

# Grammar—Comma—a New Beginning

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**O**n thinking of grammar as a transformative agent in writing workshop, I suggest that we fundamentally change the *way* we teach grammar. I work as a staff developer and teacher of writing in the New York City public schools. Over the last year, one of the research questions that has been driving my learning has been how to teach grammar in the upper elementary, middle, and high school writing workshop. I've been asking teachers and students about grammar, observing lessons, reading student writing, and experimenting with teaching grammar in new ways. I have some glimmers of hope to offer here, including some

curious success with students taking on grammar as part of their writing process, and some ideas about starting the teaching of grammar in a radically different place and as a radical agent. This inquiry is ongoing, but it seems like a good time to share some moments in the classroom—moments that mark a paradigm shift in the way we are teaching and learning grammar.

I started this inquiry as an antidote to the feeling of gloom that surrounds the teaching of grammar. Lunch meetings and faculty meetings too often sound like, “I teach punctuation every year, and they still don't know it;” or “They learned the tenses for the test, but then they still don't use them accurately in their writing”—comments we have all probably made out of frustration. The premise for this study lies in the belief in children's ability to learn. I supposed that if we are teaching grammar, but the students are not learning grammar from us, then there is something wrong with the way we are teaching it. This belief suggests two possibilities; namely, that there is something confusing in the way we are teaching it, a lack of clarity or definition that is not enabling the children to become autonomous; or that the students *do not like* the way we are teaching it, and are, therefore, resisting it. “Resistance

theory provides a framework for understanding these children's behavior as active resistance to a situation they find threatening, boring, or otherwise intolerable,” says Heshusius, a researcher in resistance theory, describing the paradigm for understanding children's learning in terms of acceptance and resistance (409). I found resistance theory useful because it shifted my attention from looking at students' ability to comprehend to looking at how they attach meaning to what we are teaching. And here I found some surprising results.

If we examine how students attach meaning to learning experiences, something as innocent as using student work to begin our teaching of grammar suggests grave implications. It is fairly common practice to ask students for permission to use a piece of their writing for the minilesson in grammar or punctuation. For example, in reading student writing, we find a common problem such as improper use of tenses, and we decide we need to pay attention to it. In order to ground our teaching in the students' writing, we use a piece of student writing as a sample. We always ask permission, and we explain to the students why we think the class would benefit from looking at this piece of writing. We demonstrate how the writing becomes more accurate and

powerful when this grammar issue is resolved. But what else is happening while we are paying attention to the grammar?

I began to observe students during these grammar lessons, wishing to know why the lessons weren't sticking. What else is going on? It is not that the students aren't engaged. They learn to correct the text. They can take the lesson and apply it to their writing. But they do not use the tenses accurately when they begin to write anew. *They don't want to.* And now that I paid more attention to method, I suddenly thought, why would they? Who wants to learn by having someone hold up a piece of their writing and say what's wrong with it? It doesn't matter how courteous I am, or how helpful my intentions are; that is what I am doing when I start my teaching by looking at student writing to see what they can't do right.

So here we were with this illumination, which probably many teachers have had before, and we needed a new place to start. In talking with colleagues, I asked if we could simply abandon this method and start the teaching of grammar from a completely different place. We agreed to *not ever* hold up a piece of student writing in front of the class, or even in a small group, and say what was wrong with it in terms of grammar. This turned out to be very hard. We want to correct. We want to instruct. We want to tell them how to do it right.

I turned to Constance Weaver's *Teaching Grammar in Context* and Harry Noden's *Image Grammar* for some ideas. Both Weaver and Noden suggest that grammatical structures are intimately linked with larger writing structures such as story. They also demonstrate grammatical concepts through the writing of published authors. They start with what works well. In fact, they start with the notion of grammar as a transformative agent in the writing process. I really liked this idea, and that became the new start for teaching grammar. I decided to ground all teaching in the notion that grammar is a transformative agent. This means that we teach how authors use fragments in powerful ways in their writing. We don't teach that fragments are wrong. We show how and when they are right. This means that we don't start with memorizing tense endings and forms. We start with how authors use verb tenses. *We seduce* the students into grammar. We let grammar seduce us. We assume that it is, in fact, seductive, and we search out those writers who manipulate and exploit grammatical structures in their

writing. We imitate them, we pay attention, we play, we make sense of how we will use grammar in our own writing so that it becomes an expressive agent. Following are some examples of how this notion, that grammar is a transformative agent, transformed grammar for us.

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I'll start with a vignette from an eighth grade class because this lesson begins so simply, but it marks such a radical shift, and it demonstrates the radical potential in this teaching. These were students who had been in this school, a small middle school on the lower east side, for three years. Over these three years the teachers felt that there was little noticeable improvement in the students' grasp of grammar and punctuation. They seemed to grasp it during the lessons, but they didn't demonstrate their learning in their writing. So it seemed like a good time to look at punctuation and sentence structure, but to look at them with the idea that these concepts can be transformative. The first lesson began as a writing prompt, not as a grammar/editing lesson. The idea is that the students will do "quick-writes" or "freewrites" the way they would with any writing prompt, in order to achieve fluency, in order to play with form and style, in order to suggest how these may enhance content. The important issue is that the lesson is not about editing. It is about composing. The prompt I began with came from a few lines of a song being performed on MTV by a popular singer: *Do you love me? I love you. Please, please! (I want to hold you.)* The lines are sung so that the speaker sings the punctuation. So they read: *Do you love me, question mark? I love you, period. Please, please, exclamation point! I want to hold you, parentheses.* We talked over the purpose of the punctuation, and the students came up with the ideas that the question mark was used to indicate a question, that the period marked a definitive statement, that the exclamation point marked an emotional cry, and that the parentheses seemed to explain something

special within the markers. Not something so new, except that we had been trying to teach these forms of punctuation for three years, and this was the first time the students explained them on their own. Now we used the sentences as a prompt. The students could write something new, or they could take an idea they were writing about in their notebooks and return to it. Either way, I asked them to express this idea in the same form as the prompt.

Yuk-tsi was an English Language Learner who had been learning English rapidly over the last four years, since her arrival in New York. Yuk-tsi's writing was careful. It showed that she had some trouble understanding the purpose of punctuation in English and that she was restraining her writing to avoid mistakes. This meant that she wasn't often saying meaningful things in her writing. Here is the lesson, in Yuk-tsi's notebook:

**Notebook entry:** I want to go to college. I want to go to an ivy league college.

**Prompt/Model:** Do you love me? I love you. Please, please! (I want to hold you.)

**New Writing:** Will I ever be a college girl? I want to walk in ivy halls. Please, please! (I don't want to stay in Chinatown.)

That new group of sentences shows Yuk-tsi using sentence structure to express her longings, her hopes for the future, a way of reaching out in writing that she never showed before. She could see it, too. And instead of using a piece of writing to demonstrate inaccuracy, we could put Yuk-tsi's writing up as a model and show how she used those particular sentence structures to tell the reader so much about herself in such concise form.

This lesson led the students to notice the use of parentheses and to ask how authors use them. So lesson two became just that—how some authors use parentheses in powerful ways. The prompt became a single sentence from Nabokov's *Lolita*. I used this sentence because I love how Billy Collins wrote a whole poem from it (entitled "Picnic, Lightning," in the collection, *Picnic, Lightning*) and because I think it is one of the most marvelously constructed sentences in the English language. It suggests a whole narrative within those parentheses: "*My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three*" (10).

We talked first about the parentheses, and the students imagined what "picnic comma lightning" might imply. Then we noticed the way the sen-

tence was set up, so that it told something about the mother and suggested something, in its tone, about the narrator. This was a new idea, that sentences had tone. We talked a bit about that, about how the narrator seemed a little dry, a little sarcastic, and a little distant from that "very photogenic" mother. We talked about the difference in saying "very photogenic" versus "beautiful." We noticed that language matters, and we thought about word choice and word placement. How empty the sentence would be without those parentheses and the words inside it.

Next we used the sentence as a prompt. We did not agonize over the parts of speech. Students are naturally mimetic. Sometimes I think we overteach when we ask them to use mentor texts as models and pick apart every aspect of those texts. I think sometimes we just need to give them a little space and trust in the power of the authors we choose.

Jenny had been involved some time earlier in writing a multigenre piece about her attempts, not always successful, to cope with adolescence, poverty, and custody. Her mother remained peripheral in the piece, and Jenny had searched for ways to express the impact of her relations with her mother. She rarely used accurate grammar in her writing. Jenny's notebook reads as follows:

**Notebook entry:** My mother couldn't keep me when I was twelve.

**Prompt/Model:** *My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three.*

**New Writing:** My not-so-loving mother felt unable (welfare, the projects) to keep me when I was twelve.

How closely Jenny models her own writing on Nabokov's sentence structure, and how much power that gives her writing! Like Nabokov, she has implied a history within the parentheses. She has told the reader something about her mother and something about herself. She has set a tone that is slightly distant, slightly wry, that suggests the world and her place in it. She has punctuated accurately as well. Jenny was able, without further instruction, to see how powerful this sentence is. It leaps off the page. This moment demonstrated several things to us. It took the teaching out of my hands and moved it from direct instruction to the idea that students have an apprenticeship relation with great authors, even at the level of sentence structure. It showed

students what it is like to be in a relationship with the ideas and language of literature. It gave Jenny, and the class when we shared it, a whole new idea of the purpose of grammar. It suggested grammar as inquiry and as craft.

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At this point, we began using sentences such as those just described as occasional writing prompts for quick-writes. We also began to expand our inquiry, to take on something larger such as verb tense. I did not want us to begin tenses again with the notion that the teachers were pulling their hair out because the students didn't get it. Instead, I brought tenses in by beginning to question, in shared reading and read-aloud, how authors use tenses. The students noticed that authors often use present tense to create a sense of immediacy and past tense to create a sense of narrative history, of trajectory. After reading several different short passages and seeing how authors manipulate verb tense, I asked students to simply look over their notebooks and their published writing to see if they used tense in similar ways, or if they could see the potential for using tense in those ways. Some of the students in the eighth grade class said, "You know, we don't think we really know how to use tenses." Similarly, students in a seventh grade class said, "We don't think we even know the forms." I asked them if they would like to learn about tenses, if they thought it would help their writing, and we agreed that we would pursue study in two ways. We would get out that abandoned workbook of regular and irregular forms, which they had visited for three years with little success, and we would look at the forms again and think about ways of learning them. We would also look at how authors use tense, why they adopt

certain tenses, and why they may switch, and we would try out these methods. Students asked, Do any authors switch tenses within a single piece? Why? So we had an inquiry.

For the minilesson, I composed in front of them a passage in two different tenses, and we talked about the larger narrative purpose of using past or present tense:

The clock by my bed says two a.m. I wonder why I am awake, and why the numbers on the clock look so blurry. There seems to be a gray cloud between me and the clock. The sharp smell of smoke fills the room. My throat hurts and the covers seem very heavy on the bed. I want to put my head back under the covers and go back to sleep.

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We talked about things like time, place, suspense, immediacy, and their relation to the narrator, and the students noticed how present tense implies that the narrator is still in a possible fire, and we don't know if the narrator will survive. The past tense, on the other hand, simply by the combination of past tense and first person, implies that the narrator survived the fire. The students then tried writing a passage, either new or from their notebooks, in a particular tense, to imply immediacy, or history. Some students tried a passage in both tenses. Others saw that only one tense made sense for their choice. This was new—students making verb tense choices for a reason.

Now we realized, together, that even when the students made a clear choice, sometimes they confused their reader because they didn't know the accurate forms. The *ed* ending was fairly simple, although not obvious to all English Language Learners. It was the irregular forms that were wreaking havoc in their writing. Rather than focus on correcting them, we decided to compose with them. A new homework, which I participated in, became a quick-write using a few of the irregular verb forms. I started doing this in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade classes, and it is actually tremendous fun if we set it up as play. For example, I took one of those lists, and the students highlighted the words *come*,

*bite*, *swing*, and *hang*. The rule was that we had to use all of the highlighted words. Here is my quick-write, in present tense:

This morning my dog comes into the room, bites me on the arm, and starts to pull my sweater between his teeth. It's a green sweater with orange stripes. He swings the sweater back and forth, with my arm still inside. I hang on grimly, wondering if he has gone crazy. Suddenly he lets go of the arm and grabs the neck of the sweater. The next thing I know, the sweater is on the floor and he is biting it into little bits. He isn't crazy . . . he just doesn't like the sweater!

Then I changed it to past tense:

This morning my dog came into the room, bit me on the arm, and started to pull my sweater between his teeth. It was a green sweater with orange stripes. He swung the sweater back and forth, with my arm still inside. I hung on grimly, wondering if he had gone crazy. Suddenly he let go of the arm and grabbed the neck of the sweater. The next thing I knew, the sweater was on the floor and he was biting it into little bits. He wasn't crazy . . . he just didn't like the sweater!

Following is sixth grader Asia's freewrite. She has seen my model, which I gave to the students. Though I did not ask them to follow it, students are responsive to mentor texts, and this mimetic ability is empowering in their writing.

Today I met a dragon in the subway. He was green and orange and he smelled like old shoes and tangerines. He hung onto the straps and swung back and forth from his little arms. He had huge feet, but his arms were tiny, like on an alligator. Suddenly the lights went out in the train. The dragon's eyes shone red and bright in the darkness. Slowly, I edged closer to the dragon. If things went bad in the city, I thought that it would be good to be sitting next to a dragon.

As part of a conversation about the teaching of grammar, I brought this piece of writing to a staff developers meeting at District Two, and to Shelley Harwayne, our superintendent. For all of us, our immediate response was to the phrase "if things went bad in the city," which tells us so much about the anxiety our students, especially our downtown students, have after September 11. It reminded us, among other things, of our purpose in teaching writing so that it enhances our students' powers of communication. Shelley noticed also how closely and easily Asia had worked within the model I had given

the class, and, being Shelley, she dove at once into her files and emerged with models she used with elementary school children—particular poems and excerpts from picture books, really provocative sentences lifted out as mentors. Shelley reminded me that thinking of grammar as transformative in the writing process isn't new, but that we need to locate more texts to use as writing prompts for middle and high school students, and also that we must not assume that we stop this way of teaching as students get older.

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In collaboration with another staff developer, Vicki Vinton (whose ideas and practice inform all stages of this inquiry), I expanded our classroom exploration into how authors use certain grammatical constructions. For instance, in following the inquiry posed by the students—Do any authors change verb tenses and why?—we started to pay attention when we read aloud, when we did a shared reading, when we wrote. I was poring over books at home also, and finally came across this excerpt from Sandra Cisneros's "One Holy Night":

He said his name was Chaq. Chaq Uxmal Paloquín. That's what he told me. He was of an ancient line of Mayan kings. Here, he said, making a map with the heel of his boot, this is where I come from, the Yucatán, the ancient cities. This is what Boy Baby said.

It's been eighteen weeks since Abuelita chased him away with the broom, and what I'm telling you I never told nobody, except Rachel and Lourdes, who know everything. He said he would love me like a revolution, like a religion. Abuelita burned the pushcart and sent me here, miles from home, in this town of dust, with one wrinkled witch woman who rubs my belly with jade, and sixteen nosy cousins.

I don't know how many girls have gone bad from selling cucumbers. I know I'm not the first. My mother took the crooked walk too, I'm told, and I'm sure my Abuelita has her own story, but it's not my place to ask. (27–28)

I brought this excerpt in, eager to share an author who switched tenses and inquire with the students into her narrative purpose. The students talked about the implications of the tense switch, suggesting that the change shifts the narration from a story about people in the narrator's past to a story about herself. They felt that when she speaks in the present tense she is saying how she really feels about herself now. They suggested that the author wanted to link a sense of history, of ties to the Yucatán, of girls getting pregnant and going bad, to a sense of the present and possibilities for her future. Then they wanted to try it. Here is seventh grader Katherine's response to the prompt:

My mother was African-American, and my grandmother was African-American, and my great-great-great-great-great-grandmother was just African, until they came and took her away, I guess, in a ship, away from that place where her grandmother was, and her great-great-great-great-great-grandmother maybe lived in some ancient city in Africa.

And I don't know that ancient city, but if only that woman in Africa knew, her great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter lives in a city too. Not an ancient city but a city full of African-Americans. Years passed, and passed since that boat came, but I wonder if she does know, and if she's with me here in this city, and maybe all the African-American girls I see in my city have their great-great-great-great-great-African grandmothers with them.

Katherine brings a sense of history into her piece. She tells us something about herself, something about her racial experience, something about being a woman, and being black, and being a black woman in the city. When she shifts from past tense to present tense, she brings us along in that ship, from that ancient city in Africa to the city where Katherine lives now. Looking at that prompt, paying attention to how the writer was making choices, thinking about the writer's purpose, released all this into her writing. She found a way to carry with her a sense of history, to let that run through her writing like a river.

I'll never go back to looking at student writing for grammar errors. I'd like to finish this conversation by returning to an earlier moment, when a student composed some powerful pieces in class, and these pieces demonstrated unfamiliarity with grammatical concepts, and I'd like to think about how I would change my teaching because of this inquiry. Here are three selections from Jenny's multi-

genre piece, all of them about her hospitalization after she had mutilated herself after her first night in the homeless shelter. The three pieces all circle around one moment, when she is left alone at the hospital. Jenny was trying on different genres to explore how they reflect new insight into an idea. We were talking in class about how writers choose genres. We had not yet looked at the possibilities of grammar, and how grammar can reflect similar choices. Jenny's writing included these pieces:

Mom please mom don't leave me here, I ran to her crying. I looked like a sad waterfalls. I just went down on the floor leaning on my knees looking up at my mom face and she's looking at me as her tears are dripping down on my face and our hands are getting sweaty from holding tight to each other. Dr. Willson put his right hand under my under arm pit and his left hand under my other under arm pit as he trys to pick me up to separate me from my mother and get to my room. As our hands are slowly sliding away from each other with me screaming I love you mom please don't leave me and she did.

#### "At a Hospital"

Holding as tight as I can to my  
teddy bear as tears and tears will  
drip down my brown eyes full of fear.

Laying down on a hard uncomfortable not  
mine mattress staring at the pale blue ceiling  
not wanting to be here.

As my roommate constantly staring  
at me like if she never had  
a girl roommate before.

It's the first time I write to a journal but I am  
pissed. I can't forgive Ms. R for this, she branged  
me to this hospital for nothing. Basically nothing  
change. I still have thoughts of committing suicide.  
I just feel like committing suicide and stop think-  
ing about doing it but actually doing it but actually  
doing it.

When I looked at Jenny's pieces then, I felt paralyzed as a teacher. There was so much to celebrate in this writing in terms of its evocative power, the rhythm and liquidity of the verse, the spareness of the prose. But what and how was I to teach Jenny in terms of writing? I simply couldn't think of what I could teach her that would respond to the depth of her emotion. I certainly didn't want to point out the grammatical errors because this was one of the first pieces Jenny had shared as a writer, and I didn't want to make her experience with conferring in any way

a negative one. There was no way I wanted to use this piece as a means to teach correct grammar. At the same time, I knew Jenny wasn't making deliberate choices; she was simply putting the words down on paper as they came. Ultimately, the only useful thing I taught her was how to incorporate stanzas and line spaces into poetic form, and she revised her middle piece so that it looks the way it does now, whereas it started as three sentences across a page. Essentially, I was working with a framework of genre choice, and genre-linked craft lessons.

Now, when I look at Jenny's pieces, I see a conversation about how she uses run-on sentences to create a sense of rhythm, a rapid pace that runs like a frantic heartbeat through the prose pieces. I see conversation about how she uses fragments and periods in the poem, to break up the poem into three distinct, frightening moments. I see conversation about the deliberate use of "branged" to convey a sense of a narrator who is a young girl, unfamiliar with tense forms. I see a way to work around Jenny's unfamiliarity with grammar usage, by naming what she is doing. Without being able to articulate it, Jenny was responding to things we had read in class, like Sandra Cisneros, and Rosario Morales's *I Am* poem, which uses a stream of consciousness form rife with run-ons and fragments. I could show her these, point out that her first piece looks like a stream of consciousness, ask her if her third piece is meant to be a journal entry, ask if she thinks her grammatical choices are consistent. We could look at other writers who use run-ons and fragments in meaningful ways, and other writers who introduce dialect. When we shift our teaching paradigm, we can help Jenny

articulate the choices she makes as a writer. When I went back to this piece with Jenny this year, in this new context of grammar as a transformative agent, Jenny learned the form of "brought," and she decided to keep "brang" as a deliberate narrative choice. And then she wrote the sentence copying Nabokov, and she decided to start her entire project with that sentence: *My not-so-loving mother felt unable (welfare, the projects) to keep me when I was twelve*. When Jenny opens her piece now with that sentence, she is able to make it clear that her later run-ons and fragments are choices. And now they are *her* choices.

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