a great moment to really bring home the point that they each bring something new to the table linguistically, which is where the next lesson begins.

LESSON 5: THE RIGHT WORDS (OR WHY I HATE THESAURUS.COM)

Mark Twain once wrote, "The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning" (Bainton, 1898, pp. 87–88). Twain is right, as anyone who has ever been knocked flat by a sentence can attest, but what makes for the right words? This lesson makes a case that because our idiolects are unique and few things in life are more personal than the words we use, the right words are almost always going to be your own words, not ones combed from Thesaurus.com.

The urge to ditch our words can be strong, though, especially for students who might not fully realize the power their words can carry. This is true at some level for all of us because we live with our words every day, which can make them seem unremarkable to us. Further, with the rise of GenAI, ditching our words is easier than ever—often just a button away.

This lesson is meant to help students to see that their language is often less lightning-bug and more lightning than they might realize and to better understand how to use that lightning on paper in a way that burns brighter and hotter.

1. Begin by returning to the notion of an idiolect and asking the students to recall what it means and where it comes from.
2. Then tell students that our idiolects are not a passively constructed thing. Yes, we learn language by listening to the people around us, but we aren't just language sponges. Instead, even at a very young age, we are more discerning and filter the language around us through our own personal style and approach—picking up the words, phrases, and sentence structures that speak to us for some reason. In other words, each of us has a truly unique way of speaking and writing—one that has never existed before and will likely never exist again—that also acts as a manifestation of who we are. What this means from a speaking and writing perspective is that if you consciously lean into your own voice, you will always have something unique to add.
3. Next, explain that word choice or "usage" is a key element of idiolects, so today the class will examine word choice and how writers can lean into their words to make a strong impact with their language.

4. After this setup, pass out and then read from excerpts of works by authors who are renowned for their word choices. As the class reads these, the students should highlight word choices that stand out to them as more lightning than lightning-bug. Some of my favorite word choice examples include the following.

   From Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929, p. 13):

   Chicago. August. A brilliant day, hot, with a brutal staring sun pouring down rays that were like molten rain . . . Quivering lines sprang up from baked pavements and wriggled along the shining car-tracks. The automobiles parked at the kerbs were a dancing blaze, and the glass of the shop-windows threw out a blinding radiance. Sharp particles of dust rose from burning sidewalks, stinging the seared or dripping skins of wilting pedestrians.

   From Wesley Morris's "Tornado. Treasure. There Was Nobody Like Tina Turner" (2023, para. 2, 12):

   They're saying [Tina Turner] was 83? Nobody's buying that. The ingredients made her seem immortal. For seven decades of making music, it all sizzled in her. . . . It just occurred to me what else "I, Tina" is. I've read this book ratty, but I'd really never thought about that title. It's a declaration, yes, the staking of a claim. It's also the beginning of a vow. To live, I think. To live so fully, so galactically, so contagiously, with so much daring, candor, zest and, yes, energy that no one is ever going to believe it when you die.

   From Brian Doyle's "Their Irrepressible Innocence" (2017, para. 1):

   Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a moist, gray November in my soul . . . then I account it high time to get to a kindergarten as fast as I can. There, I sit myself down in a tiny chair, in which I look not unlike a large, hairy, bespectacled, bookish giant, and inquire after the lives and dreams and feats of the small populace, and listen with the most assiduous and ferocious attention, for I find that as few as twenty minutes with people no taller than your belt buckle is enormously refreshing, and gloriously educational, and wonderfully startling, and endlessly hilarious, and very much like drinking

a tremendous glass of crystalline water when you have been desperately thirsty for a long time, and in something of a personal desert.

5. Have the students then discuss what they highlighted and use this conversation as a springboard to make a list of rules for good word choice. This process works best when the students lead, as the whole point is less about uncovering some secret list of word usage suggestions and more about a mindset shift where they begin to think more closely about their word choice and seeking the words that fit best for them. For the record, I have also found them to be as capable as anyone when it comes to discussing the moves that can often lead to strong word choice. Even still, there are a few points worth bringing up, if students don't first (and they usually do):
    a. *The right words are often unexpected words or word combinations*. Think "seared or dripping skins of wilting pedestrians" (Larsen, 1929, p. 13) or "most assiduous and ferocious attention" (Doyle, 2017, para. 1).
    b. *The right words are often personal and fit with the persona of the writer.* Only Wesley Morris (2023, para. 12) could have written "To live so fully, so galactically, so contagiously," and if one were to run across "wonderfully startling, and endlessly hilarious, and very much like drinking a tremendous glass of crystalline water," it would only be natural to guess it was Brian Doyle (and the start of Doyle's [2017] passage, which is an allusion to *Moby Dick*, is classic Melville).
    c. *The right words are different and unique*. If I were a bettor, I would wager an awfully large sum of money that no one had ever independently written the words, "A brilliant day, hot, with a brutal staring sun pouring down rays that were like molten rain," before Nella Larsen penned them in 1929.
6. Then have the students take word choice for a spin with the Your Writing Superpower assignment.

YOUR WRITING SUPERPOWER

Wonderful Words

"The difference between the almost right *word and the* right *word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning."*

—Mark Twain (Bainton, 1898, pp. 87–88)

When it comes to writing, the superpower that everyone has—but few fully use or understand—is their voice. As we've discussed, every human who has ever lived has had a unique way of communicating (called an idiolect) that is a combination of their style and personality and the language used by the people around them. Remember, this means that every single one of you has a way of expressing yourself that has never existed before.

You Try!

Write your own short piece in which you explain what others can do to cheer up. In your piece, really think about using word choice that excites, interests, intrigues, and captivates. In doing this, please highlight and narrate (using the comment feature or footnotes) *at least three* of your best examples of strong word choice. The narration should explain what you did to make your words stand out in those moments—potentially by using our class list of how to have strong word choice—and the response should be at least eight lines long.

Student A

I feel dull, lifeless, and weak. Sore and bruised from a week of hard practices. I have dark bags under cloudy eyes that haven't had nearly enough sleep. Maybe it's rainy and cold, gloomy and bleak. So I call my friends. Wanna do something, I ask, praying with all my might that they'll say yes as I wait for an answer. After I start contemplating if suspense can actually kill me, I get an excited reply, and together we decide what to do. It doesn't matter. Whenever I get sad, or gloomy, or weary, being with my loving, encouraging, and fun friends always helps bring me back.

Student B

When I'm feeling inconsolable and I need to talk to somebody, I click the white video camera with the lime-green backdrop, and I immerse myself in the magic of modern correspondence—FaceTime. I scroll through my contacts list until I find someone who I imagine will be available. This almost always ends up being camp friends, because of the convenient one-hour timezone difference between here and the faraway fantasy realm that is suburban Chicago. I then take my opportunity and spend forty seconds crying about the calamities of 15 minute math homework, before we start talking about something entirely different. The topics have a wide range, from our disappointment with the lack of a dystopian, Orwellian zombie apocalypse after a 6-second phone alert, to a dog she saw on the street. This never fails to make me feel even the slightest bit better, and I doubt I will ever tire of it.

Student C

Cheer chip cookies recipe for when its a dark midwinter day:

6 Cups of exotic fun

$2\frac{2}{5}$ Cups of jolly holiday spirit

$2\frac{2}{5}$ Cups of that warm fuzzy feeling when your drinking hot cacao

$2\frac{2}{5}$ Cups of melted sugary sweet kindness

$2\frac{2}{5}$ Cups of cheerful chips.

5 concentrated balls of compliments.

$1\frac{1}{4}$ Tablespoon of deliciously nostalgic smells

$2\frac{1}{2}$ Teaspoons of love

Have a child mix the dry ingredients (exotic fun, jolly holiday spirit, warm fuzzy feeling from drinking hot cacao, and the love) in a shiny homemade bowl with a handheld mixer.

Mix the wet ingredients (melted sugary sweet kindness and deliciously nostalgic smells) using a well worn wooden spoon.

Crack the concentrated balls of kindness and add the innards to the wet ingredients.

Mix it all together using the mixer held by a child and add the cheerful chips.

Take a piece of parchment paper with encouraging words on the backside and roll ~85 bells of dough onto it. Bake in the oven for 12 minutes.

Enjoy!

TEACHING TIP

A Word About Writing Prompts

Many of the assignments in this book are based on students writing according to some prompt to practice a particular skill, as this allows the teacher to see how students use the lessons in the context of their writing. Generally, I choose prompts that riff off the mentor texts we use, connect to the texts we are reading as a class, or both. I encourage you to be playful with your prompts and to sub my prompts at times for ones that match your classroom, your curriculum, and the mentor texts you use when needed. The main idea with these assignments is to give students room to play and romp and experiment and demonstrate while giving us a space to respond to their early attempts at these skills. And these things can be done with any number of prompts.

LESSON 6: METAPHORS AND SIMILES

Research, word choice, and metaphors/similes aren't typically where books on grammar/language begin. In fact, these things are hardly in grammar and usage books at all, instead being covered most often in connection with things like poetry or close reading. This unusual placement is part of what makes them such powerful early language lessons for so many, though.

This book will get to types of sentences, adjectives and adverbials, and the difference between hyphens and em dashes, but first it's important to establish the power of the students' voices, give context to what language lessons are all about, and make clear that the lessons to come will be focused on opportunities and joy. I have experimented with lots of different progressions, but I've found that starting with lessons that exist outside the usual orbit of grammar and language lessons and focusing on the assets and authority students bring is the most effective way to prepare students for the grammar and language to come.

This penultimate lesson in this unit looks at metaphors and similes, not as something to seek out in other writers' published works (as it is commonly approached in school) but as a powerful, underutilized extension of one's voice—a sort of amplifier of one's style. A metaphor or simile may just be an analogy, but the analogies we use tend to say a great deal about us and our backgrounds, and the right one can evoke an image like few things can. Here is how the metaphor and simile lesson goes:

1. Begin by noting that metaphors and similes are often viewed as things that are useful for poets or novelists, but not the rest of us. This couldn't be further from the truth, though. Metaphors and similes are one of the most efficient and effective conveyors we have of both what something looks/feels/smells/sounds/is like and one's style and personality.
2. Then do a quick metaphor and simile tutorial for those who are fuzzy on what these are and what they do. Go through a text that's rich with metaphors and similes and identify them. My favorite example is Clint Smith's incredible poem, "My Father Is an Oyster" (see Button Poetry, 2014). (Find it online here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FX-tWNIdMAM)
3. Next, show students the video of fellow student writer Varya Kluev, a winner of the *New York Times* 2019

Personal Narrative Contest, as she talks about why metaphors and similes are her "go-to tool" when writing (The Learning Network, 2020). (Find it online here: https://bit.ly/3ROAQEk)

4. Then discuss what Kluev points out: that metaphors and similes show instead of tell and give us strong visuals and interesting sensory information. They also allow the writer to express their personality, as personal metaphors and similes can add a wealth of personal flavor to any piece.
5. Next, give the students one last suggestion when it comes to metaphors and similes: Much like with word choice, the key to using them well is to lean into what you know. Follow your experiences and voice, and you will create a lot of great metaphors/similes.
6. To test this theory, have the students take two minutes to write a list of things that they know a lot about. They then use that list to come up with their own unique metaphors/similes about how common experiences (waking up to an alarm, the beginning of summer vacation, the nerves over an upcoming test) feel to them, and share and compare their metaphors with their classmates.
7. Lastly, the students write a short piece where they use metaphors and similes in a personal, interesting, and (if they are feeling ambitious) extended and connected way. See the following box for this assignment.

MAKING MEANINGFUL METAPHORS AND SIMILES ASSIGNMENT

Metaphors and similes are often written off as things that are useful for poets or novelists but not the rest of us. This couldn't be further from the truth. Metaphors and similes are two of the most efficient and effective conveyors of both *what a given moment feels/looks/smells/sounds/is like* and *your personality and style*.

For those who need a metaphor/simile refresher, they are comparisons where you take something the reader may not know about and compare it to something they likely do know about. Similes are comparisons that use *like* or *as*. Metaphors are comparisons that don't use

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like or *as*. Here is a part of "My Father Is an Oyster" by Clint Smith that uses both; similes are in boldface, and metaphors are underlined:

> *My father held his stomach,*
>
> ***as if he had been stabbed by the very person entrusted***
>
> ***to protect him**. Betrayal has never been so silent.*
>
> *There is no treason like that of your own body turning*
>
> *against itself. Benedict Arnold with a bayonet in your*
>
> *bloodstream, Judas kissing your kidneys goodbye*
>
> *for 30 pieces of silver. Chronic kidney disease is deep*
>
> *sea diving with no oxygen.*

The key to metaphors and similes is to lean into your experiences, your interests, and the areas that you know well. To practice this, please write *at least eight lines* describing a location you know well and use at least *two metaphors and two similes* to help the reader to understand it and you better.

Student A

23 Cypress Court is the place you look forward to going every year. 23 Cypress Court is the people you love most. The dining room looked like my grandfather had taken the recycling and dumped it out all over the table, started sorting through it, then got tired and quit halfway through the job. The kitchen is my mother making pizza frit, covered in hot oil and powdered sugar, my Zio yelling "Sugar!" in place of a swear word when he forgot to add something to the salsa, my Uncle David burning the popcorn on purpose on movie night because that's the way my grandfather liked it. 23 Cypress Court has a smell that no one else would know, but when you walk in you know that it smells like home, like baby powder and wood polish and like something stuffy you can't quite identify. 23 Cypress Court is running up and down the stairs for minutes on end, stairs my grandmother was never able to climb in her later years. It's like being cast in the starring role of a play, like everyone says you're the most important one there, but you only feel it a little, and you know everyone else has their own role, too, that's equally, if not more, important . . .Walking into 23 Cypress Court for the last time was like seeing a celebrity without all her makeup and plastic surgery. It feels weird, naked—it's not right.

She can't be the same person. It can't be the same house. Empty, like someone vacuumed a little too much and sucked the soul right out of 23 Cypress along with all the dirt. You know what it looked like before, that's imprinted in your head. The rooms are the same. The lawn is the same. How did the second home I'd known for fourteen years suddenly disappear before my eyes?

Student B

I think one of my favorite places in the world is Stonegreen Golf Course. It's such a refreshing environment. The trees always dance like they're being pulled on by invisible strings. The grass always smells freshly cut and rubs off on my clothes, I usually smell just like the golf course, it just has this distinct smell like cinnamon or honey. It smells sweet to me, at least, but I think it's because I love the sport so much. Golf is a language that I feel as if I can speak fluently in. Golf is a song that I can listen to on repeat for hours and never get bored. Stonegreen Golf Course is where I learned how to play, and it's what I'm familiar with. I think the course and how it's set up is so perfect and that's another reason why I love it. Although it's not an easy course, it's gorgeous, from the clear waters to the sand pits. Stonegreen Golf Course is one of my favorite places in the world.

LESSON 7: DEFINING ONE'S VOICE

One of the neat things about language is that any sequence of sentences longer than a few words and populated with specific topics and solid verbs is likely to be unique in the history of the English language. For example, the sentence before this one has probably never been clacked onto a keyboard or spoken aloud before, ever. The same is even more likely to be true once you add the sentence before this one to it as well.

There exist an estimated 5 trillion different possible ten-word sequences one can create in the English language. Not all will make sense, but enough will that the number of possible ten-word sentences is a very big one. And when the number of words in a potential sequence goes up to 20 words like the sentence before this, the number of possible combinations goes up to 500 quintillion (500,000,000,000,000,000,000; Louwerse, 2021).

These numbers can surprise students (and are also very useful if students try to pretend that they just happened to write the same exact words as something that exists online), but they are even more surprising when one points out that what these gigantic numbers mean is that every single day, every single student potentially says hundreds of sentences/sentence combinations that are potentially novel *in the history of the world*. Further, not only do we produce novel sentences daily, but we also pronounce them in our own unique way and use a stable of idioms and sayings that has never been seen before and is likely never to be seen again.

This final lesson for the opening unit seeks to use this uniqueness to complete the circle of the lessons before it by coming back to the idea that the students already possess great linguistic knowledge—enough that they will be able to not just survive but thrive on the linguistic journey to come.

1. Start by sharing that there exist an estimated 5 trillion different possible ten-word sequences one can create in the English language, and when the number of words in a sequence goes up to 20 words, the number of possible sentences goes up to 500 quintillion (500,000,000,000,000,000,000).

2. Next, remind students of their idiolects and make the connection: When one adds the earlier outlandish numbers to the uniqueness of their speech, it is not an exaggeration to say that each student has unique linguistic gifts to bring to the world and likely says things that are unique in the span of human history every day.
3. Then read poetry by poets who are renowned for leaning into their own unique voices. A wonderful collection for this is the Poetry Foundation's Ours Poetica series, which seeks to capture the feel of immersing oneself in a poem while sitting curled up under a soft lamp or a tree on a spring day through the use of animation and celebrity readers. Two favorites are John Green reading Matthew Olzmann's "Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem" (Ours Poetica, 2020) and Elizabeth Acevedo reading "blessing the boats" by Lucille Clifton (Ours Poetica, 2021).
4. As students listen to the poems, have them take notes on the voices of the poets and think about how they would define them. Right before doing this would be a good moment to revisit and review the lessons learned so far so they can use those concepts to help describe the voices of the poets. Don't forget that revisiting and reviewing is essential to long-term learning—one recent study found that students need, on average, to revisit something seven times to reach a "reasonable level of mastery" (Koedinger et al., 2023). You can also add other things to look for: I tend to add to our list that one can notice how succinct or long-winded, soft or loud, fast or slow, and excited or steady the poets are.
5. The class then listens to the poems and discusses them, with the goal being to come to a shared definition of each poet's voice.
6. Once the discussion is done, ask the students to then turn that microscope on themselves, writing for five minutes about what they've noticed about their own use of language when they speak. What words do they use a lot? Do they use figurative language? Do they tend to be succinct or long-winded? Do they talk in long sentences or short ones? Do they tend toward talking louder or quieter? Faster or slower? Do they usually show their emotions, or do they keep it more steady? Do these trends continue into other media like texting or writing for school? The goal of this is to begin to define their own voice.

John Green reading Matthew Olzmann's "Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem"

Elizabeth Acevedo reading "blessing the boats" by Lucille Clifton

7. To end, have the students take their descriptions of their voices and write poems that seek to lean into and celebrate their own voices. The assignment for this is as follows.

YOUR VOICE POEM ASSIGNMENT

Your voice is your secret advantage when it comes to writing. No one has your voice, so if you stay true to it, your writing will always be distinctive and therefore interesting. Your job today is to better understand your voice by defining it and then using it in a short poem about some object you have (such as your catcher's mitt or your smartphone or your favorite stuffie from when you were a toddler).

- Look to capture the elements and essence of your voice as much as possible. This means thinking about how you defined your voice and then looking to bring that out in the poem with your word choice, length of lines, organization of ideas, punctuation, formatting, style, and so on.
- Think about our lessons so far. What language can you mine from your friends, family, and background? What words that are your words can you use? What metaphors and similes really speak to you and your style?

The approach of the poem is totally up to you. It can rhyme or not, have stanzas or not, and have whatever structure you want. The main rule is to have fun with it! Your voice is wonderful, so let it shine!

Student A

The weight, the comfort, the embrace.

I used to dread the night. When my parents hollered from

The kitchen, "It's time for bed!"

When times were simpler. My only problem was . . . my bed.

Now I have complex stress, with complex thoughts, and I obsess. Obsess. Obsess.

Obsess over words.

My bed is now my comfort. I long for the weighted blanket that rests at the

Edge of my bed, that rests there through the day.

The warm embrace my comforter provides around my body. When my

Head hits the pillow; I feel every muscle, joint, and cell in my skin combust

Into relaxation.

Until my brain has finished its daily coverage, and I fall into a deep sleep.

Thank you, to my bed.