Mechanically Inclined

Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer’s Workshop

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Foreword by Vicki Spandel

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Moving from Correct-Alls to Mentor Texts

As writers, we learn most of what we know just by watching the pros, don’t we?

John R. Trimble, Writing with Style

Often teachers fall back on grammar and mechanics textbook lessons and workbook pages for lack of something better to do. Many teach mechanics and grammar with daily correct-alls. Yet as far back as 1936, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) found that the formal teaching of grammar and mechanics had little effect on students’ writing and, in fact, had deleterious effects when it displaced writing time. Other teachers who know these methods don’t work have fallen into haphazardly mentioning mechanics or, fearful of teaching grammar and mechanics out of context, teaching them only during the editing phase of the writing process. When this is the case, kids may only deal with grammar and mechanics a few times a year. Three hundred and sixty degrees from wrong is still wrong. I had to break open the “way it’s always been done” and figure out why the tried-and- untrue methods don’t work.

Canned Daily Correct-Alls

Are you picking up a tone here? It’s true. I am not in favor of most daily correct-alls publishers create by the dozens. Correct-alls are the prepackaged editing programs that overwhelm students with sentences so riddled with errors that it is impossible to spend sufficient time on each type of error,
much less see through the maze of corrections on the overhead. With correct-alls, only those already good at correct-alls get better.

Many correct-alls don't capitalize the first word of every sentence, nor do they have end punctuation. I have observed kids getting so numb with this kind of repetitive activity that they actually miss putting a question mark when it is finally needed. In a robotic, unengaged fashion, they make the same marks every day.

It's not rocket science. One sentence with ten errors to correct is problematic. How on earth can you discuss the errors? How will students pick up the patterns of correctness in language by marking up a sentence beyond recognition? How can teachers give the depth of discussion needed to address the purpose and effect of punctuation with so many errors? With what we know about the brain absorbing information visually, is it a sane educational strategy to have kids stare at something so wrong for the first ten minutes of class every day? Etching wrongness into my students' visual stores was not what I wanted.

To make matters worse, my kids did not transfer canned daily correct-alls into their writing. So why do them?

I found I needed to address more sophisticated errors. Middle school students don't need proofreading practice to capitalize the first word of a sentence or put a period at the end of a sentence. Their errors emerge when they struggle to shift gears from the informal communication of their world to the more formal or standard language expected in academic writing. Dialect issues, such as subject-verb agreement, double negatives, and dropped inflectional endings, are the gaps that may limit their access to future opportunities.

**Mentor Texts: The Close-Up Lens of the Sentence**

Are you weary of being a rule rattler, a constant corrector, an error eradicator? Do you poop out at parties? Relax. Let examples do your work. Telling kids about grammar and mechanics translates to students as Peanuts-teacher talk—the equivalent of blah, blah, blah. My lips are moving but nobody's listening. What do I do instead? I use a text as a mentor. A mentor text is any text that can teach a writer about any aspect of writer's craft, from sentence structure to quotation marks to "show don't tell." I let Gary Paulsen show my students about active verbs and short sentences. I let Patricia MacLachan show my students how to make phrases tumble off the ends of their sentences. I let newspapers, magazines, or any piece of literature make grammar and mechanics points for me.

Vicki Spandel (2005) gave a name to something I had been doing for the last few years: "sentence stalking." I am a self-professed sentence stalker. I
am always on the lookout for great mentor texts: sentences, paragraphs, essays, articles, advertisements, and novels. I also constantly look for well-written student sentences, paragraphs, and essays. From posting a student's sentence on the door as a *Sentence of the Week* to using a piece of student writing as an example of correctness rather than error, sentence stalking goes a long way toward building goodwill in any classroom. Kids love seeing what other kids can do. It spreads the idea, “I can do that too.” It encourages them to have their sentences taped to the door for everybody to stop and read.

When my student Christopher brings a sentence into class to show his friends, then I know he's got it: He can relish language and the way it is put together (see Figure 2.1). All students need to be sentence stalkers, finding them in literature and the world. If I can't find a student's sentence to make a particular point, I make one up. And, as quick as I can, I send kids back to creating and checking their own prose to match or imitate the mentor text examples with their own ideas.

![Figure 2.1 Student Posts a Sentence](image)

**The Power of Short Text**

I know kids need to hear the flow of language, its patterns, its cadences, its surprises, its syntax. Students who have limited experience with English need this even more. Whether they understand every word or not, whether they notice the way that dependent clauses tumble off the end of a writer's sentences, the flow of language is becoming imprinted and is more likely to come out of the writer who is consistently nourished and allowed to write his or her ideas on the page.

Reading provocative, very short text brings about surprising, thought-provoking student writing, especially when the readings are used as stimuli to writing. I read aloud, no matter how old the students are. The more behind students are, the more I need to read aloud from newspapers, novels, and poetry.

Jerome Harste, Carolyn Burke, and Virginia Woodward's linguistic data pool theory (1985) states that all of a student's visual and aural language experiences flow into that student's personal pool of data. Later, when communicating in oral or written form, the student will use things from his
or her pool in speech or writing (see Figure 2.2). In other words, every time a child hears a piece of literature, a conversation or a radio program, or sees print in written form, this data fills the child’s linguistic data pool. That’s an argument for a print-rich environment if I ever heard one.

Brian Cambourne (1987) used Harste, Burke, and Woodward’s theory to explain why things children hear, from words to syntactic constructions, often appear in students’ later writing or conversation. Cambourne calls the reappearance of these language experiences “linguistic spillover.”

This theory also hearkens back to Mikhail Bakhtin, who argued that 50 percent of what we say is repeated text from previous linguistic encounters (Bernabei 2005). In short, what we hear and see will end up in our writing sooner or later. Therefore, the better the literature we read aloud to our students and the closer in proximity the reading is to the next writing experience, the more likely it is that a spillover of rhetorical techniques will occur in student writing.

After I share any short text, I ask students Barry Lane’s million-dollar question (1992): “What sticks with you?” Its simplicity is its genius. Open-ended, this question allows students to explain what strikes them about a text, which, in general, are effective writing techniques. Processing what works in a piece makes it more likely that the stuff of powerful writing will spill over into students’ writing. I am teaching my students to pay attention, to live consciously, to think, to analyze, to connect, to synthesize.

I have also found that typing the text of most picture books doesn’t take that long. Then, as a class, we can look at individual sentences in even greater depth. We can use a text several times to look at several grammar and mechanics concepts in action and in context. Once the kids know what the text means, then their minds are free to attend to the other aspects of the text and to discuss the grammatical choices and their effects.

**Zooming in at the Sentence Level**

Ideally, grammar is a tool to help the reader and writer “see.” Grammar focuses us in on the writer’s point and “zooms in on” all the details that help enhance the point. As Harry Noden (1999) showed in Image Grammar, focusing on grammar’s power to make movies in our readers’ minds is far
more interesting to students than focusing on a policy and procedures manual that ignores most of what is done in the literature students read. Noden (1999) and Christensen (1968) argue that success leaves clues. What clues does literature point us toward teaching? Useful grammatical structures cause writers to refocus, zoom in, notice, and grapple with information that will convey their meaning. Zooming in to the sentence level helps novice writers understand the connections between mechanics, craft, style, and meaning.

For example, when writers learn ways to add concrete details to a sentence, they begin to look at life more closely, more observantly. By teaching students how to add pictures to their sentences, we are requiring students to “see” their world again. Using details to create pictures with grammatical patterns sharpens students’ observation and thinking skills.

Daily Doses: Using Mentor Sentences to Develop Concepts

To develop fluency in grammar and mechanics, students need quick daily instruction and practice. Ongoing shared experience with playing with and understanding grammar and mechanics is crucial. I take five or ten minutes—no more—to look at mentor sentences. I do it at the opening of class. I am not talking about a quick look at an entire book or even a whole paragraph. I found that looking at a whole text and merely skimming the surface of punctuation craft and moving on didn’t help my kids internalize sentence patterns that fill professional, fluent writing. I had to be more intentional, more focused.

For instance, I take a sentence from a book we’re reading or will read. Richard Peck’s novel, The Teacher’s Funeral: A Comedy in Three Parts (2004), starts off with a doozy:

If your teacher has to die, August isn’t a bad time of year for it. (p. 3)

I simply ask, “What do you notice? What do you like about the sentence?” I highlight how the author crafted the comma to pause at just the right point, setting up the comedic end to the sentence. We connect the sentence’s structure to one of the most used sentence patterns: a comma after a long introduction. There’s more to notice—subordinating conjunctions, cause-effect—but the point is not to beat the sentence to death. The point is to get the kids to look at it, think about its effects, suppose the author’s intent, and play around with the mechanics and see what changes.

“What happens if we take the comma out? Will someone reread it without the comma?” I ask. We debate whether we like the change or not. We try to imitate the sentence. At first kids will use too much of the original
sentence when imitating. It's a necessary first step. One of mine immediately came up with this imitation of Peck's sentence: *If your teacher has to die, right now isn't such a bad time.* We place successful, original imitations on a wall chart (see Figure 2.3).

Another way to weave sentences into writer's workshop, when students have more experience, is to have students look back at two or three sentences previously studied and compare their structures. I know that when kids start looking at commas they become walking pseudo-concepts. They attach meaning to the wrong things. They develop hypotheses such as, "Any sentence with two commas has an interrupter in it." This can be true but is not always true. It's not the two commas that distinguish a sentence; it's the function of those commas.

Take this sentence from Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2002):

> We cruise past block after block of humble little houses, whitewashed and stucco, built decades ago. (p. 10)

When I share this sentence with students, we discuss how the phrase *whitewashed and stucco* contains adjectives that add to the description of the *humble little houses*. We notice how moving the adjectives behind the noun meant that Schlosser was interrupting the sentence with details and necessitated that he set this interrupter off with commas. We note that we could take out *whitewashed and stucco* with its two commas and still have a sentence. Once kids start understanding a comma concept such as this, the first level of error is overgeneralization of the more sophisticated rule. They used to understand commas in a series. Now, when confronted with a sentence such as the following, also from *Fast Food Nation*, they say it's an interrupter just because it has two commas, even though they are serial commas:

> Then somewhere a dog barks, the door of a nearby trailer opens, and light spills onto the gravel driveway. (p. 92)

As students conceptualize, they grasp onto markers to provide meaning. The commas in the middle of the sentence around a sentence part do make the part look like an interrupter on the surface, but we help students look beyond the surface markers of punctuation and more deeply into the meaning and the function the marks provide.

One way to quell this misunderstanding is to give students three examples to look at over time, introducing one per day over the course of three
days. Later, we look back at all three sentences and cement the distinctions of function, meaning, and marks. The following three sentences from Fast Food Nation work well for this exercise:

We cruise past block after block of humble little houses, whitewashed and stucco, built decades ago. (p. 92)

Then somewhere a dog barks, the door of a nearby trailer opens, and light spills onto the gravel driveway. (p. 92)

All the trailers look the same, slightly ragged around the edges, lined up in neat rows. (p. 92)

Figure 2.4 describes the three distinct patterns represented in these three sentences. Note: All the patterns are discussed at length in the lessons in Part II of this book. For my purposes here, patterns serve as conceptual categorization.

Vygotsky (1986) believed first levels of conceptual development evolve out of piles and heaps we try to form when grasping for meaning. Think of a kindergartener who sorts all the red buttons into one pile and all the black into another. At a higher level of sophistication, students need experience categorizing sentences, testing theories, and being wrong quite often, but we have to trust that students will move in the right directions when scaffolded and given things in small meaningful chunks.

Younger children may need to spend many weeks on one pattern, such as setting off an introductory element with a comma. One sentence at a time, students can begin to sort out which sentence patterns are like the others. Most important, they can distinguish between the functions of sentence patterns so that they can make them part of their individual sentence-crafting repertoire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Patterns</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sentence</strong></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.4 Sentence Patterns

**Weaving Technical Terms into Instruction**

What is the place of technical terms in grammar and mechanics instruction? There are no clear answers to this question. My best response is to share an example that shows the level of detail that is possible. Christensen (1968) argues that the sentence pattern "we can best spend our efforts trying to
"teach" is the cumulative sentence (p. 5). Before I define the cumulative sentence, let's look at some sentence patterns from literature.

In the cumulative sentence patterns below, notice how the bolded information that follows the base sentences sharpens the focus of each sentence.

Joel sat scrunched in a corner of the seat, elbow propped on the window frame, chin cupped in hand, trying hard to keep awake. (p. 9)
—Truman Capote, Other Voices, Other Rooms

John Laroche is a tall guy, skinny as a stick, pale-eyed, slouch-shouldered, and sharply handsome, in spite of the fact that he was missing all his front teeth. (p. 3)
—Susan Orlean, The Orchid Thief

Rising to his feet, he saw the field through drifting gauze but held on until everything settled into place, like a lens focusing, making the world sharp again, with edges. (p. 1)
—Robert Cormier, The Chocolate War

Basically, the cumulative sentence is a base sentence (also known as an independent clause), with a number of subordinate constructions, which are bolded in the examples above. What are subordinate constructions? Think of subordinate constructions as a string of modifiers, and modifiers are really just "describers." How would I put it in student language? The parts we add to the base sentence are what we focus our lens on, what we choose to focus on from the wide-angle shot of the base sentence (see Figure 2.5). Lens focusing is adding details, qualities or attributes, or comparisons to sharpen the image and deepen the reader's understanding of the base sentence (Christensen 1968). Lens focusing brings the writer's world into focus for the reader, making words sharp again with edges. Figure 2.6 gives examples of the three basic components of lens focusing.

The good news is that you don't need to share all these terms and options with your kids. It's not that our students need all these labels. However, it is helpful to consider the possibilities as a teacher. As I teach, I balance what students gain from learning the definitions or labels with what they may lose by delving too deeply into the technical terms instead of focusing on the craft of writing.

When you heard the term cumulative sentence, did your eyes glaze over? If you hadn't heard the term
Figure 2.6 Lens Focusing to Sharpen Sentences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lens Focusing</th>
<th>Grammar Names</th>
<th>Literary Examples from <em>The Chocolate War</em> by Cormier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parts or details</td>
<td>Prepositional, participial, or absolute phrase</td>
<td>. . . Brother Leon went on, speaking softly . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualities or attributes</td>
<td>Adjectives</td>
<td>He was aware of other players around him, helmeted and grotesque . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparisons</td>
<td>Like phrases</td>
<td>He needed a shave, his stubble like slivers of ice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

before, what helped you more? The definition? The examples? What if I'd given no examples, or only one example? Would you have seen the pattern?

Students learn by example. It's a cliché because it's true. We have to flood students with elegant examples, whether it be decking the walls with them or individually collecting our favorite words, phrases, and sentences. As teachers we have to focus our attention on literature and all of its possibilities.

**Divulging Writer’s Secrets Through Short Mentor Text**

*Students cannot become facile at writing in general and using conventions in particular if they do them only now and then—no more than I can get thin by dieting on Fridays.*

Janet Angelillo, *A Fresh Approach to Teaching Punctuation*

Common sense tells us we have to do more than mention mechanics and grammar: we have to teach them. We can’t expect our students to be flexible enough to apply these conventions if we don’t cycle them in front of our students in various ways. By discussing the dash and figuring out what it does in authentic, well-crafted texts, students will begin to read like writers. Not just for style, but to see how writers achieve that style.

One good thing about daily correct-alls is that they do force students to consider mechanics and grammar on a daily basis. But the correct-all is rarely applied to students’ own writing. It’s all about searching for what is wrong with writing rather than what is right. Spandel (2003) frames the teaching of grammar and mechanics differently. In her book *Creating Young Writers*, she explains how she tells students that she has noticed they are ready for a writer’s secret—a secret that all writers share that helps make their writing sizzle. The goal is not to point to what is wrong with their writing, but to encourage students by showing them what they are ready for now.
Leslie Hart (2002) suggests there are other reasons the brain needs repetition. He claims that input needs repetition, not in terms of drill and kill but a constant cycling: "Repetition within input can be valuable . . . because what a particular brain is not ready for at one time will be welcomed and utilized at another" (p. 145).

I know the value and necessity of recycling through all the mechanical issues. We have to cycle through them explicitly and intentionally several times for students to recognize the patterns. Until we build their schemata, students will have a hard time intentionally crafting their prose.

If our struggling readers need to see a word forty times to learn it (Beers 2002), then I'll make a leap and say students need to see grammar and mechanics rules highlighted in different contexts at least that many times to own them. If the kids don't know a particular structure or that they have options, some may not ever go into the realm of complex sentences or other effective rhetorical devices that separate functional writing from effective writing.

My experience teaching English language learners certainly bears this out. In fact, many of my students are flooded daily with oral models of language that don't correlate with what is considered Standard English. Students need scaffolding and modeling to hear the difference. It's not automatic for every child.

By the third day of school, the teacher who hates daily correct-alls wants to start a daily routine. Anyone who has worked with a challenging group of students—in other words, all of us—knows that routines create safe structures—brain research says it; Nancie Atwell (1998) and Lucy Calkins (2003) say it. Routines give our students something to count on, a place to hang knowledge, a place to share and explore every day.

Our kids write every day. I argue that they need a writer's secret every day, too. Students need to stare at and relish some well-written snippets of effective mentor texts. Every day we look at some writing to aspire to or imitate—texts that teach with their artistic punctuation or jaw-dropping grammar. An appositive becomes much more than merely a renaming of the noun it precedes or follows; it becomes a construction that allows a writer to combine sentences for rhythm and effect. One more pattern, one more choice to add to students' style repertoire. I let my students know I will share a writer's secret during the first few minutes of class almost every day. My students know these first few minutes are important; they know they must listen because they will hear secrets they will be able to use, taking the guesswork out of what makes writing effective.

Writer's secrets can be shared in several ways. I might:

• Lift a sentence from literature and let students tell me what is right about it, generalize some principles, and apply them to their writing
• Lift a sentence from literature and leave out one piece of the punctuation I've taught or make one usage error and have the students correct it
• Lift a sentence from student writing and imitate its mistake, whether it's a frequently seen error or a point I need to make
• Ask students to imitate a construction and talk about its uses
• Ask students to copy down an example of a rule from a mentor text, then discuss it, as in Figure 2.7

In my class, these five minutes each day will never include a sentence so riddled with errors that we could never deeply discuss the errors or the purpose for the mechanics. These quick warm-ups recycle or introduce information that the students need to know.

The key to the writer's secret being useful is that it is to be applied in writing that day, pointed to again during writer's workshop and at the close of writer's workshop. Evidence of the writer's secrets' use is processed again at the end. If it's not yet clear, then more focused practice may follow.

Remember that this practice is only a small part of teaching students about the uses of mechanics. It supplements and recycles deep instruction that is steeped in literature and application in student writing.

I find establishing a few minutes at the beginning of the class ensures that I hit high-payoff grammar and mechanics rules sufficiently. Kids' brains
Mechanically Inclined

can only handle one new thing at a time, so I make sure this space doesn't become a catchall.

In addition, I provide order in my classroom—a structure and routine kids can count on. Katie Wood Ray (2002) says that we have to make our workshop routines and rituals as consistent as lunchtime. If I waver, the quality of my workshop suffers. If our kids are going to breathe conventions, inserting quick spurts more often and regularly is essential. We can't wait until the final copy to edit, but it pays off to take time for these quick spurts of well-selected craft and mechanics lessons that are based on student need and what researchers say kids need to know. In the next chapter, I'll show how this instruction is woven into the routines of writer's workshop.