

On the Richness of Grammar as an Analytical Lens in the Integrated Language Arts

Using William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," Massey demonstrates how reading a poem for grammatical features, such as adjectives, adjectivals, adverbs, and adverbials, can help students develop a richer understanding of how language works to evoke mood, setting, and more.

As a teacher of Bowling Green State University's English 3810, Grammar and Writing, I am charged with teaching future language arts teachers how to teach grammar so that it actually helps their students become better writers and communicators. And because such teaching rejects the ineffective but time-honored drill-it-and-kill-it approach, in which students are bombarded with decontextualized grammar lessons and worksheets, my effort to expose my students to new teaching techniques and philosophies is simultaneously an effort to get them to forget much of what they thought they knew—by virtue of having undergone it themselves—about grammar instruction. This pragmatic approach to grammar instruction means that I try to convince my students to teach grammar from both a descriptive (as opposed to prescriptive) and rhetorical stance, which includes the following:

- honoring linguistic differences and recognizing the utility and validity of nonstandard dialects and other rule-governed usages that depart from Standard English;
- teaching grammar in the context of students' writing whenever possible instead of relying on acontextual, general lessons; and
- seeing grammar not as an absolute standard to be lived up to but as a communicative tool that can be manipulated for rhetorical effect as audiences, purposes, and contexts for writing change.

One implication of this approach (and particularly the last element of this list) is that, far from

merely being a superficial feature of writing—a formal adornment draped over some deeper substance known as “content,” or perhaps a rigid mold into which substantive content is poured—grammar can and does play an important role in the construction of textual meaning. After all, grammatical choices can affect levels of formality, amplify poetic language and meaning, and even reflect deep epistemological orientations (as in the oft-cited example of scientific writing relying on passive voice because of its seeming neutrality). Grammar thus marks an important point of contact between form and content, and, as such, it also constitutes a powerful analytical lens for textual (i.e., literary/rhetorical) analysis and criticism, which remains a bedrock of an integrated language arts curriculum.

This is neither obvious to students nor easy for them to grasp, so I am continually inventing new activities and assignments to help them do so. In what follows, I describe one such activity, in which students analyze William Carlos Williams's distinctive use of modification—adjectives, adverbs, adjectivals, and adverbials—in his famous poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” and ask how this use mirrors and enhances meaning. In short, this activity treats grammar as an important *stylistic* (and therefore rhetorical) aspect of writing.

I emphasize this last point to call attention to the fact that what I write about here is not, in its most basic sense, a grammar lesson. It is a way of looking at a text's grammatical form (or, from a rhetorical perspective, an author's grammatical choices) to tease out that text's meanings, in all of their subtlety and depth.

Before getting to my discussion of the activity, however, I should note that, while I came to this approach in effect on my own, it has forerunners, particularly in the work of Virginia Tufte, whose 1971 book *Grammar as Style* espouses and explains “the literary merits of grammatical structures,” including a chapter “in which Tufte shows us how writers use the syntax, punctuation, and diction at their disposal to create in language what the words themselves try to describe” (Edwards 11).

I also recognize the irony of submitting this lesson—reliant as it is on grammar—to an issue of *English Journal* that is themed “Beyond Grammar: The Richness of English Language.” What I hope to show in the following discussion, however, is that grammar is deeply implicated in, and can be equally used to tease out, that richness, and, far from the dry, even punitive subject it is often portrayed to be, grammar can actually serve as an effective focal point for integrating many of the most important aspects of the language arts, including close reading skills, literary study, rhetorical analysis, and the study of English language forms.

Modification and Meaning in Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow”

The activity I describe below is part of a larger activity that includes the poetry of E. E. Cummings, Robert Frost, and Seamus Heaney, but for brevity’s sake I focus on Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow,” which is inevitably the most successful example in the activity. In this activity, I ask students to “identify and discuss the differences between these authors’ uses of adjectives, adjectivals, adverbs, and/or adverbials. What are the effects of these uses on the poems? How do they help the authors convey a message, style, or mood?”

While originally I gave students, working in groups, 15 to 25 minutes in class to work through four poems, in recent classes I have assigned the activity as homework that we then discuss in class, first in groups, then as a whole class. Students have much more of substance to say about the poems in this format than they normally do after only in-class work, but they still struggle with “The Red Wheelbarrow”:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

They pick up on the single-word adjectives “red” and “white,” and a few of them identify “so” or “glazed” as modifiers, but by and large they are stumped, even though they have had several weeks of grammar instruction, including lessons on adjectives and adverbials.

At this point, I focus the students on talking about what the poem means: students invariably notice that the wheelbarrow is on a farm, and that without it much of the work of the farm would be more difficult, or even impossible. Other responses always note the simplicity of the poem, and occasionally students will suggest that it doesn’t “mean” anything at all, that it is just a simple description of a simple scene. As this discussion develops, I begin steering things back to our analytical lens—grammar—with questions about the relationship between the grammar of the poem and the meanings we are finding (or not finding) in it.

I point out to students that the key to this poem—and, incidentally, the only part of the poem that is even remotely enigmatic—is the kernel clause and the opening preposition, “so much depends / upon.” What, exactly, depends upon that wheelbarrow? Certainly, as my students aptly discern, the work of the farm to which it apparently belongs does: The wheelbarrow undoubtedly performs many tasks that are essential to life on a farm, making it a life-sustaining tool. But there is also a deeper, more abstract sense in which “so much depends upon” the wheelbarrow: As a quintessentially Imagist poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow” adheres to the idea that it is only in concrete images—not in the grandiose poetic flourishes and moral embellishments of, say, Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “The

“The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams, from *THE COLLECTED POEMS: VOLUME I, 1909–1939*, copyright ©1938 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

Charge of the Light Brigade”—that true meaning can be found. Indeed, such images, for (the early) Williams, are more than just prerequisites for *any* meaning. Rather, they carry an almost infinite *density* of meaning, in which “words, things, people, and God vanish as separate entities and everything becomes a unit” (Miller 291).

Needless to say, this fact places a heavy burden on the image of the wheelbarrow. But the image is able to bear that burden precisely (if not exclusively) because of the similarly dense syntax of the sentence, in which modifiers within modifiers within modifiers mirror the density of meaning in the wheelbarrow itself. Indeed, seven of the poem’s eight lines—everything after “so much depends”—constitute a single prepositional phrase that functions adverbially to modify the verb “depends.” Yet, within that phrase, we find, modifying “wheel barrow,” two parallel adjectivals, “glazed with rain water” and “beside the white chickens,” adding another layer of modification to the poem. As we dig still further, we see, within the phrase “glazed with rain water,” the adverbial “with rain water” modifying the participle “glazed,” revealing yet another layer. Now, taking the whole poem/sentence as a starting point, we are three layers down. But we are not done yet. One more layer of modification remains to be excavated: within the adverbial “with rain water,” the word “rain,” which is normally a noun or a verb, becomes an adjectival modifying “water.”¹ In sum, there are *four layers of modification* lurking beneath the surface of this deceptively short, simple poem.

As I lead students through this explication, I note each layer by marking it on the poem itself, moving from square brackets (top layer) to

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parentheses to braces to chevrons (bottom layer), like the following:

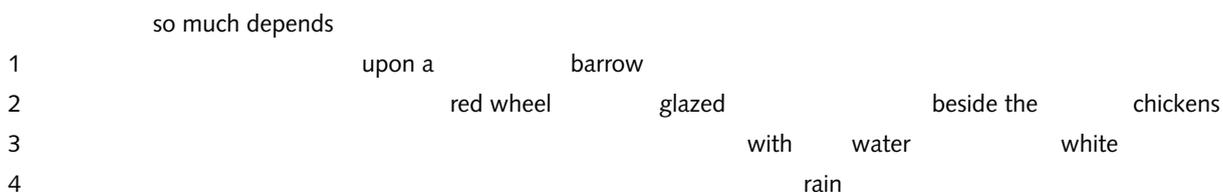
So much depends [upon a (red) (wheel) barrow (glazed {with <rain> water}) (beside the {white} chickens)].²

I might also translate the linear notation represented above into a spatial one, as represented in Figure 1 (with the numbers along the left side representing successive layers of modification). In this representation, one easily sees each layer of modification, which in turn emphasizes the grammatical density of the poem—a density that perfectly reflects the density of meaning Williams bestowed upon the wheelbarrow itself.

Toward an Integrated Approach

At the end of the class, as we go back and reflect on the day’s lesson, students invariably report “getting” “The Red Wheelbarrow”—and getting poetry in general—in a way that they never would have on their own. This activity is one of the most commonly cited among my students when they recount the most enlightening aspects of the course. Students routinely point out that the lesson helps them “get a feel” for the ways that structures such as participial and prepositional phrases—often so lifeless on the pages even of good grammar books—actually make meaning in language. They also regularly note that the activity makes studying poetry interesting and fun in ways they hadn’t experienced before. These two most common comments from students—that the activity helps them get a feel for grammatical forms and that it helps them learn about poetry—in addition to being deeply gratifying to me as a teacher, also point precisely to the *integrated* nature of the learning that happens in the activity. We do not, in short, put down our grammar books and then pick up our poetry books. They

FIGURE 1



are the same book, and the knowledge that issues from that book is strong by virtue of its tightly woven character.

I do not have any illusions that all or even most of my students will go into their first teaching jobs with all the tools and sensibilities they need either to help their students perform such nuanced formal analyses or to teach grammar from a rhetorical perspective; these things can, and usually do, take years of practice and honing. (My students recognize that, too, and this semester, on completing the activity, they explicitly asked me if we could do several more such activities so that they could “practice.”) What’s more, good theory often clashes with imperfect practice: They will have standardized tests to administer, prescribed curricula to follow, and administrators (who may or may not share their views about grammar) to please. But I am confident that, largely because of activities like this one, students leave my class with a deeper appreciation for the richness of English language and a stronger grasp of how to find that richness in—and extract it from—English’s grammatical bones, both in their own writing and that of their students.

At the least, I am certain that a number of my students—I would venture to say a strong majority—who otherwise would have gone on to toe the “grammar police” line leave my class prepared to use language analysis to help their students *become better readers and writers* instead of better grammar-drill completers. And they will do so not by ignoring grammar altogether in their classrooms, but by understanding that grammar is an important part of writing to the extent that it has a rhetorical effect: it signifies specific meanings, affiliations, and aptitudes to readers.

The question remains, however, how my students might take an activity like this one and bring it into their secondary language arts classrooms. While this activity assumes a level of grammar knowledge not likely to be found in most secondary classrooms, there are ways that similar lessons can be tailored from this general approach.

Adapting the Lesson for Secondary Students

If I were doing this lesson in a secondary school setting, I would begin by offering a basic introduction to the grammar of the poem, focusing only on

the two adjectival phrases (the participial and prepositional phrases). I would point out that two groups of words, known as phrases, act like adjectives modifying “wheel barrow”—one, beginning with a verb ending with “ed,” that describes the appearance of the barrow; the other, beginning with the preposition “beside,” describing its location. (My sense is that secondary students might be intimidated by the grammatical term “participle” but not “preposition.” That is why I use the lay term “verb ending with ‘ed’” instead.) Students would then be encouraged to complete a generative writing assignment, borrowing the structure of the poem and substituting objects and imagery of their own choosing in place of Williams’s. I might even further scaffold the activity by suggesting students focus on the current season. For example, in winter a student may write, “So much depends upon a green spider plant, layered with dust, under a frosted window.” Or, “So much depends upon a navy sweater, specked with lint, in a plastic laundry basket.” As students compose two, three, or more such imitative poems (perhaps even combining in-class writing and homework), they will begin to internalize its rhythms and cadences—an internalization that can then be capitalized on in a class discussion about how and why Williams might have chosen to construct this one-sentence poem in this way, in which the teacher will have laid the groundwork for illuminating the grammatical structure of the poem in more detail. I might note, for example, that “within the phrase starting with ‘glazed,’ there’s also a prepositional phrase beginning with ‘with.’ And what word does ‘with rain water’ describe?” Such a question can lead students to discover the adverbial within the adjectival and, eventually, the adjectival within the adverbial within the adjectival.

As the students, with the teacher’s guidance, zero in on this fine-grained analysis—even if they only get some of the way there—teachers who do

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this activity will then have the flexibility to turn it, depending on the unit or specific lesson plan it serves, into one of the following:

- a grammar lesson (“See how participles and prepositions work to add meaning to writing?”);
- a lesson in producing descriptive imagery in poetic writing (“See how the image takes on depth and meaning with these descriptive modifiers?”); or
- a literature lesson (“See how the density of the poem’s grammar mirrors the density of the image for Williams?”).

The poem may serve as a focal point that a teacher returns to across various curricular divisions as a way to help students find an anchoring point for what can seem like many unrelated sub-areas within the language arts, including reading skills, writing skills, appreciation for literature, and understanding English language forms. In short, taking this approach and integrating awareness and study of grammar into other facets of the language arts curriculum can give students confidence as readers and writers, and it can help instill in them both a recognition and an appreciation of the richness of English language. 

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Notes

1. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes a New York newspaper’s usage of “rainwater” as one word in 1887, as well as James Joyce’s doing so in 1922, one year before the publication of “The Red Wheelbarrow,” suggesting that there was indeed an element of choice in Williams’s decision to use the separate words “rain” and “water.” A similar argument can be made for “wheel” and “barrow” in the second stanza. While, moreover, it could be argued that Williams used two words instead of one to achieve the wheelbarrow shape of each stanza, such a claim does not diminish the strength of a claim about the grammatical implications—and the stylistic effects—of such a choice.

2. For expediency and clarity, I have de-formatted the poem in this representation, even though the poem retains its format when I perform these notations in class.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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In “Is a Sentence a Poem?” students are given a picture and asked individually to describe the picture in one sentence of fewer than 20 words. Afterward, the class analyzes syntax, imagery, and meaning in William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” to decide what makes it a poem. Students return to their own descriptive sentence to decide whether it is, is not, or could be a poem, justifying their reasoning. This exercise encourages students to examine an established poem while defining the characteristics of the genre of poetry and then apply this knowledge to their own work. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/sentence-poem-246.html>