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Rhetorical Grammar
Grammar and Style Manifesto
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When many people think back to their elementary, middle or high school English classes they think about grammar lessons—learning about the eight parts of speech, the different punctuation marks, all the different rules of grammar. But most won't remember any of those rules. If you ask someone if and how they learned how to write with style, they probably won't say they learned it in a classroom through more rules, definitions, and exercises. Can students learn to write effectively through memorizing grammar rules and style terms? No. The traditional rule-based method of grammar instruction does not help students learn grammar; it may even make their writing worse or give them a hatred of writing. The same may be said for teaching style—what we are doing now does not work. Writing and writing well is an important skill, but we have been teaching it the wrong way.

Study after study has shown that the traditional, rule-based method of grammar instruction does not work. [One researcher](#) found that it makes students so focused on writing with correct grammar that they never give themselves the chance to actually write—they never get the chance to explore different ways to express their ideas in writing. That doesn't lead to good writing. The traditional rule-based method of grammar instruction makes the fatal mistake of teaching grammar before writing. Grammar is a part of writing, so it makes no sense to teach it separately. The way we teach grammar now, the students learn the rules, somewhat in the abstract, then diagram sentences or fix punctuation in paragraphs that others wrote. Then, they have to take all of those rules, and all the exceptions to those rules, and transfer them to their own writing. That's like teaching a child how to ride a bike by explaining the mechanics of a bike. You could do that, but the child wouldn't learn how to ride the bike—not until you put them on it and let them try it for themselves. It's the same with writing. Teaching students the rules before they have really started to write inhibits writing ability because they focus so much on doing it correctly that they never get the words on the page. Studies, including one by [Marcia Hurlowb](#), find that when students focus on their ideas and stop focusing on grammar they actually write better and with less grammatical errors.

If the traditional method doesn't work and studies show students who just write without worrying about grammar actually produce writing with fewer errors, do we still need to teach grammar? Yes, grammar remains important because it helps make writing accessible for different readers. But teaching it as rules you have to learn before writing is not effective. We should teach grammar through writing, not before it. Have students focus on their ideas first and get those ideas onto the page. Once they can do that, then focus on grammar in editing and revising. Show students how to combine some of their shorter sentences by using conjunctions, semicolons, and modifiers. Teach them how to incorporate quotes or dialogue into something they have written. Tell them to rely on their ear and if something doesn't sound right, ask them how they would re-write it to make it sound better, and help them with suggestions as needed. *Teach them grammar through their own writing.* Students will produce better writing if they learn to focus on their ideas first. Grammar should be taught as part of editing and revising when students can immediately apply the lessons

to their own writing instead of trying to transfer what they learned in a grammar exercise to their writing.

If teaching grammar through rules does not work, teaching style through structures and rules probably isn't effective either. [Style](#) is harder to teach than grammar because it's subjective; different readers have different ideas about what they think good style is, and that changes depending on the genre and the audience. Like grammar, talking about style in [structural terms](#), teaching terms like *noun phrase* and *elliptical adverb* to get students to think about how to craft style, may not help. This method, used by authors such as Nora Bacon and Joseph Williams, won't hurt a student's writing ability in the way that more structured grammar instruction can. But, as Keith Rhodes points out in "Feeling it", many students will not remember those specific terms after a class ends. So, teaching those structural terms may not be necessary. As students advance as writers, their knowledge of language from writing and speaking will usually tell them when something in a sentence seems good or bad or awkward. They probably can even describe why it is that way, they just may not name the structural term as the reason—and that's okay. We shouldn't abandon all terms when teaching style: terms such as voice, concise, clear, tone, active, passive and other "steering" language can help to guide students in revising to improve style. But they don't need to learn the structural terms that they will just forget.

Beyond using those steering terms, we should teach style by exposing students to a wide variety of writing methods and techniques so they can figure out what they like, what works best for them. This could happen by having students read and talk about a variety of writings: different fiction, nonfiction, and academic pieces, and discussing how the different styles work, serve different purposes, and what they liked and didn't like stylistically about each piece. We should have those discussions about students' own writing too. Let them just write, without worrying about anything else, then have them edit for style, deconstructing the good and the not so good in their natural voice. Writing in different styles can also help teach style: practice writing in the vernacular, encourage students to write in their own voice, have them imitate an author they love to help improve style.

In addition to exposing students to different styles, provide a variety of tips and tricks on how to write more clearly, concisely, and actively. That might mean still using some of the writing books like Bacon and Williams, but don't hold them as gospel. Tell students to take what works for them and don't emphasize learning the definitions of all the terms. Don't rely on the chapter exercises either; they may work for some students, but others, like with grammar exercises, may not be able to apply them to their own writing. Above all else, when it comes to teaching style, make it clear that style comes in editing. Drafting is only for getting the words and ideas on the page. Then they can take all the new styles and tips and tricks they think will work for them and use them in revising to write a piece with style.

Students will not work to improve their writing if they develop an aversion to it because writing classes forced them to memorize the rules and terms of grammar and style but not how to enjoy writing. Studies have proved the traditional methods of teaching grammar don't work, so we shouldn't teach style in a similar way. We shouldn't teach writing in ways that don't work. Writing and writing well, with correct grammar and good style, like most other skills, can only be learned through practice. That is how we should teach grammar and style—by letting students practice and try new things in their writing.