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5-2012

Grammar Workshop: Systematic Language Study in Reading and Writing Contexts

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Recommended Citation

Zuidema, L. A. (2012). Grammar Workshop: Systematic Language Study in Reading and Writing Contexts. *English Journal*, 101 (5), 63. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/21

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Grammar Workshop: Systematic Language Study in Reading and Writing Contexts

Abstract

Responding to claims that grammar instruction has become too limited, Zuidema describes field notebooks, mentor text, show-and-tell essays, and other strategies for engaging students in systematic language analysis.

Keywords

writing, grammar

Disciplines

Education | Educational Methods | English Language and Literature | Rhetoric and Composition

Comments

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The Grammar Workshop: Systematic Language Study in Reading and Writing Contexts

Responding to claims that grammar instruction has become too limited, Zuidema describes field notebooks, mentor texts, show-and-tell essays, and other strategies for engaging students in systematic language analysis.

A grammar course? No way. I want to teach grammar in context!” In my head, I shouted at my department chair. In reality, I swallowed my words and worried silently. I had taught grammar in the context of high school writing units and college composition classes, and my teaching had benefited greatly from guides such as Constance Weaver’s *Teaching Grammar in Context*. But I couldn’t envision a practical way to study grammar “in context” outside of my writing courses. Worse, as I contemplated the semester-long grammar class that lay before me, I feared I was doomed to reenact skill-and-drill approaches that have long been acknowledged as ineffective (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer; Hartwell). Planning for meaningful grammar study seemed like an impossible task.

Reframing Contexts for Grammar Study

My worries were rooted in assumptions that teaching grammar in context always meant “in the context of a writing course” or at least “as a supplement to a larger writing project.” Conversations with high school teachers and reports from college professors (e.g., Leahy) suggest that these assumptions are fairly common. In her July 2010 letter to *EJ*, respected grammarian Martha Kolln pointedly criticizes NCTE for policies and publications that, in her view, advocate “teaching of grammar only in the context of writing.” Kolln claims that over the past 30 years, this “only in the context of writing” approach has become an entrenched view—and has led many English teachers to believe “that the sys-

tematic study of grammar, of sentence structure, has no place in the classroom” (12–13). (For further discussion of the recent history of grammar instruction, see Kolln and Hancock; to see recent perspectives on grammar instruction from English teachers, see the March 2011 *English Journal*, including Ken Lindblom’s concepts for enriched discussions of English language.)

Whether or not Kolln is correct to blame NCTE, she is right that prevailing views of the “right” context for grammar learning have been too limited. In too many cases, “teaching grammar in context” is either fancy parlance for “I don’t teach much grammar” or a mantra that forces a false dilemma: “My school requires me to teach a stand-alone grammar course/unit, which means my only option is to use traditional drills, worksheets, and exercises.” Thus, Kolln is right about this much: we have to expand our understanding of the context for grammar instruction. Our students are awash in texts, and as readers, it is essential that they understand how the working parts of these texts are manipulated to shape arguments, hold their attention, and persuade them to “buy in.” Furthermore, as composers of everything from academic papers to YouTube videos, social text messages, workplace emails, and tweets calling for civic change, young writers benefit from having a more conscious command of their words. In this “prosumer” era in which we seem always to be producing and consuming texts (D. Anderson), words matter as much as—or more than—they ever have. Learning how grammar works in the texts they read and write is essential to students’ literacy. It is time to reframe

our view to include both writing *and* reading as contexts for grammar learning, and in doing so, to create opportunities such as courses and units in which contextualized grammar study can take center stage.

Tools for Designing a Grammar Workshop

The challenge, then, is to create opportunities for grammar study that are both rigorous and relevant, that prompt students to systematically explore the

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language in texts that are meaningful to them—both as readers and as writers. Helpful tools for designing this kind of grammar study may be derived from the book *Engaging Grammar: Practical Advice for Real Classrooms* (Benjamin and Oliva). Explaining her conceptual framework for planning grammar lessons, lead author Amy Benjamin describes how she uses the simple heuristic “notice, name, apply”:

Going from reading to writing is a recursive process in which grammar is the craft to be discovered in the former and practiced in the latter. . . . Just as the artist’s trained eye sees the use of geometrical shapes in a painting, the writer’s eye can be trained to notice writerly shapes. Once patterns emerge for us, we name them. Then we apply them. (7)

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If reading and writing are two sides of the same coin, then grammar study is one way in which these two types of language study can be connected.

The notice-name-apply concept is simple, yet powerful. When we understand that grammar study can be foregrounded in an expanded context encompassing both reading and writing, it is as though language study becomes a swinging door that can be pushed open in either direction into two equally wonderful rooms. At different moments in our study of grammar we can step more deeply into either the reading or writing room, and in pushing the door open farther in one direction, we also gain a better view of the other room. That is, when we as readers explore how grammar works in another author’s text, we also have the opportunity to think about how we author grammar in our own texts—and vice versa.

Working from this view of grammar, I use the term *grammar workshop* to refer to an inquiry-based

framework for curriculum and pedagogy in which careful language study is foregrounded, even as it is embedded in the contexts of both reading and writing. A grammar workshop encourages students to do meaningful and in-depth language study—to explore and play with grammar as it is used in authentic texts. Grammar study functions as the center point of the workshop, but three different aspects of learning about English—literature, language, and composition—are put into reciprocal relationship. A successful grammar workshop could be designed in any number of ways, so my intent in sharing my approach is not to be prescriptive. Rather, I offer an illustration of a grammar workshop that I hope will spark your creativity in designing significant experiences in grammar learning for your students.

A Grammar Workshop Overview

One of the key projects in my grammar workshop is the Field Notebook assignment. This collaborative project requires students to take on the role of grammar researchers: to start *noticing* and *naming* how grammar works “in the wild,” and to *apply* their findings by experimenting with grammar in their own writing. The mechanics of the project are fairly simple. Near the beginning of the course, students form research teams. Like professional researchers, the student researchers collect data and make “field notes” as they analyze those data. For this project, this means that the three or four members of a team study texts by one author, working together throughout the semester to label and analyze their selected author’s grammatical choices. For each of the twelve major topics that we study as a class (see fig. 1), the team prepares a corresponding

FIGURE 1. Field Notebook Units/Topics of Study

1. Sentence patterns
2. Verbs
3. Fragments
4. Coordination and subordination
5. Cohesion
6. Sentence rhythm
7. Writer’s voice
8. Adverbials
9. Adjectival
10. Nominals
11. Stylistic variations
12. Gendered language

Field Notebook section that includes a sample of their author's work with the group's annotations—markings, marginalia, and analytical commentary discussing their findings (see fig. 2).

Throughout the course, students also work individually to draft, revise, and polish Show and Tell essays. Students write about grammar-related issues, and they apply their Field Notebook knowledge by experimenting with the same kinds of grammatical maneuvers that they notice in the texts they are studying for their Field Notebooks.

What I've provided so far is a bird's-eye view of my grammar workshop. However, it is also important to share more detailed explanation of some of the noticing, naming, and applying components of this project, not only to clarify how the projects provide meaningful occasion for grammar study but also to illustrate how students engage in inquiry throughout the grammar workshop semester.

Mentor Texts: Noticing

For the Field Notebooks, each student team analyzes texts by a single author. To begin, each team collects at least six samples of their chosen author's published writing. If the samples are lengthy, they choose one substantial excerpt (such as a chapter or section). We refer to these samples of published work as *mentor texts*, borrowing a phrase widely used among writing workshop teachers. Teacher Jeff Anderson suggests that a mentor text is “any text that can teach a writer about any aspect of writer's craft, from sentence structure to quotation marks to ‘show don't tell’” (16). Anderson's description is a good place to start understanding what mentor texts are and what they can do, but I wish to tighten this definition. Perhaps an analogy will help to explain why. As a professor, I often seek advice from colleagues. But not everyone who has taught me is my mentor. I reserve the term *mentor* for a select group—for those special people who are particularly skilled in what they do *and* who, over the long term, stay in a relationship with me and continually teach me more.

The same is true for mentor texts. There are innumerable texts we can turn to in order to learn grammar craft. But not just “any text that can teach a writer” qualifies as a mentor text. In my classes, mentor texts are those that are especially power-

ful models—not only because they have so much to teach us about language craft but also because my students and I establish a long-term literary relationship with their authors. We familiarize ourselves with several works by the same author and repeatedly revisit concentrated selections from those texts. In this way, these authors and their work become more than just good examples; they are elevated to the status of true mentors.

This enriched notion of mentor texts requires that students learn to look to written texts as teachers.

In *Wondrous Words: Writers and Writing in the Elementary Classroom*, Katie Wood Ray shares her practical wisdom about “how to help students read like writers so that they can see craft for themselves” (25). Readers need to know what to look for:

When you see that a writer has crafted something in a text, you see a particular way of using words that seems deliberate or by design—like something that didn't “just come out that way.” . . . Crafted places in texts are those places where writers do particular things with words that go beyond just choosing the ones they need to get the meaning across. . . . This is what helps writers write well when they have an audience in mind, it helps them garner attention for what they have to say, and it helps them find that place beyond meaning where words *sing* with beauty. (28; italics in original)

An important way to begin noticing language craft is to develop a deep familiarity with one author's ways with words across a variety of texts—and then to draw on that understanding for analyzing works by other authors. In a demonstration lesson, for example, Ray draws extensively on her knowledge of author Cynthia Rylant's craft to analyze a *Sports Illustrated* piece. She explains: “You might have noticed that my connections drew heavily from my knowledge of the work of Cynthia Rylant. That's not an accident. I know Rylant's work like the back of my hand. She's my mentor. It's important for us to know the work of a few

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FIGURE 2. Excerpt of Ruth's Research Team Analysis from Caramelo by Cisneros (page 388)

□ Parallelism across sentences - The parallelism is not perfect, but ties the otherwise very different sentences together. The first three sentence fragments all start with the article "a", name and give a brief description of a person, and then the first two sentences use a participial phrase to describe the person (sweeping... blessing...)

○ Repetition and Reader Expectation

Throughout the paragraph the phrase "needs a lot" is repeated. Every "everybody" and "everyone" are repeated in the paragraph. Cisneros also uses specific examples of a variety of people to fulfill the reader's expectation of who this "everyone" is, and also to give cohesion to the paragraph. Diplomats, widowers, and babies all fit together because they refer back to the original sentence in the paragraph. They are examples of "everyone" this kind of list seems more universal

△ Repetition using synonyms

Cisneros uses a variety of words and phrases to repeat and emphasize the idea of interconnections

□ Reader Expectation

Cisneros uses a question to get the reader to think ahead. After asking this up, Cisneros tells us what happened.

★ Repetition across paragraphs

Repeating "it hurt, medulla" not only gives emphasis, but also helps connect the two paragraphs and gives lexical cohesion.

the window. But I didn't realize about the strength and power of *la fe*. What a goof I've been!

□ A wisp of a woman sweeping herself feverishly with a candle. A mother still in her apron blessing herself and blessing her daughters. A ragged *vejuna* who walked here on her knees. Grown men crying, machos with their lips numbing prayers, people with so much need. Help me, help me!

○ Everybody needs a lot. The whole world needs a lot. Everyone, the women frying lunch putting warm coins in your hand. The market sellers asking. — What else? The taxi drivers racing to make the light. The baby purring on a mother's fat shoulder. Welders, firemen, grandmothers, bank tellers, shoeshine boys, and diplomats. Everybody, every single one needs a lot! The planet swings on its axis, a drunk trying to do a pirouette. Me, me, me! Every fist with an empty glass in the air. The earth throbbing like a field ready to burst into dandelion.

△ I look up, and *la Virgen* looks down at me, and, honest to God, this sounds like a life, but it's true. The universe a cloth, and all humanity interwoven. Each and every person connected to me, and me connected to them, like the strands of a rope. Pull one string and the whole thing comes undone. Each person who comes into my life affecting the patterns and me affecting theirs.

□ I walk back to the hotel. I walk past pilgrims who have walked here all the way from their villages, past dancers performing with rattles on their ankles and great plumed headdresses, past vendors hawking candles and night-light Lupes. I walk through the Alameda, green oasis, and sit down on an iron bench. A man carrying a pyramid of cotton candy floats by as ethereal as angels. A pushcart full of sweet corn rolls past and makes my stomach grumble. A girl and her young lover neck hungrily across from me. They remind me of me and Ernesto. Seeing them so happy only breaks my heart.

○ And then what happened? I hear my mother asking me. And then I felt, as if I'd swallowed a spoon, like something had lodged itself in my throat, and every time I swallowed, it hurt.

★ Me duela! I say softly to myself. It hurt! But sometimes that's the only way you know you're alive. It's just like Aunty Light-Skin said. I feel like I'm soaked in sadness. Anyone comes near me, or just brushes me with their eyes, I know I'll just fall apart. Like a book left in the rain.

I get back to room 606 at the Hotel Majestic just as the sun is slanting,

Use of Synonym
repetition of
and 2 minutes

repetition of
verbs in
sentences

Subj + verb + pp

para. 11-13
cross
sentences

writers very well, to have what Lucy Calkins calls certain ‘touchstone’ texts that we know almost by heart” (41). In the grammar workshop, it is important that students know the work of one writer especially well *so that* they can extrapolate from that knowledge to notice how language craft functions in others’ works and in their own writing.

Because each team focuses on a different author, individual students have the opportunity to choose grammar mentors who are personally interesting to them. Some teams choose canonical authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Flannery O’Connor, and Sandra Cisneros. Others study works by children’s and young adult authors such as Patricia Polacco, Roald Dahl, Jerry Spinelli, Lois Lowry, and Chris Crutcher. Teams may choose any published author whose writing they deem worthy of emulation, and I encourage them to consider not only novelists and short story authors but also essayists, poets, travel writers, investigative journalists, and syndicated bloggers. (Since most groups do focus on fiction, I also bring other writing samples into our class discussions: poems, presidential speeches, blog entries, columns from newspapers and popular magazines, articles from academic journals.) Regular reports and discussions of examples from each team allow everyone to consider how different authors shape their words.

Conversations about Craft: Naming

For the Field Notebook, students analyze their mentor texts during each unit of study, labeling grammar choices and considering how they affect readers. There is power in naming; for this reason, my students are given opportunities both to create names and to learn existing names for grammatical structures and strategies.

Inventing Names

When we observe without bringing preexisting category names as analytical lenses, we may notice phenomena and patterns that we might otherwise have overlooked (Glaser). Early in the course, I teach students to read grammar in literary texts in this manner. We start by studying how others go about this same task: my students read Chapter 2 from Ray’s *Wondrous Words*, and we discuss how Ray, in her lengthy analysis of a *Sports Illustrated* ar-

ticle, uses labels that elementary children invented: *close echoes*, *runaway sentences*, *commenting on the text*. Ray’s point in using invented labels is not that we should avoid grammatical jargon; in fact, she argues the opposite point a few pages later. Rather, Ray emphasizes that when we take the liberty of creating names for what we notice, we free ourselves to see complex techniques and intricate patterns for which we don’t yet have the names. I stress this point with my students, too. There will be time later in the course to learn about *parallelism*, *periodic sentences*, and *metadiscourse*. But during the early days of the grammar workshop, the point is to learn to notice, to see how language really functions.

After we consider how Ray and her students read like writers, my students try this rather organic approach to noticing and naming. We practice first, all working together through a text that meets three criteria:

- **A thoughtful analytical essay that addresses a serious topic.** Often, undergraduates are skeptical that Ray’s approach for elementary students will have merit for them as college students. They need to test the rigor and benefits of Ray’s method—to see how it can work not only with children’s books or *Sports Illustrated* articles but also with what they see as “serious” writing.
- **A showcase for skillful crafting of English grammar and punctuation.** I choose a piece where there is much to notice. Some of what is notable is evident with a passing glance (e.g., dashes, colons, intentional fragments). Other aspects of craft may be observed only through more careful study, and their technical names may be unfamiliar to students (e.g., parallelism, asyndeton, sentence appositives). When students notice these techniques, they are soon persuaded that (1) authors make many deliberate choices in crafting language and (2) this approach to noticing is a rigorous, worthwhile method for upper-level study—even if we do use invented names until they learn the technical terms.
- **A recently published one-page piece.** Some students imagine that grammar was relevant long ago, before people wrote on screens. Students need to see that linguistic attentiveness continues to be a contemporary

concern—both in spite of and because of the fact that texting, status updates, and other types of screen writing are bringing about new conventions of grammar, usage, and spelling. Limiting the selection to one page prompts students to recognize just how many conscious grammar choices an author may make in a short passage. A one-pager also makes it easy to work through a piece with a document camera or overhead projector.

Each semester, I choose a different piece for the class's first noticing practice session so that I, too, analyze with fresh eyes. Most recently, I used a *Newsweek* column by Jon Meacham: "Don't Wait for a Thank You, Mr. President." We analyzed the opening paragraphs together, and then students completed their analysis with partners.

Learning Names

For the remainder of the semester, students go on to independently analyze grammar choices in many other texts, especially in the mentor texts for their Field Notebooks. As they learn new terms and concepts, students use them to notice aspects of craft that they might otherwise have overlooked (e.g., Where does the author use *it-* clefts, *what-* clefts, and *there-* transformations, and to what end? Where and why does the author use the known-new contract?). In this way, names become analytical lenses. Students learn the language of grammarians and to use that discourse to see, think, and organize ideas like knowledgeable grammarians do.

To develop this deeper familiarity with the discourse of grammar, students must first be exposed to the technical labels. This is where mini-lessons and textbooks have their place. By taking a few minutes to complete and discuss short readings and exercises from Martha Kolln and Loretta Gray's *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, my students build their initial understanding of key terms and concepts. Like aspiring scuba divers practicing in a pool, students understand that their textbook exercises are practice for the more authentic and challenging task of identifying grammar structures "in the ocean." They anticipate the challenge of analyzing their Field Notebook mentor texts, so they work purposefully to learn new concepts as thoroughly as they can while we are still "in the pool."

Moving from our brief review of textbook exercises to more extended, in-depth analysis of Field Notebook mentor texts raises the challenge (and relevance) to a new level. When students complete ten textbook problems about participial phrases, they know that they are likely to find at least ten participial phrases. However, when they read ten sentences from a mentor text, there is no assurance that there will be ten participial phrases (or any at all). To confidently identify participial phrases and explain their function in mentor texts, they have to know what participial phrases look like, where they might be located, what "tests" one might use to determine whether or not a structure is a participial phrase, and what purpose a participial phrase would serve within a given sentence.

Since this kind of grammar analysis is quite challenging, I structure Field Notebook noticing-and-naming activities so that students have many opportunities to develop their understanding of each of the grammatical concepts we study. For example, during a unit on adjectivals, I instruct students to identify pre-noun participles, participial phrases, and relative clauses in one of their mentor texts. (I omit forms that most of my students recognize easily and use confidently in their own writing, such as adjectives and adjectival prepositional phrases.) Working independently first, students mark their mentor texts, highlighting the structures they were instructed to watch for. They annotate: labeling forms and functions, commenting about patterns, remarking on the author's possible motivations, and noting their own reactions as readers. Students then bring their completed homework to class, where the teams meet to compare their findings and develop a consensus about what they see. Within groups, leadership of the team rotates: each student takes a turn for three of four of the units of study. I check during each research team meeting that all students have done their individual work, but I collect only one Field Notebook copy per unit per team. This means that each team must build consensus about how to label and interpret their data.

The team conversations that ensue are essential to students' learning. To complete their Field Notebook tasks, team members use their noticing and naming skills to argue how to correctly annotate their mentor texts and what to write about in their interpretive commentaries. In doing so, they reinforce and fine-tune their knowledge of gram-

mar. When a research team has arrived at consensus, the leader for that unit of study produces one copy of the mentor text pages—complete with labeled and annotated grammatical features—that accurately represents the team’s reading of their author’s writing. Additionally, team leaders compose commentaries of at least 100 words that function much like researchers’ analytical memos. They share their group’s findings and interpretation: *How does the author use the grammatical techniques we studied in this unit, and to what end? What is especially noteworthy or surprising about the author’s grammar craft?*

Team members also record questions that arise as they work together, and they report these to me as they meet. These inquiries serve as the heart of our daily class discussions: team members rarely agree on everything, and they often make unexpected discoveries, so students regularly have pressing, authentic questions about grammar. They want to check their understanding, to consider why well-known authors “break the rules” or favor particular elements of craft, and to know how they might play with similar grammar craft in their own writing. Instead of providing direct answers, I guide the class toward developing their own answers and insights. For these discussions, I use a document camera to display a team’s annotated mentor text while team members explain what they find puzzling and hypothesize possible explanations. The rest of the class then weighs in, sometimes drawing similar examples from their own mentor texts to support their arguments.

Noticing and naming grammar in this way is challenging; it is also fun—what Donald Murray and others have called “hard fun.” Students find their learning stretched by the many grammar puzzles in their mentor texts; at the same time, they enjoy the challenge precisely because it is puzzling, and also because they are working with texts they admire more and more as they better understand authors’ skill in crafting prose.

Show-and-Tell Essays: Applying

At the same time that students are busy noticing and naming grammar concepts in their Field Notebooks, they also apply what they learn to their own writing. During the semester, they compose three short essays (about 650 words each) that explore grammar-related issues. They choose their topic, target audience, and genre; I suggest that they may want to share a witty observation, offer cultural commentary, recount a telling story, present a persuasive argument, or respond to one of the many grammar-related news stories and opinion pieces posted on our class website (<http://homepages.dordt.edu/~lzuidema/eng336.htm>). Though they now shift from reading to writing, students again act as researchers: as they draft, revise, and polish, students experiment with the grammar techniques we are simultaneously studying in the Field Notebooks—including the unique approaches to craft that their mentor authors use (see fig. 3). The

FIGURE 3. Excerpt from Ruth’s Show-and-Tell Essay

These questions and categories for the parts of speech may have been helpful for you. It is good to know what adjectives do so that we can distinguish them from adverbs. Categories are helpful. To determine the parts of speech in the preceding sentence, we can ask questions pertaining to the words. What is the noun—the person, place, thing, or idea? Categories. What kind of categories are they? Helpful categories. Helpful is an adjective. But what if categories are not only helpful, but also harmful? This question is important for those of us who are future teachers to ponder.

How might categories and questions about the parts of speech be harmful? Sharing a real-life story, Dennis Baron explains how this could happen. [The teacher was leading the class in a grammar game]. Upon receiving a card with a noun written on, each student was required to put

Comment [R4]: Bare sentence. Cisneros uses short and bare sentences. They attract the readers’ attention and receive additional emphasis. In this situation, the use of a bare sentence emphasizes the fact the categories can be helpful.

Comment [RLM5]: A dash is used to separate the question from the list of categories of nouns. This puts more emphasis on the categories than would be there if I used parentheses.

Comment [R6]: Single word sentence fragment. Cisneros uses this technique, often for emphasis which is different from my purpose here. I used the one word sentence to give a natural conversational sounding response. The same applies to the minor sentences’ helpful categories.

Comment [R7]: Starting a sentence with a conjunction. Sandra Cisneros often starts a sentence with a conjunction instead of combining the two sentences. She uses the conjunction more as a transitional word. This grammatical choice seems to emphasize the negative or the contrast more than would happen with a traditional comma + conjunction combination.

Comment [RLM6]: Meta-discourse attitude. Shows that the author thinks this is important and directs the readers to pay attention to it.


assignment includes these instructions about their grammar experiments:

Where your experiments work well, leave them; where other choices would be more effective, replace them and paste the experimental excerpts in an appendix. In either case, use the highlighting tool in Microsoft Word to mark your experiments, and use the Insert Comments tool to add a note that names what you did and explains its rhetorical effect.

In this way, students *show* their grammar knowledge and also *tell* about it—both through their essay content and in their margin comments annotating their experiments. By requiring experiments and reflective notes (rather than requiring inclusion of techniques regardless of their effectiveness), I emphasize that good writers make choices about grammar craft. And by prompting students to make these experiments during drafting, revising, and editing stages, I emphasize how writers can consciously shape their prose at all stages of their writing. (For more about planning for grammar learning throughout the writing process, see Ehrenworth and Vinton 44–45.) Show-and-Tell essays give students a meaningful context in which to apply the grammar they have learned as readers, and these essays are excellent opportunities for students to consider the nature and power of grammar in our culture (see fig. 4).

“Not Your Mother’s Grammar Class”

The Show-and-Tell essays close the notice-name-apply loop for the grammar workshop. Rather than treating grammar as a static body of knowledge to

be transmitted from the teacher (or the textbook) to students, the grammar workshop approach presupposes that grammar study is dynamic, a site where knowledge is continually being constructed through meaningful, contextualized inquiry. I have been consistently impressed with students’ engagement and learning in the grammar workshop. The students seem impressed, too, and perhaps even a bit surprised: their anonymous evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive, giving the course high marks for facilitating their learning. Many students comment about how the course was much different from what they expected—about how useful, challenging, and fun they found it to be. Recently, my department chair visited the class. I wondered what he would think about the way I had immersed our grammar study in the context of both reading and writing. I needn’t have worried. “This,” he reflected afterward with a grin, “is not your mother’s grammar class.” 

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FIGURE 4. Teaching Critical Thinking about the Power of Grammar

These resources can help teachers develop writing assignments that prompt students to explore and critique the cultural power of grammar:

- Brown, *In Other Words: Lessons on Grammar, Code-Switching, and Academic Writing*
- Dunn and Lindblom, *Grammar Rants: How a Backstage Tour of Writing Complaints Can Help Students Make Informed, Savvy Choices about Their Writing*
- Ehrenworth and Vinton, *The Power of Grammar*
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Leah A. Zuidema is delighted to have learned much of what she knows about grammar from her mother—and as a mother. Her interest in systematic (yet contextualized) grammar instruction began during her years as a high school English teacher. She continues to enjoy language study with her students at Dordt College, where she is now associate professor of English and specializes in composition and English teacher education. She welcomes email at lzuidema@dordt.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

"Analyzing Grammar Pet Peeves" is designed to help students become "rhetorically savvy" through their analysis of their own and others' grammar pet peeves. Students begin by thinking about their own grammar pet peeves. They then read a Dear Abby column in which she lists several grammar pet peeves. Using a chart, students analyze each pet peeve and research it to determine its accuracy. By analyzing Dear Abby's "rant" about bad grammar usage, students become aware that attitudes about race, social class, moral and ethical character, and "proper" language use are intertwined and that the rant reveals those attitudes. Finally, students discuss the pet peeves as a class, gaining an understanding that issues of race, class, and audience's expectations help determine what is considered "proper" language usage. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/analyzing-grammar-peeves-1091.html>