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# ***Grammar Course or Grammar Discourse: Contextualized Grammar for Advanced 8th-Grade Students***

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Grammar is a mainstay in schools. Some schools even proudly bear the appellation “Grammar School” clad in brick and mortar. The traditional roots of grammar study harken back to Roman education, when grammar held a key role in the training of children. Roman orator Quintilian (35-95 CE) long ago wrote, “Let no man, therefore, look down on the elements of grammar as small matters” (as cited in Murphy, 1989, p. 29). To him, grammar sharpened the wit and exercised the deepest erudition. From this classical foundation, grammar evolved into the present-day English classroom. One of the first English grammars was published by Robert Lowth (1794), bishop of the Church of England and Oxford professor of poetry. Up to this point in history, grammars had been based on Latin rules placed on the English language with the goal of standardizing the various uses of English prevalent at the time. Lowth’s nascent grammar started a slew of writers, authors, priests, and professors who, for the next two centuries, would continue to revise standardized grammars for the broad array of English speakers (Schuster, 2003).

Lowth (1794) can be used as an example of early English grammar, and there are surprising similarities to our current grammar instructional texts. For example, nearly half of his book *A Short Introduction to English Grammar with Critical Notes*—for which short means a mere 100 pages—is focused on etymology or the parts of speech. Compare this to a popular grammar textbook by Houghton Mifflin where five out of 14 units are dedicated to the same subject (Rueda et al., 2004). This connection from past to present is a link which many have deemed *traditional school grammar*.

## **A Tale of Two Theories**

There is a choice between two key theories dictating the philosophy behind grammar instruction. These theories are prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar. Early models, like Lowth’s (1794), who focused on the correction of errors, reading of rules identified in textbooks, and the constant drilling of “correctness” through exercises set on identifying false syntax were prescriptive (Leitner, 1991). Grammar, in these early textbooks, contained a prescribing quality that at the time was needed. These rules focusing on “correctness” occurred in response to new additions to the English language that abounded during the Elizabethan era (Gartland & Smolkin, 2016). Immense changes to English language in the 18th and 19th centuries required some formal standardization. This is where early grammars came into prevalence.

As the term is presently used, *traditional school grammar* is instruction that focuses on the same ideas as these centuries-old models. Identification of elements, direct instruction in rules, rote practice in isolation, and the use of grammar to primarily identify errors are emphasized. In essence, traditional school grammar goes back to instilling those *prescriptions* about how to use the English language to communicate (Myhill, Jones, Watson, & Lines, 2013).

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In contrast, a philosophy of descriptive grammar seeks to describe common English usage. A modern source, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, explicitly states, “Our aim is to describe and not prescribe” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 2). This current source on grammar illustrates language in use, but it neither recommends nor condemns any grammatical constructions. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* explains this modern rethinking on grammar as a description of common use by expert English speakers and writers. Our world differs greatly from that of Elizabethan England and, therefore, our grammar should differ as well.

Although students may need guidance in remediating certain errors, descriptive grammar does not focus solely on these corrections. Unlike prescriptive grammar, descriptive grammar allows for changes when they can and *do* happen. For instance, when Edgar Schuster (2003), Master Teacher at Harvard University, compared a list of English “errors” created in 1941 to a list from 1998, he found that 77% of the original “errors” were gone by the publication of the latter. English usage is not set in stone. If prescriptive instruction focuses on identifying grammar errors and standard usage, a paradox is encountered (Myhill et al., 2013). Changes and errors are difficult to reconcile in this rigid prescriptive mindset. Instruction rooted in prescriptivism also becomes difficult to reconcile.

The instructional benefits of traditional school grammar instruction, rooted in the theory of prescriptivism, have often been questioned. Direct grammar instruction in isolation—labeling words and applying grammar rules on isolated sentences—has been proven ineffective at improving ability in writing (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963; Fearn & Farnan, 2007). It can also impair writing development by confusing the beginning writer’s focus (Elbow, 1981), and it has been shown to do a disservice to students by taking time away from writing practice and instruction (Hillocks & Smith, 1991).

Schuster (2003), author of *Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction*, boldly asserts, “Traditional grammar traditionally taught is an utter failure” (p. xviii).

Learning rules and errors that may or may not become outdated is instructional time squandered. There are two main arguments behind why many experts claim this to be true. First, traditional school grammar takes time away from the higher-order thinking that students should be doing. The deep thinking of writing, synthesizing, and critiquing is sacrificed to simply identification (Micciche, 2004). The task of identification falls on the lowest order of Bloom’s revised taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002). And although some of these lower-order skills should have a place in instruction, it should not be the whole of our instruction. Second, correct grammar does nothing to help a writer who can’t formulate ideas properly (Micciche, 2004). The famous phrase, “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously,” exemplifies this perfectly (Chomsky, 1957). Notable linguist Noam Chomsky’s grammatical gibe shows that although the grammar is quite sensible, the idea is complete nonsense.

The evidence shows that even students with high IQs have trouble understanding decontextualized grammatical concepts (Hudson, 1987). Their struggles, along with those of many other students, are not due to their inability to reason or think critically. Critical thinking is not at the forefront of traditional school grammar instruction. Even though it is difficult to explain why these capable students sometimes struggle, it may be due to developmental readiness or simply having trouble oversimplifying complex grammar into confusing “rules.”

## **Grammar Rethought**

In response to these findings, many new pedagogical techniques have been adopted. One method is to teach grammar as a rhetorical study. This rhetorical grammar is also called contextualized grammar because it is directly

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contextualized into writing. The use of grammar as a rhetorical device creates classrooms that look very different from the traditional grammar classroom. Rhetorical grammar analyzes the strategy in grammar. Grammar and usage, therefore, are studied as tools to be used, not gauges of correctness (Micciche, 2004). Consider even the power of asking “How do writers use a certain grammatical idea?” This instruction focuses on what writers do with language rather than what they should not do with it (Fearn & Farnan, 2007). Teachers who have students focus on analyzing craft in this way strengthen writing skills and encourage writers to see the power in language, not just the mistakes and pitfalls.

The differences from the traditional grammar classroom are evident, but there are small overlaps, especially in the treatment of terms and vocabulary. Rhetorical, contextualized study of grammar differs in how it starts with authentic, published writing—the context—and is applied to relevant student writing, not isolated sentences. Despite this, rhetorical, contextualized grammar does not eliminate terms. Where labeling structures takes precedence in traditional school grammar, there is a small place for this grammatical metalanguage, or linguistic terminology, in a contextualized approach. What is different between the two? The term is not the starting point; instead, examples and patterns are at the forefront of teaching. Only later do students learn the structure’s name (Myhill et al., 2013). This type of instruction begins with questioning how writers use certain structures and ideas to communicate knowledge (Anderson, 2005). Terms are introduced after an understanding of the rationale is demonstrated. In her seminal work, *Teaching Grammar in Context*, Constance Weaver (1996) suggests that terms should be introduced casually amid discussion. Through this type of instruction, teachers capitalize on a student’s intuitive knowledge of writing to build a more productive classroom (Noguchi,

1991). The study of grammar becomes a complex dialogue about audience, meaning, and purpose within structure. Additionally, grammar study becomes the analysis and complex use of structures to create stunning writing to match excellent ideas.

## Classroom Approaches

Along with analyzing the grammatical moves an author makes, when grammar is contextualized, application of skills is demonstrated and practiced in an ongoing writing project. A practical instructional approach involves combining grammar with writing instruction through a series of writing workshop stages. The writing workshop is an approach to teaching that sets up an environment for writers of a variety of abilities to work and learn together. The mini-lesson and workshop application time allows students to immediately try out new ideas and apply techniques (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). A lesson contains a *connection* to students’ work, a *teaching point* with demonstration, *active involvement* to process the lesson, and a *link* to ongoing student work (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005).

Grammar can easily fit this framework. From the start, students are exposed to models of authentic writing. Engaging grammar mini-lessons move from published authors into analyzing how authors employ grammatical structures (Ehrenworth, 2003). These authentic texts help students to see the application of what they are learning, and these choices are best applied by matching the grammatical concept to a given genre (Dean, 2011). For instructional methodology, research shows all grammar lessons should be structured around the idea that writers make certain choices (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005).

After the grammatical strategy is observed, analyzed, and named, students then apply the new skill into their writing (Zuidema, 2012). Anderson (2005) writes in *Mechanically Inclined*,

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“Writers should first experiment, imitate, interact, notice, and revise text without hearing the words: revision, grammar, editing” (p. 28). The interplay of active, living writing projects and completed, professional works is integral for effective contextualized grammar instruction.

## **Benefits of Descriptive Grammar Instruction**

Research shows the huge benefits of integrated grammar instruction. First, the practice of embedding grammar into writing is effective for improving writing skill in ways that traditional methods fall short (Myhill et al., 2013). Teaching in this way assists adolescent writers in thinking as professional writers by considering how their choices will affect their audience (Ehrenworth, 2003). Weaver (1996) notes that although her methods are far from perfect, “the relevant research confirms what everyday experience reveals: that teaching ‘grammar’ in the context of writing works better than teaching grammar as a formal system” (p. 23).

Myhill et al. (2013) conducted a study among 13- and 14-year-old students that incorporated grammar instruction within the teaching of three writing units where relevant grammar features were integrated into instruction. The study found that participants in this intervention showed a 20% improvement in writing scores as opposed to 11% in the control group. Significant writing improvement is a tangible benefit that integrated grammar instruction offers adolescent writers. Although all students tested showed greater improvement, this study found that the greatest improvement in ability was found in already able writers. These “gifted” writers benefited the most from a contextualized grammar approach.

## **Application**

Teachers hope that their students learn the conventions of English and apply them to their writing. Looking closely at a given characteristic of grammar and then practicing it on worksheets

clearly does not result in transference to student writing. Many experts have outlined guidelines for how this transfer can be encouraged in the English grammar classroom. Grammar study is far more than just rules and prescriptions, and the effects of learning these ideas are far-reaching. The study of language bridges into every other curricular area. Reading and writing are foundational for every area of study. So how do we prepare students to use their writing and knowledge of conventions to communicate in a variety of disciplines?

## **Methods**

I set out to study how to best ensure that students apply grammar understanding to their writing. The study took place in a Christian school located in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. The participants included a group of 22 students spanning two advanced language arts classes. The students tested at a high level on the language arts portion of the TerraNova test. These students were also chosen based on good study habits, writing ability, and effort as demonstrated through recommendations by their former language arts teachers.

During the first semester of 2016-2017, my students participated in a four-week investigative journalism writing and reading unit, with grammar instruction included toward the end of the unit. The unit was based on the *Units of Study* curriculum (Ehrenworth & Minor, 2014), published through the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project—a group sponsored by Columbia University to improve literacy instruction across the country. This unit provides mini-lessons on writing journalism for a variety of audiences. For this study, I made adaptations to the curriculum to incorporate the specific grammar instruction described here, and I created my own mini-lessons to accompany those included. Although changes were made, this curriculum provided a solid framework for instruction around journalism.

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The mini-lesson and workshop model was used throughout the unit to move students into the increasing complexity of journalistic writing. Before the start of the unit, students were pre-assessed via a writing prompt through which students were asked to produce their best journalism piece in a class period. Analysis of pre-assessments showed very little familiarity with the genre of journalism. With this as a benchmark, the class set out to learn and practice crafting quality pieces of journalism for their school community.

The unit began by having the students draft short newscasts of interest to peers. These were just reports on significant and interesting things going on in the community. Students used these newscasts as publishing opportunities on student blogs and writing pieces that they could revise for concepts covered in class. After a set of journalism skills was developed, the class moved on to conducting investigations into a person or topic of interest to their school community.

As students began brainstorming, researching, and writing their own longer journalism pieces, the students demonstrated a great ability to transfer the skills covered in mini-lessons through the newscasts. By reading texts, students analyzed and applied skills from published exemplars—for example, using narrative writing, expository writing, and outside research. These same mentor texts would play a role in the grammar study that students would take part in later in the unit. These would first be analyzed as examples to follow in style and format and later would be analyzed for their grammatical choices.

The investigative mentor texts came from a variety of sources. Many were recommended through the *Units of Study* curriculum (Ehrenworth & Minor, 2012). Others were chosen based on their relevance to the class and connection to current events. “Lexi Youngberg: Invincible” (Neville, 2011), published in *Scholastic Scope*, gives an excellent

character profile of a former graduate of our school, telling the story of a high school student who lost her leg in a boating accident and worked to recover and return to competing as a skilled athlete at the college level. Another mentor text, “Shoot-Out” (Martin, 2009), published in *The New Yorker*, showed students an example directed to an older audience with a cast of characters at the high school level participating in a noteworthy ritual. The inner-city school’s game of water-pistol ambush was enough to hold the attention of 8th-grade students and show them how their lives could be shared in ways that would even interest adults. Although other stories were shared throughout the unit, these were the two pieces analyzed for our grammar mini-lessons.

### ***Grammar Mini-Lessons***

Grammar was taught in a mini-lesson format as well. A contextualized approach to teaching grammar was crafted following the guidelines of experts like Anderson (2005) and Ehrenworth and Vinton (2005). In the grammar mini-lesson, students went back to the same journalism pieces with the new lens of punctuation. In a contextualized grammar lesson, the question was asked, “How do journalists use punctuation to share their ideas in an engaging and clear way?” Notice how the class didn’t question *correctness* or *revision*. The lens focused on imitation and borrowing of masterful techniques as outlined by the research.

The first mini-lesson had students annotate these two articles by highlighting the punctuation they noticed in the *connection*. Anderson (2005) calls this process an invitation to notice. Alongside the punctuation, students were to write the effect of the author’s punctuation choice. Students discussed what they saw. What types of punctuation did they find in the journalism pieces that they read from sources like *The New Yorker* and *Scholastic Scope*? Students identified and listed a variety of punctuation marks:

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commas, periods, and exclamation points, but then they found that “long hyphen thing”—em dash, I corrected—and even colons.

We discussed whether they were surprised by what was found; and although students were not necessarily surprised, they did realize that they hadn't *noticed* these things before. These punctuation marks had slipped into the background, and it was not until we read closely with the lens that students noticed what was being used.

After noticing, we discussed why the writers chose these punctuation marks. For the *teaching point*, I had pre-chosen a few mentor sentences to use as aids for these various punctuation marks that were utilized by journalists. For the *em dash*—a beautiful punctuation mark with a variety of uses—I chose a few sentences from “Lexi Youngberg: Invincible,” including, “Incredibly, she is back to skiing, back to playing soccer, and back to running—though she still struggles with these activities” (Neville, 2011, p. 10). Second, we read, “Over the next two weeks, Lexi underwent nine surgeries and survived an infection—from the dirty lake water—that nearly killed her” (p. 7). From the second source “Shoot-Out,” I chose, “Meanwhile, Jake Protell and his squad—Paulie Lowther, Charlotte Istel, and Mark Croitoroo—mowed through entire teams, racking up thirteen kills in four days” (Martin, 2009). After reading, students discussed the effect of each of these em dashes and then listed guidelines and uses for an em dash provided through direct instruction. These rules offered some structure to accompany the rhetorical moves they would soon apply. In *active involvement*, students read through their writing to identify a place where they may add em dashes to their writing and discussed this with a writing partner to *link* to future journalism work.

In another class period, we came together to discuss the *colon* following the same mini-lesson format. The colon was a punctuation decision that surprised students. Although many students remembered learning the technical rules

for semicolons, when asked, they did not recall extensive instruction on colons. Interestingly enough, there were no examples of semicolons in the pieces analyzed. As mentor sentences for colon use, I chose a few examples. From “Lexi Youngberg: Invincible,” we looked at “Wherever Lexi decides to go in life, one thing is certain: Nothing is going to get in her way” (Neville, 2011, p. 10); and from “Shoot-Out,” we looked at “The game’s valedictory message is built into its architecture: school is the safe ground” (Martin, 2009). Discussing why the author made the choice to use colons in these sentences brought students to interesting conclusions. The colon was dramatic. The colon was creative. The colon allowed for shorter sentences and drew an arrow to the idea following it. When looking at both, students identified where they were toward the end of the journalism piece. Using the colon can be an effective flourish in writing: a dramatic ending with a professional tone.

Students were then challenged in *active involvement* to add colons to their own journalism piece. To give them a way to track the changes that they made, they were given a chart. On one side, they were to write a sentence where they made a “punctuation decision.” In the second column, they were to explain the effect of their decision. This allowed formative assessment and insight into the thinking they were doing as writers. My biggest question was how to assess them in a summative fashion when using every punctuation mark available does not make for good writing. Not everyone’s writing requires an em dash or a colon, so how should I award points for using or not using these marks? As a compromise, I included a section on the criteria rubric for evaluation that assessed their use of punctuation. Tucked in among the other areas of evaluation was a category for punctuation (see Table 1). Even though instruction focused on the use of em dashes and colons, I did not include anything specific about the em dash or colon. I left students to make the connection to punctuation they thought demonstrated “thoughtful placement.”

## The Results

To evaluate their transfer of knowledge for these punctuation topics which had been taught in an integrated way, I analyzed three writing samples. The first was a pre-assessment (draft) before this instruction occurred, the second a final draft submitted after the instruction occurred, and the third was an on-demand post-assessment for which students had 45 minutes to draft, write, and revise their best journalism piece at the conclusion of the unit. In analyzing this data, I tracked the frequency of use for the em dash and colon.

### Pre-Assessment

In a first draft analysis of these writing samples, no students attempted to use an em dash in their writing. Five students attempted the use of a colon, but only three of the uses were “correct” based on the rules to be covered in class. I was surprised that there were so many attempts to use the colon before the instruction because, in my experience, this is neither the most common punctuation mark for junior high students nor a curricular focus for most elementary schools.

### Final Draft

After the integrated grammar instruction, 12 of 22 students used an em dash in their final drafts, and all 12 were technically correct. Because some used two em dashes, this resulted in around 41% of the students using an em dash as an intentional punctuation decision. Twenty-four

colons were used in final drafts, with 23 demonstrating “correct” usage based on the rules covered in instruction. These 23 came from 11 different papers, with some using two or three colons throughout their writing. (Honestly, this may be a little excessive, but credit goes to them for trying the skill.) This came out to a total of 50% of students using colons in their journalism writing.

### On-Demand Post-Assessment

So how does this transfer? When asked to write their best journalism piece without a rubric and knowing that this would not be given a formal grade, there were 12 em dashes or 27% used from six different journalism pieces and 19 colons or 60% used from 13 different journalism pieces in total (see Figure 1).

### Discussion of Findings

The results illuminated that integrating grammar instruction into a writing unit based around a certain genre increased the frequency with which students used certain grammatical structures. This instruction gave students the tools they needed during a given assignment and then encouraged them to see the punctuation as a decision. From the pre-assessment to the final draft, there was a 41% increase in the use of em dashes and a 21% increase in the use of colons. Compared to the final writing assignment, the on-demand assessment showed a decrease in use of the em dash and colon, so longer-term transference was lower, but the use

**Table 1. Example of a Section of Rubric to Evaluate Thoughtful Use of Punctuation**

<b>Concerns</b> <i>What needs to be fixed</i>	<b>Criteria</b> <i>Standards for this performance</i>	<b>Advanced</b> <i>Evidence of exceeding standards</i>	<b>Points</b> <i>( ___ / 3 )</i>
	Excellent mastery of <b>grammar</b> conventions. Punctuation is used in a way that demonstrates thoughtful placement.		

in this on-demand writing was still dramatically higher than the initial pre-assessment over these ideas. Students increased their use in both situations.

In reflection, I was hoping to see a higher transference to students' on-demand assessment as an indication that they had added a new tool to their writing tool kit. This may have been caused by the lack of overt emphasis on the rubric for final evaluation. The rubric which they referenced for their evaluation did not directly state the use of em dashes and colons. Likewise, the checklist they used for revision only had them read through with the lens of punctuation, not to add those two specific punctuation marks. Including those on the rubric and checklist would have provided a second chance for students to internalize these

punctuation tools that journalists clearly use. Further study could show whether the inclusion of rubrics and checklists could improve application and future use. In fact, as I implement this type of instruction in the future, I plan to include specific grammar decisions on the rubrics for evaluation to encourage future practice.

Despite that, including a clear statement of em dashes and colons on a rubric would move the writing into more of a prescriptive stance over allowing students the freedom to make decisions the way professional writers do. A step toward prescribing use is not necessarily a step in the right direction.

Although I focused on frequency of use related to these punctuation marks for this advanced population of students, it would be

**Figure 1. Frequency of Punctuation Use Before and After Instruction**

Draft 1	Em dash (tried)	Em dash (correct)	Colon (tried)	Colon (correct)	Draft 2	Em dash (tried)	Em dash (correct)	Colon (tried)	Colon (correct)	On-Demand Assessment	Em dash (tried)	Colon (tried)
	0	0	0	0		0	0	3	3		1	0
	0	0	0	0		0	0	1	0		3	1
	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0		0	0
	0	0	0	0		1	1	3	3		0	0
	0	0	0	0		1	1	0	0		0	0
	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0		0	0
	0	0	0	0		1	1	0	0		0	0
	0	0	0	0		1	1	2	2		4	1
	0	0	1	1		1	1	2	2		0	0
	0	0	0	0		1	1	4	4		1	2
	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0		0	1
	0	0	1	1		0	0	2	2		0	1
	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0		0	1
	0	0	0	0		2	2	0	0		0	1
	0	0	1	0		2	2	2	2		1	3
	0	0	0	0		2	2	1	1		0	0
	0	0	1	1		0	0	1	1		2	2
	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0		0	1
	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0		0	0
	0	0	0	0		0	0	2	2		0	1
	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0		0	1
	0	0	1	0		0	0	1	1		0	3
<b>Total</b>	0	0	5	3		12	12	24	23		12	19



interesting to see how a series of these grammar studies would impact a student's view of grammar. Through a survey, it can be seen how students may, with time, begin to see grammar less as a passive rule of correctness and more as an active rhetorical decision that writers make.

While my study focused on advanced 8th-grade writers, able to utilize strong writing and reading skills, there is room to use these techniques with any group. Room exists for analyzing the results after integrating grammar study into the contextualized, rhetorical study of excellent writing grammar with any student population.

## Final Thoughts

We want our students to be more skillful, independent writers—writers who know how to improve beyond their time receiving grades and comments from a teacher. Showing students the strategies of rhetorical grammar feeds future learning. Contextualized grammar instruction equips students to mimic the great writing they see in the world.

Benjamin Franklin was certainly not wrong when he and others wanted the tome titled *Grammatica* as the symbolic foundation for all learning. Instead, looking more closely at this seal, the first three volumes in ascending order are *Grammatica*, *Rhetorica*, and *Logica*, or grammar, rhetoric, and logic. These subjects encompass what we now call literacy (“A Guide to the Usage of the Seal,” 2017). Although rules may be broken, rhetorical thinking is the foundation on which we build our literacy learning. Above all, it is when we provide opportunities for students to think *logically* about the *rhetorical* moves an author makes *grammatically* that we have found an idea that would make Benjamin Franklin proud.

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