

Grammar education at the collegic level is perhaps an unexpectedly controversial topic. Teaching grammar in a college classroom to disinterested students can be a monumental task that has far-reaching consequences. This controversy stems from two main perspectives, the prescriptivist and descriptivist arguments, most students are completely unaware of this debate and its inherent consequences. For many college students, grammar education, especially in college, can seem unnecessary and even banal. When discussing grammar education with my colleagues, I was shocked at the blasé attitude many of them had concerning their own grammar education. Software, such as spellcheck and Grammarly, are relied upon to an astounding degree and basic concepts, such as the eight parts of speech and exactly what constitutes a comma splice, are virtually unknown.

If given two two-hour class periods, I would divide these periods into two segments. The first segment would be theory; the second, application. I would assign the *Grammar Revolution* documentary, David Foster Wallace's "Authority and American Usage," and the Wall Street Journal [article](#) "This Embarrasses you and I*" to be watched and read prior to class. The purpose of these assignments is to educate the students about the current state of the grammar war and its possible implications in the business world, since that is extremely relevant to students who are looking to join the workforce in a few years. I believe that beginning a grammar segment that focuses on *why grammar is important* would motivate students to further their own grammar education by showing how it directly affects them. Hopefully, this knowledge would also spark conversation outside of the classroom and help bring this discussion into the realm of the students, rather than just the professional and academic sphere that it seems to inhabit.

During this first day of discussion, I would attempt to emphasize the student's own lack of basic grammatical principles, such as parts of speech and comma usage, without specifically targeting personal examples. This can be done by asking the class to give the eight parts of speech and to define a comma splice; I believe that most classes would struggle with this. I would also use the Wall Street Journal article to point out how important grammar is outside of academia. It may also be pertinent to show how this article sparked discussions in other journalistic outlets, such as Forbes, which has at least 3 articles that cite the WSJ. The importance of grammar is being emphasized in the professional world; yet it continues to decline in our education system. This seems counterintuitive, but there are very few offered solutions and even fewer plans of implementation.

This first day will mainly center on group discussion about the reading and the current state of grammar education. Hearing what the students have to say would be incredibly interesting, and it would hopefully spark conversation and perhaps even action. It would also be important to see where the students feel the system should be changed, or if it should be changed, since they have most recently been subjected to this system. I would think that the first 90 minutes of class could be centered around this discussion. The last 30 minutes or so would be spent learning to diagram sentences. Diagramming sentences is a great way to have students think about their writing in a more detailed manner. They must find the subject and verb, identify all the different clauses, prepositions, adjectives, and so on, in order to piece them together to create a clear understanding of how that sentence functions.

After that first day, I would ask the students to diagram several different types of sentences, including sentences with compound subjects and phrases, to bring to class. I would

also ask them to bring in a paper that they had recently written for another class, and to read Ben Yagoda's "The Seven Deadly Sins of College Writers." The first 30 minutes of the second class would be spent on diagramming sentences. If the class was small, work on the whiteboard would be preferable. The second 45 minutes would be spent on common mistakes in college writing, such as those in Ben Yagoda's article, focusing on correct punctuation and general flow and coherence in a paper. The next 30 minutes would be going over your own paper, and then another student's paper, attempting to find examples of these common mistakes and to correct them. The final part of class will be spent workshoping a single sentence in the student's paper. This can be done in pairs, or, if the class is small enough, as a group.

The purpose of this second class would be to implement basic grammatical skills that the students have learned, but also to make them think about their writing in a more grammatically critical way. Simply learning to think about writing in a new way and making the students aware of the complex ways grammar can be used effectively is one of the goals of this lesson plan. I really believe that if students were simply exposed to this controversy, and could see how much a proper understanding of grammar would help them, they would choose to learn more and become more aware in their writing.

Part III: Reflection

I really believe that my writing will change because of this class. That may sound abstract, but that is because it is. I have always taken a special interest in grammar because I enjoy reading and writing, and teachers told me that grammar was essential to truly succeed in

either of these subjects. However, I did not realize how little formal grammar I knew until I took this class. It was easy to say I understood the passive voice, but I was never able to truly explain it other than I knew it when I saw it.

More than anything, this class pointed out how little I knew, but it also gave me the resources, motivation, and confidence to educate myself. Looking back on my first writing assignment for this class, I am tempted to fix the passive (*I was recently accepted into the*), put in missing commas (*I am also an avid reader which has exposed*), and improve general flow and cohesiveness. Much of this stems from a newfound confidence in my own grammar vocabulary. Simply knowing what a nominalization is allows me to identify and rewrite a sentence to make it more effective. In fact, one of the most important discoveries I made in this class was my average sentence length, which is 21.5 words, and was discovered in the very first assignment. It baffled me how all of my sentences are roughly 20 words. I don't think that is a feat I could accomplish if I intentionally tried! In *Short Paper 9*, this trend is already decreasing. *Short Paper 9* still has an average of 23.5, but the range of my sentences was much wider. The shortest sentence was 8 words and the longest was 42; marking a much greater range than my previously analyzed paper. My sentences are starting to vary in length, adding texture and (I hope) elegance to my writing.

My editing process has also changed dramatically since, prior to this class, I edited by reading the paper multiple times, both out loud and in my head. Now, I am attempting to use targeted editing and an editing checklist when going over my papers. I think the most influential factor contributing to this change is my grammatical knowledge. Actively seeking out the

passive voice and changing it to the active differs immensely from ‘hearing’ the passive, and then attempting to fix it.

My general use of punctuation has also changed dramatically. I am now more confident in my use of commas, semicolons, colons, hyphenations, and parentheses; it shows in my writing. In my first writing assignment, I used one colon incorrectly, no semicolons, and omitted several commas. In *Short Paper 10: Links*, there are semicolons, parentheses, and lots of commas. I was also more confident in experimenting with style by attempting some anaphoric devices, varying sentence length, and a more personable tone.

I also composed the first sentence that I am, perhaps inordinately, proud of. This was done in class, while we were workshoping our long, 300+ word sentences, and produced this mirroring sentence, “In this speech, which denies there was any truth in the previous two speeches due to their biased view of madness – since madness is essential to human life as logos is not sufficient enough for the highest modes of human existence, a point that was not previously discussed – the four types of madness are defined, with the fourth type being love; yet this definition of madness requires an understanding of the soul and leads to the assumption that loves enslaves the soul – since it makes the soul forget about everything else except for the desire for beauty and the relief from pain that beauty provides – and furthermore, it is this source of beauty that is most often found in another person, and when the soul adores this person he falls into madness; Socrates constructs a work of rhetoric that captures his argument in exemplary fashion.” While the mirroring and parallel structure was partly a happy accident, this sentence showed me the value of working on an individual sentence, a concept I had always been interested in, but had never attempted.

Another revelation that came to me during this class, was my particular style of writing. I tend to write very linearly. I like things to flow in a sequential manner, and therefore tend to use

many linking phrases, such as *however*, *therefore*, *as such*, and *so*. In fact, while reading a paper I wrote a few months ago, I saw so many examples of this that it became a source of increasing annoyance, similar to my predictable sentence length. While these are not inherently negative writing traits, they are habits I intend to work on in order to further my writing.

This class gave me motivation and resources; now it is up to me to continue to expand on the principles introduced in this class. One of the main avenues I intend to explore in the upcoming months is that of editing. Reading the articles and discussing the process in class reignited an interest that has long laid dormant. I am hopeful that, through my expanding experience teaching and editing, I can work towards finding an editing internship in the next year.

Simply put, this class will help my writing. It has given me tools, resources, and motivation. It has given me some room to experiment, and made me curious about the nuances of an adverbial clause and the correct usage of a semicolon. It has made me eager not just to write, but to revise! And, for better or worse, it has opened the world of grammatical controversy to me.