

What Activity Do You Recommend for Teaching Grammar?

Gregory Shafer

Mott College
Flint, Michigan
gshafer@mcc.edu

Too often the study of grammar becomes a tedious journey into a thicket of irrelevance. There are times, however, when a contextual examination of our language can help and even engage students in important discussions of writing style. Such a situation arises when I engage students in an examination of passive and active voice. What is especially important about this lesson is the way it galvanizes writers to the way their language can be manipulated for clarity and power. When we write in the passive voice, we tend to make sentences longer and less direct, removing much of the muscle from our sentences and creating longer, flabbier, less animated constructions. So, in a class that otherwise has little direct instruction in grammar, I always take time each semester to review passive and active voice and their implications for writing with power.

The lesson begins simply and becomes progressively more complicated as we examine longer, more entangled examples of passive voice. I begin by asking students to compare the sentences “I love you” and “You are loved by me.” The comparison and the notion that one would ever say “You are loved by me” is a great way to introduce students to the effect of passive and active voice and the rather dramatic way they can alter style. Key to this lesson is the notion that passive voice carries with it baggage that defies the simplicity of tightly written prose. Even in such a simple comparison, we can see that the passive structure is longer and more indirect. Equally important, it lacks the active verb that drives a well-written sentence. From such simple examples, then, we begin to practice revising wordy sentences. With the mantra of KISS carefully

implanted in each student’s mind, we take sentences like “The police will never find a solution to the problem of crime” and make it “The police will never solve the crime problem.” Without changing the meaning, we’ve gone from twelve to eight words—an economy of 33 percent.

In studying active and passive voice, students are exposed to a minimal number of technical terms. Prepositional phrases tend to be endemic to passive voice, so we devote some time to the identification of these phrases and their impediments to good writing. Equally important is our look at passive verbs and the reason why active verbs tend to be integral to effective prose. The acronym KISS never seems more meaningful to students than after they have transformed a twenty-word monstrosity into a ten-word prize. Indeed, after rewriting a few sentences and recognizing the way this skill can change their writing, student engagement often grows quickly. This is a lesson that transfers to the writing of essays. It has a place in the real world of composition.

In teaching the style of active and passive voice, I have found Joseph Williams’s book *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (Scott, Foresman, 1989) to be indispensable. This practical work is filled with examples of passive and active voice and detailed discussions on how each construction can be changed to accentuate one’s writing.

Stephanie Swindle

West Hills Middle School
West Jordan, Utah
sswindle@m.whms.jordan.k12.ut.us

I was certain I was still hip and *down with that* when I began teaching the high school set, but repeated misinterpretations of teenspeak had caught me staring slack-jawed and squinting at my students time and again: “What? What are you telling me?”

Things are no longer *cool*. They are *cold*. They are *O.G.*, *phat*, and possessing of *bling*, *bling* quality. Oh, but tit for tat—I welcome the generational chasms and evolution of words. Throw in a snappy bit of vocabulary—“Michael and Jennifer, you need to discontinue your *tête-à-tête* until after class.”—and I have them staring back at me in no time.

Building on equal doses of respect and confusion for the language of Generation Y, I’ve had students construct slang dictionaries for the last three years. A finished product includes pronunciation, parts of speech, definitions, and contextual sentences and synonyms. It’s a ball to teach and a great means for improving grammar and usage skills.

We begin with a simple definition of slang, making sure to distinguish between slang and jargon. Next, I start making a list on the whiteboard of the words I hear from them the most, which they think is hysterical—me, an adult-type, uttering bits of their carefully honed veneers. And then I turn it over to them. What do they want to add to the list? What do they overhear or notice about others’ speech?

Students bring in words for the next few days, and I show them how to write definitions in Standard English. As students are often stumped about how to define a slang word without using further slang, this portion of the activity helps to deepen our initial discussion of usage.

Working in groups, students write definitions, and we move to the parts of speech and contextual sentence sections of their dictionaries. This is the perfect venue for a little grammar study. We discuss fragments and what makes a sentence complete. We review and define parts of speech. It’s similar to how learning a foreign language strengthens a person’s understanding of their own language. And students seem less embarrassed about their grammar learning gaps this time around, as the context is *their* language and territory.

Nancy Joseph
Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan
joseph@oakland.edu

Sentence combining—a meaningful, creative approach to grammar instruction—engages students and encourages carryover to their writing. For years, research has indicated that formal grammar lessons have little transfer to student writing, directing teachers to explore approaches that go beyond iso-

lated skill instruction into the realm of grammar in context. This means that grammar instruction should be part of a rich language arts learning environment: extensive reading, writing, talking, and thinking with limited, focused minilessons on syntactic options, sentence sense, and brief reviews of effective constructions as needed.

I like to provide opportunities for students to explore language by assigning sentence combining activities, encouraging language study without the burden of memorizing rules. This strategy avoids complex explanations and lets students discover how the language works. They may not know the grammatical terminology, but they have an innate sense of logical connections and clear wording. Through sentence combining, students experiment with new constructions without risk, becoming more aware of sentence rhythms and patterns. This approach to grammar and sentence structure moves students toward greater syntactic maturity: fluency increases and the number of repeated ideas and simple constructions decreases.

Using current topics in the news, I create sentence combining exercises. Student-centered topics engender lively discussions and active participation, activities essential to language growth. When students work on these exercises, I include brief reviews of independent and dependent clauses, as well as reminders about coordination and subordination. At times we discuss stylistic options, emphasizing that good writing includes sentences of varying lengths and complexity, creating a smooth and interesting flow of information for the readers. I present examples to demonstrate that too many short, choppy sentences indicate an undeveloped style, while too many long, stringy sentences reveal a poorly planned, careless style. Very importantly, though, I remind students to apply the sentence combining strategies to their own writing.

Directions to Students: Combine the following short, choppy sentences into longer, smoother sentences. Try to develop effective transitions from one idea to the next. Check your work to be certain that you have not created sentence fragments or run-on sentences.

Junk Food Sales in Schools

1. American students buy junk food.
2. They buy junk food from vending machines.

3. The vending machines are in schools.
4. Schools earn money from vending machines.
5. The money is known as a commission.
6. The money funds extracurricular activities.
7. The money buys band instruments.
8. The money buys athletic equipment.
9. The money funds computer centers.
10. The money pays for students' field trips.
11. Some educators object to vending machines in schools.
12. They believe that junk food consumption has an impact on learning.
13. Some students have a sugar high in class.
14. The sugar high is from junk food.
15. The sugar high is from soda drinks.
16. The sugar high creates problems for students.
17. Students can't concentrate.
18. This is difficult for teachers.
19. The issue of vending machines is complex.
20. The issue must be resolved.

As a follow-up activity, you may want students to write an opinion paper on the topic of junk food in school. Encourage them to apply the sentence combining principles to their writing. You should notice greater syntactic maturity in your students' writing as they become more familiar with stylistic options through their work with sentence combining. And you will notice how much you enjoy this approach to grammar instruction.

answers for **THREE FOR ALL** (page 26)

1. HARMONIES (HARM-OWN-EASE) 2. MANDOLIN (MAN-DOUGH-LYNN) 3. PAPERWEIGHT (PAY-PER-WAIT) 4. SPAGHETTI (SPA-GET-TEA) 5. HIERARCHY (HIGHER-ARE-KEY) 6. ANIMATEDLY (ANNA-MATED-LEE) 7. PAPA-RAZZI (PAPA-ROT-SEE) 8. LEGENDARY (LEDGE-IN-DAIRY) 9. COMPARISONS (COME-PARIS-SONS) 10. ME-THEORITE (MEET-EEYORE-RIGHT) 11. DOCUMENT (DOCK-YOU-MEANT) 12. MARIONETTE (MARE-IAN-NET) 13. ANACONDAS (ANNA-CON-DOES) 14. DETERIORATION (DEE-TEARY-ORATION) 15. CHRYSANTHEMUM (KRIS-ANTHEM-MUM) 16. MISTRANSLATED (MISSED-RAN-SLATED) 17. INCARCERATED (IN-CAR-SERRATED) 18. BAR-BECUING (BAR-BIC-EWING)
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EJ 20 YEARS AGO

Language and Humanity

“[L]anguage does more than provide us with labels; it also serves as the spark that keeps reigniting our curiosity and expanding our humanity. After Frankenstein’s monster taught himself to speak, he attributed his earlier misery and cruelty to the fact that Frankenstein had not given him language. This reciprocal relationship between our language and our humanity may even be verifiable in a laboratory. Researchers are finding evidence that a growing vocabulary has a chemical effect on the brain, that it triggers new circuits, increases the versatility of the brain, and expands our consciousness.”

Roland Bartel. “Growth and Regression through Language.” *EJ* 72.6: (1983): 44–46.
