

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Will the Common Core Step Up Schools' Focus on Grammar?

By **Liana Heitin**

Grammar instruction may have waned in some classrooms starting in the early 2000s, largely because the high-stakes tests required by the No Child Left Behind law didn't assess grammar specifically.

But with most states now using the Common Core State Standards, there's some thought that grammar is making a comeback—along with perennial debates about how best to teach it.

"We are asking kids to dive into complex texts and understand them, so we need to teach them how to read complex sentences," said Chris Hayes, a veteran elementary teacher in Washoe County, Nev. And that requires deep knowledge of grammar.

If it's true that grammar instruction dropped off but is now enjoying a resurgence—and even that is tough to track with certainty—then determining the best approach for teaching syntax and semantics is now once again a critical conversation topic. Should teachers dedicate time to stand-alone grammar lessons and tasks—diagramming sentences, for instance, or memorizing the differences between adjectives and adverbs? Or can students learn the language system through broad writing and reading?

Questions around whether and how grammar should be taught in schools have long been the cause of a tug of war within the language arts community.

In an article published in the **January/February issue of The Reading Teacher**, the International Literacy Association's journal, two researchers from the University of Virginia make the case for preventing the pendulum from swinging too enthusiastically toward "prescriptive" grammar instruction. They argue that isolated lessons focused on drills and memorization—a relic of early American schooling—should be avoided, and instead, teachers should embed grammar instruction into other language arts work.

"Activities that don't link form and meaning aren't particularly helpful for anyone and may be harmful," Lauren B. Gartland, the lead researcher on the report, said in an interview.

### What Research Says

Plenty of research exists to back that way of thought. A 2007 meta-analysis of experimental and quasi-experimental research, conducted by Steve Graham, now an education leadership professor at Arizona State University, and Dolores Perin, a professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, found that explicit, systematic **grammar instruction had a small but statistically significant negative effect on students' writing ability**. The more than 100 studies included in that analysis go back as far as the mid-1960s.

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"What empirical research found is that the formal teaching of grammar has typically not improved reading comprehension and not improved writing quality," said Timothy Shanahan, a distinguished professor emeritus specializing in literacy research at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

But actually avoiding drills and isolated grammar lessons while teaching students to write is much tougher than it sounds.

Many teachers are insecure about their own grammar knowledge, write Gartland and her co-author Laura B. Smolkin. That insecurity can cause them to fall back on "prescriptive" grammar instruction, focused on drills and memorization.

"It's frankly easier to teach grammar in a prescriptive way, and say, 'Here are the rules, memorize them, I'm going to quiz you on them.' But if [students don't learn the rules] in context, they're not going to carry them over," said Michelle Navarre Cleary, an associate professor in the School for New Learning at DePaul University in Chicago.

Hayes, the Nevada teacher, agrees that many teachers are less than comfortable with grammar. "All those diagramming sentences we did as children didn't stick," she said.

However, some say the real issue isn't a lack of teacher knowledge, it's that teaching grammar is just hard. Unlike learning a formula in math, "if you learn a grammar rule, it's easy to over apply it or apply it to the wrong situation," said Roxanna Elden, a high school writing teacher in Miami-Dade County, Fla., and the author of the 2013 book *See Me After Class*. For example, the rules on commas can change depending on context—and they don't apply at all to poetry. "It's more like giving relationship advice—it really depends on what the situation is," Elden said.

The realities of classroom management can make teaching grammar through writing tough as well. "Ideally, you wouldn't have to teach [basic grammar skills] in isolation—you'd be having students writing a paper and then correcting it," said Meghan Everette, a 3rd grade teacher in Daphne, Ala., outside Mobile. "But it doesn't really work out that way."

Young students need a lot of direction in learning new skills, she said. And managing that kind of individualized task with 20 or 30 students is just too time consuming.

### **Harder Texts, Harder Sentences**

Some experts say that under the common-core standards, now being implemented in 42 states and the District of Columbia, teachers have more reason than ever to improve their grammar instruction. And ironically, that's not so much because of what the standards say about grammar—it's because of what they say about text complexity.

"The issue now is that kids are being asked to read harder stuff," said Shanahan. "So wouldn't grammar help them more than it would have in the past when we asked them to read easy sentences?"

Hayes said the shift to more complex texts has changed her approach to grammar instruction completely.

For years, she used the grammar programs assigned by her district, in which she'd put an isolated sentence on the board and have students correct it. "And I saw no success," she said. "Teaching in isolation never worked, but I didn't know any better."

But with the common core, in trying to figure out how to get students to parse complex texts, she did some research on syntax and came across a tactic she now uses daily called "juicy sentences." Developed by **Lily Wong Fillmore, an education professor at the University of California, Berkeley, the technique** involves pulling a particularly complicated sentence out of a text that students are reading, and deconstructing it as a class.

"You do a deep dive into that one sentence that kids are already familiar with," explained Hayes.

Because students have context for the sentence, they're more likely to remember how the language rule works, she said. The daily practice, and teaching the tactic to other teachers, has also helped improve her own understanding of the English-language system.

Sue Pimentel, a lead writer of the common-core standards for English/language arts, said she's pleased that some teachers are making the connection between text complexity and grammar, even though it's not written out in the standards explicitly. "When you're getting into college-level texts, you're getting into a lot of clauses," she said, and teachers can pull those apart to help students learn how language works.

### **What the Standards Say**

The common standards directly address grammar as well, laying out benchmarks at each grade level that will lead students to "demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage."

In the common-core document, grammar has its own special section—away from reading and writing. While leading professional-development sessions, Hayes found that "a lot of teachers didn't even know there were language standards. They were kind of ignored."

Pimentel explains that the writers debated about where to put the language standards in the common-core document.

"We felt like if we stuck them in writing only, we'd be sending the message that language use is only in writing," she said. "And do we repeat them again in speaking and listening? That wouldn't make sense, either."

Giving them their own section, and adding references to them within the writing standards, was a compromise of sorts, according to Pimentel.

"There's always a danger when you separate things out that people think you teach them separately," she said. "We hope that's not the case because that doesn't lead to good instruction."

Interestingly, the grammar skills in the content standards don't differ too much from most previous state standards, the writers say. For instance, they ask students to "use an apostrophe to form contractions" and "form and use regular and irregular verbs"—benchmarks that shouldn't much surprise teachers.

The standards do, however, focus more on grammar application than most previous state standards, some say—which could encourage more authentic grammar work.

"Whereas before it was OK for a kid to identify nouns, now, it's that they actually have to be able to use them and use them correctly," said Everette, the Alabama teacher. "A lot of the skills do overlap from what we had before, but you're taking it to the next level and applying it to

your real writing."

The common-core-aligned tests also generally have more writing tasks than previous state tests, which could give teachers more incentive to teach grammar through writing, experts say.

So will teachers make the switch to fully embedded grammar instruction and stop with the drills and memorizing altogether? Not likely.

As of now, the research supporting embedded grammar work "could be on the planet Mars for the extent to which it impacts some classrooms," said Cleary of DePaul.

And some experts are OK with teachers using a mix of instructional techniques.

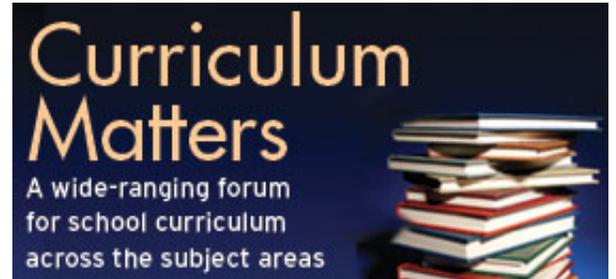
To try to teach grammar solely through indirect methods, "I think that's hard on students," Pimentel said. "You have to do a ton of reading and a ton of writing to figure out what the rules are. So help along the way with practices seems to be the best way go."

"Like a lot of things where the pendulum is swinging back and forth," said Miami-Dade's Elden, "the place you want to be is not on either extreme end."

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