Teaching Grammar as Part of the Writing Process

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ABSTRACT

This study documents one teacher’s transition in moving from a traditional grammar curriculum toward the development and implementation of a writing based grammar curriculum. The study was completed in a large diverse middle school in eastern Pennsylvania with 22 eighth grade honors English students. Methods of gathering data included research, student surveys, interviews, and work samples, and observations. Throughout the study, students wrote three standards-based essays: the personal narrative, the informative essay, and the persuasive essay. These assignments were assessed using writing rubrics adhering to the six-traits of writing as well as the Pennsylvania State Standards for Writing. Within the larger writing units, students worked on skills associated with vivid words, sentence variety, creative punctuation, and pronoun usage. At the close of the study, improvements and understandings were noted in the stylistic aspects of student writing, including vivid word choice, sentence variety, and creative punctuation. Within these units, the teacher came to realizations regarding the effectiveness of instructional techniques, specifically: minilessons, extended minilessons, inductive lessons, and incidental lessons as well as summative assessments and student motivation.
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RESEARCHER STANCE

As a middle school student, I had many unpleasant experiences; however, most numerous are the fearsome moments anticipating and subsequently failing to answer grammatical questions in Sister Anne’ s sixth grade English class. These instances, while too many to count, were stored in my memory as one negative experience and sullied my feelings toward the writing aspect of English class well into high school. Prior to Sister Anne, I was an active writer and reader; however, the practice of underlining direct and indirect objects, predicate nouns and predicate adjectives was an English I had never known. It was more of a formula, a right or wrong, an area that seemed rigid and devoid of exploration and interpretation. Suddenly, English was no longer fun. It was just like math, the subject I simply did not “get.” Now I was no longer a student who was weak in one area but truly excelled and took pride in another—I was an all-around loser.

Quiz day before quiz day, I went home and whined to my parents as they attempted to drill the grammar into my head. It was no use; I wouldn’t master the stuff until it came time for me, as a teacher, to numb the minds of middle-schoolers in my own classroom.

As a first year teacher, one item on the curriculum map I remember addressing was grammar. As I asked students to copy sentences from the book and underline and identify various parts of speech, I knew very well that they would never make practical use of these skills, but I didn’t know any other way to teach it. Year after year, I started off with boring grammar exercise after boring grammar exercise. It wasn’t until early October, when I began a unit on informative writing, that I felt as though I had actually begun to teach.
Why did I do it? It was in the map…it was what I had done as a student; sadly, I also did it because the tedious grammar exercises were great for whipping students into a military-like submission that would set the tone for classroom roles and organization for the remainder of the year. Finally, because I felt guilty about all of the previous justifications, I convinced myself that, by seeing good writing in the grammar textbook, students would somehow mimic it in their own. This was the one thing I taught in which I truly did not believe.

Following a busy summer full of curriculum revisions and the unpacking and labeling of thousands of new textbooks, I was not overly excited for the start of the 2008-2009 school year. I felt as though I had not even had a summer vacation and here I was about to meet a new group of students who could never live up to the over-achievers who filled my room last year.

It took me at least two weeks to get into the swing of things and eventually I was excited and revitalized by a new curriculum. During the 2007-2008 school year, I had piloted several of the grammar in writing practices I would be using with this year’s students but that transition time was at an end. No more skill and drill grammar—the old books were tossed in the dustbin in July, and there was no turning back. Why was I doing this? Why, as a department coordinator, had I encouraged our English teachers to move away from the skill and drill practices and move into the practice of teaching grammar within the writing process?

When grammar is taught in the traditional skill and drill manner, students often fail to make the connection between grammar and writing. Teaching grammar in the context of writing places grammatical skills in situations for which they are integral and
their impact can be better understood. If one is taught how to strengthen his or her writing within the writing process, it is natural that these skills will transfer to future writing activities. Another positive component of teaching grammar in the context of writing is that it works well for differentiation. Since students are no longer bound by yes and no answers, they feel more freedom to work at their own pace and explore topics of interest to them.

After I began to more fully research reasons and methods for teaching grammar as part of the writing process, an unanticipated aspect of this study surfaced. Through this study, I needed to examine not just what I was going to teach but how I was going to teach it. I found that certain lesson structures were better suited than other for particular material. Constance Weaver (1998) inspired me to explore this in greater detail when she spoke of incidental and inductive lessons as well as minilessons and extended minilessons.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Introduction**

Traditionally, grammar has been taught through the rote process of memorization and identification (Smith 2003). This practice is inauthentic in that it does not model situations of use to learners, nor does it represent the way in which language is used in the working world. For example, the ability to diagram a sentence is not an act that assures success or even transfers to daily activities; however, the concepts of sentence structure that this exercise aims to teach are imperative for the personal, educational, and economic advancement of students when the goal is appropriate interpersonal communication. The main question here is: How do educators provide grammar
instruction that is meaningful and useful to students? The research reviewed in the following pages identifies and argues for the abandonment of traditional grammar instruction and supports an approach that teaches grammar within a more authentic situation.

The Importance of Grammar

According to the NCTE (2003), grammar is important because, “People associate grammar with errors and correctness. But knowing about grammar also helps us understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and interesting and precise. Grammar can be part of literature discussions, when our students and we read the sentences in poetry and stories. And knowing about grammar means finding out that all languages and all dialects follow grammatical patterns” (p.1). Because of the perception of clear rights and wrongs within the system of English grammar and usage, speakers may be perceived as educated or not educated based upon their syntactic structures.

The NCTE (2003) tells teachers why grammar is necessary and, through the NCTE Standards for English Language Arts, the organization lays out what concepts to address. Standard 3 addresses understanding sentence structure through the comprehension and appreciation of texts; Standard 4 informs of the need to adjust the style and conventions employed in language according to audience; Standard 6 emphasizes the need to apply knowledge of language conventions and structure to texts; and finally, Standard 9 asks writers to comprehend basic grammatical patterns that will allow them look beyond their own language and culture (1).
Defining Traditional Grammar

According to Beers (2001), grammar has been a part of the language arts curriculum since the mid-1800s (4). In order to define what is meant by teaching grammar in the context of writing, it is first necessary to define traditional grammar instruction. One of the first grammar books, written by Lindley Murray, focused on “mastering parts of speech and parsing sentences” (4). Next, in 1877, Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellog added sentence diagramming to their textbook. These methods of grammar instruction represented a part-to-whole philosophy based on the teaching of Latin and took grammar out of the writing and speaking process. Even a century ago, teachers noted that grammar instruction was not producing better speakers and writers (4). Educators cannot assume that students will make the leap from part to whole and must therefore make grammar instruction part of the writing and speaking processes.

The Flaws of Traditional Grammar Instruction

Ehrenworth (2003) explains that teachers often find that students have not retained the grammatical knowledge presented to them in previous years. Teachers commonly complain that concepts are learned for tests but are forgotten soon after; therefore, students are not transferring these practices into their writing. The inability to transfer such skills may be the result of a lack of confidence in writing abilities or the failure to recognize appropriate grammar (Hutchinson, McCavitt, Rude, Vallow, 2002). In a study focusing on the concerns of middle school writing instructors, Troia and Maddox (2004) gathered evidence that pointed to a modern society, a society that communicates mainly via e-mail, instant messaging, and text messaging, as devaluing writing, especially formal
academic writing. Whatever the cause, the problem is that students tend not to transfer traditionally taught grammar skills to their writing practices; as a result, teachers must identify and move away from ineffective methods of teaching grammar and find ways to make grammar stick.

If students are not learning grammar, teaching methods may be flawed or students may not like the way in which it is being taught (Ehrenworth, 2003). Heshusius’s resistance theory (as cited in Ehrenworth, 2003) “provides a framework for understanding these children’s behavior as active resistance to a situation they find threatening, boring, or intolerable” (p. 90). This concept aided Ehrenworth in identifying a major flaw in grammar instruction. The problem was not that the students were unable to understand the concepts; it was that they did not want to understand because the material was viewed as meaningless to their personal situations and interests.

Also, teachers often prescribe archaic rules that are not always reflected in contemporary usage, and much of the grammar being taught is of no practical use to the students. In order to remedy the problems existing within the area of grammar instruction, there must be “more accurate statements of the rules of correctness, a more teachable grammar that kids can learn well enough to apply, and a better pedagogy than a ubiquitous workbook” (McCleary, 1995, p.3). Essentially, teachers need to focus on more meaningful grammatical practices that will result in the greatest gains in student writing.

Peterson (1998) makes the case that, “grammar and the writing process are not mutually exclusive activities” (p.67). A common problem of those wishing to tie grammar lessons into the writing process is that it takes time and as a result many teachers end up embracing the ease that comes with isolated textbook exercises. Peterson
cites research from as far back as 1963 to emphasize that this type of instruction does not work, noting, “The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, as cited in Peterson, p.74). Traditional grammar instruction removes grammar from a situation for which it is vital—writing and is therefore inauthentic. Furthermore, this technique is harmful because in addition to teaching something that will not be applied it is taking time away from the actual practice of writing. Despite these findings, even new English language arts texts provide little opportunity for writing and fail to include updated language rules, a problem also cited in McCleary.

Whether it is due to a modern society or a lack of meaning associated with grammar instruction, students are not transferring the rules of the English language to their writing. One major problem is that traditional grammar instruction requires students to transfer skills from one situation to another, instead of teaching these skills in the context for which they are needed.

**Defining Grammar in the Context of Writing:**

**What to Teach and How to Teach It**

Effective methods for teaching grammar within the context of writing require dedication to practice, planning time, and resources. While it is relatively simple to cover a seemingly infinite number of grammatical topics by moving through a textbook, it is a drastically more daunting and time consuming task to teach salient concepts in the context of authentic writing tasks. It is for this reason that Peterson (1998) suggests making a list of topics that are imperative to both the success of the student and the
teacher and attempts to remedy the issue of planning time by providing sample learning opportunities, such as sentence expanding and descriptive writing prompts, that can be adapted to suit the needs of various instructional levels and subject areas.

Similar to Peterson’s train of thought, Weaver, McNally & Moerman (2001) feel that it important to focus on a few skills thoroughly rather than attempting to cover many superficially. Much of what is taught in terms of the parts of speech and their functions goes unused, and Weaver, McNally, & Moerman argue that “a little grammar goes a long way when it comes to helping students edit for the use of standard conventions in their writing” (17). They also go onto to support Rei Noguchi’s “less is more” theory when agreeing that, “teaching a limited number of grammatical concepts in the context of their use is far better than isolated grammar study in getting students to appreciate and use grammatical options and conventions more effectively” (18).

In order to implement effective methods of teaching grammar, there must be an abandonment of the “drill and kill” approach in favor of more elaborate and meaningful lessons. This approach requires that several techniques be used for the teaching of a single grammatical concept: previous concepts related to the one being taught are revisited, standard and non-standard examples are employed, and practice exercises are followed up with feedback (McCleary, 1995). Unfortunately, McCleary provides no significant evidence that these methods improved student writing; the author merely states that they may come together to make a positive difference. While he speaks to the possibility of an improvement in student writing, his approach to teaching grammar exists along the periphery of the writing process instead of within it.
Rosen (1998), however, in an updated version of her 1987 article, argues for an approach that places an emphasis on moving through the writing process without much thought being given to grammatical problems. Such problems are often addressed through “red-marking,” which may lead to a decline in confidence (Hutchinson, et al., 2002). In an effort to focus on strengths instead of weaknesses, students should address issues related to the content of their work before moving onto grammatical issues. In order to make this possible, students must be given an appropriate amount of time to write and read. If attempting to teach grammar within the context of writing, it is important that students understand the writing process and are exposed to examples of good writing. In a study of eighth grade students, Simmons, Kameenui, Dickson, Chard, Gunn, and Baker (1993) found that integrated reading and writing instruction positively impacted the development and detail of student writing. Ultimately, if students rather than teachers take primary responsibility for improving the content or message of their writing through the writing process, then students will naturally acquire the standard features of written English (Rosen, 1998).

Once teachers have identified the salient grammatical concepts they are presenting to a class, it is important to plan how best to present them. Rosen (1998) recommends using student work and minilessons to address common grammatical problems and editing conferences to address specific issues for individual writers. Rowe (1998) also supports using student work to teach minilessons and feels that students, especially those not confident in their writing abilities, will benefit from such a practice. When speaking of a sentence combining activity, the author states, “With the help of their peers, they begin to
see how they can manipulate the language and produce more interesting, complex, and varied sentences (p.100).

Feng and Powers (2005) also encourage the use of minilessons in grammar instruction. The authors conducted a study involving fifth graders that identified errors in student writing, taught minilessons to remedy these errors, and reevaluated the concepts in follow-up writing assignments. The study focused on three major categories: sentence structure, usage, and mechanics. Teacher created examples were used to address the problems and students worked with partners or in groups to practice the concepts. Finally, the students were reevaluated and showed both short-term and long-term improvement in the targeted areas (Feng & Powers).

Ehrenworth (2003) finds value in the minilesson, but unlike Rosen and Rowe, she writes against the popular practice of using student work as an example. Ehrenworth feels that showing students what they cannot do properly is a negative means of motivating them and instead argues for the use of demonstrating grammatical concepts through the use of professional examples. The author provides examples of such a practice and includes a professional example used to model a particular skill, an initial student example, and the student example after it has been modified to model the professional work. This practice was used to teach skills and concepts relating to punctuation, tone, verb tense, and genre and can be implemented through free writes, “in order to achieve fluency, in order to play with form and style, in order to suggest how these may enhance content” (p. 91). Students are no longer learning grammar as an isolated topic; they are connecting it to literature and realizing its usefulness in bringing and manipulating power and emotion within their writing.
In *Lessons to share on teaching grammar in context*, Weaver (1998) recommends experimenting with different methods of instruction: minilessons, extended minilessons, inductive lessons, and incidental lessons. Incidental lessons mention grammatical terms in a casual manner—perhaps while discussing literature or student examples (p. 26). Inductive lessons are more regimented in that students are “guided to notice grammatical patterns and derive generalizations themselves” (p. 26). “Minilessons present new and useful information in a brief format…extended minilessons…typically involve students trying out or applying the concept, briefly and collaboratively, in order to promote greater understanding” (p. 26).

Finally, in *Craft lessons: teaching writing K-8*, Fletcher and Portalupi (2007) instruct those teaching middle-level students not simply to teach to the various forms of writing as dictated by the curriculum. They state, “In fifth through eighth grade, students become accountable for writing across the range of narrative, expository, persuasive, and descriptive modes. How can we help students learn the way these forms can serve their distinct purposes for writing instead of letting the form serve as an end to their work?” (90).

The literature has indicated some key guidelines for the revitalization of grammar education in today’s classroom. While state and national standards may specify the teaching narrative, informative, and persuasive essays to the eighth grade student, it is important to remember that these forms should not be the only end results toward which to strive. Students should be pushed to mature as writers while engaged in the process of writing. One cannot attempt to cover an entire Warriner’s primer over the course of a single year; however, it is feasible that students will be capable of mastering a few
integral techniques. Because of this, the 8th grade English department at my school has narrowed the scope and sequence of grammar instruction to target several key areas including vivid words, sentence variety, and creative punctuation to be addressed through the narrative, informative, and persuasive writing processes, respectively. Next, grammar concepts should be taught through different instructional approaches during various stages of the writing process. Minilessons, extended minilessons, inductive lessons, and incidental lessons will be employed in accordance with the literature. Finally, both student and professional writing examples will become part of the process of learning to write.

**Grammar Instruction as Specific to the Action Research Study: Vivid Words in the Personal Narrative**

In teaching the personal narrative, it is first necessary to help students to focus. Fletcher and Portalupi explain that, “We need to let students feel the way writing takes on a new power when they move from the general to the specific” (92). They recommend juxtaposing two stories in order to demonstrate this point: one that attempts to tackle a whole summer and another that focuses on a moment in time. The teacher must then lead students through comparing and contrasting the two tasks and the impact that each has on the reader. The authors go on to emphasize the importance of teaching focus and lets readers know that this may take more than one or two minilessons (92-93).

When it comes down to the details of the text, Harry Noden (1999) reminds his readers of something they have most likely heard time and time again—show, don’t tell. Noden recalls Frank Webb who states, “Pictures are not made of flowers, guitars, people, surf or turf, but with irreducible elements of art: shapes, tones, directions, sizes, linens,
textures, and color” (Webb, as cited in Noden, 1999, p.1). The elements of art give detail to the people and objects in a painting, just as the elements of grammar paint a picture in the reader’s mind. Noden allows the writer to become an artist by providing five basic brush strokes for adding detail to writing: the participle, the absolute, the appositive, adjectives shifted out of order, and action verbs.

Noden’s five brush strokes are crucial to the action-research undertaken here; and, the first stage of this study begins on the smaller-scale, with students focusing on action verbs, as well as specific nouns and adjectives throughout the course of the personal narrative unit. Peterson (1998) has developed authentic writing activities that can be used as a good jumping off point for encouraging students to tap into the senses while writing. One such example, “The Color Poem,” assists students in adding powerful sensory details to their sentences. It provokes students to look beyond the black and white (or red) and consider colors from all five senses. The color poem also encourages students to experiment with similes and metaphors, two devices that can add imagery to writing.

Fletcher and Portalupi also speak of the importance of imagery and how, “description becomes rich and vivid when writers compare two things most of us wouldn’t think to put together” (98). They recommend using two stories popular amongst middle school students, Parrot in the oven: mi vida and Holes, to demonstrate the effectiveness of such techniques. Students are then to look in their own writing to find places where they are describing and ask themselves if comparing one thing to another might make them more powerful (98).

If attempting to have students create imagery through livelier adjectives, Fletcher and Portapuli instruct teachers to guide students with a less is more policy, “Adjectives in
writing are like salt in cooking—a little goes a long way. And many novice writers tend to overuse adjectives” (120). Attaching too many adjectives to a noun is a common mistake made by many young writers attempting to liven up their writing. The result is overwriting—instead students should focus in one or two lively adjectives that define and even color the noun. Again, the authors recommend having students dissect two sentences, one that overuses adjectives and one that does not, in order to make this point (120).

Grammar Instruction as Specific to the Action Research Study:

Sentence Variety

While there are many ways in which students can experiment with sentence variety, part of the informative writing unit asks students to do so through varying sentence lengths, sentence combining and appositives. Fletcher and Portalupi (2007) remind us that longer is not necessarily better when it comes to sentence structure: “When we write, we are trying to create an effect for the reader. You can do this by varying the lengths of sentences. You might lull the reader into complacency with several long sentences and then—WHAM! A short sentence” (99). The authors make us aware of the power sentence structures have in creating mood and push writers to survey their work in an attempt to experiment with variety in sentence length. Being a mature writer does not mean being able to write one long sentence after another—however, it does mean knowing when and how to use sentence structure to create effect.

When speaking on the maturation of writers, Haussamen (2003) states, “Sentence combining is a tested method for improving the maturity of student writing…Students progress from simple exercises in insertion and combining in the early grades toward
exercises in embedding one clause in another (Strong)” (41). Sentence combining is utilitarian in that it can aid in the maturation of all levels of writers because it is something that can be adapted according to writing ability.

The appositive, one of Harry Noden’s (1999) five brush strokes, “expands details in the reader’s imagination” (7). The appositive can work to enhance or to clarify and, like the other brush strokes, can, “work equally well for fiction, nonfiction, or poetry, but each genre creates a different emphasis” (8). The appositive, which is set off from the rest of the sentence through commas, can help the writer to tap into the reader’s imagination by providing more detail about the noun that comes before it. Building on the use of vivid words in the personal narrative, students in this study will use appositives to not only add detail but to also experiment with sentence variety.

**Grammar Instruction as Specific to the Action Research Study:**

**Creative Punctuation**

The final area of focus of the action-research study is creative punctuation. Constance Weaver (2007) discusses the use of less common punctuation marks such as the dash, the colon, and the semicolon. These marks are often under-explored by middle school students but can aid in variety, the addition of emotion, and in sentence combining—another popular practice of those seasoned in teaching grammar through writing. Weaver points out that teachers often tell students not to use dashes in formal writing, which calls to mind Schuster’s (1985) naming of grammar myths, such as avoiding contractions in formal writing, always using a topic sentence, never ending a sentence with a preposition, avoiding I and you in formal writing, and never using and or but to begin a sentence (p. 40-43). Schuster warns teachers of perpetuating these rules
and encourages them to get off the mythmobile, “a spaceship that many language arts
teachers fly in. If you require students to follow “rules” that virtually no writer in the real
world observes, you’re a passenger” (p. 40). Experts from Shakespeare to writers in the
*New Yorker* have violated these “rules.” Why is it that the professionals are praised yet
children are scorned for playing with language in a way that we deem unconventional?
Schuster’s article is a good place to conclude because it reminds teachers that writing is
tool meant for exploration and creativity, not captivity.

Harry Noden (1999) believes that something as simple as punctuation can add
special effects and enhanced meaning to words. Noden (1999) explores the power of and
the myths surrounding punctuation and uses several professional examples to illustrate
that “good writers use “incorrect” punctuation to create meanings that couldn’t otherwise
be expressed” (95). Noden includes “John Dawkins’ Punctuation Heirachy” which uses
the same sentence but substitutes one type of punctuation for another (the period, the
dash, the colon, the semicolon and the comma) in order to illustrate how a sentence can
change with a slight change in punctuation (95). Teachers can use this chart to explain the
impact of punctuation while introducing its common and traditional purposes.

**Conclusion**

Research indicates that effective and authentic grammar instruction must move
beyond traditional textbook teaching, archaic grammatical rules, and practices that crush
confidence and creativity. These practices should be replaced with various types of
lessons that employ professional and student samples in order to expose students to
various qualities of writing as well as diverse writing opportunities. While state and
national standards may dictate what forms of writing must be taught in the eighth grade
English classroom, teachers cannot allow these forms to stifle the maturation of the individual writer. The nuances of the language must instead be explored through the writing we teach as well as the literature that accompanies it. The goal of this action-research project is to analyze the impact that teaching grammar as prescribed above has on the writing of the eighth grade student.

**RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

**Research Goals**

The goal of this study was always to report on the observed and reported experiences when grammar is taught as an integral part of the writing process. In taking the MEDU course, “Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing,” I was presented with a variety of strategies too vast to cover in a single year, let alone a ten-week study. Therefore, together with the middle school English department, and based on the needs of the students, I narrowed my study focus on three grammatical areas: vivid descriptors, sentence variety, and creative punctuation. Within each of the three units, a series of minilessons, extended minilessons, inductive lessons, and incidental lessons involving whole class, small group, and individual formative activities addressed the targeted skills. Finally, at the conclusion of each unit, students produced an individual writing sample, which served as a summative assessment.

**Setting**

I currently teach three levels of eighth grade English in the only seventh and eighth grade middle school in the school district. The school district in which I teach is diverse, but the area in which the school is located is a predominately white suburban area. The student population of the middle school is made up of approximately 1,500
male and female students. The racial demographics are as follows: 63% White, 18% Black, 16% Hispanic, and 3% Asian.

**Participants**

The subject pool consists of ten female and twelve male eighth grade honors English students. The class consists of five students with Gifted Individual Education Plans (GIEP) and the racial demographics are similar to those of the school as a whole. What is unique to this class as compared to honors classes of the past is that it contains two students who are new to the United States—one is an exchange student from Spain, the other recently relocated from Germany. All members of the class are study participants.

**Data Gathering Methods**

*Surveys*

I conducted five student surveys over the course of the study: pre-study survey, post survey on vivid words, post survey on sentence variety, post survey on creative punctuation, and a post-study survey (see Appendixes C-G). The pre-study and post study surveys were more general than others and asked students to discuss their opinions and experiences with the writing process. The three remaining surveys focused on their grasp of particular skills and looked to determine how students understood what specific grammar techniques could do for their writing. These surveys provided greater insight to the data already collected. According to Holly, Arhar, and Kasden (2001), “We are constantly trying to understand our students, their work, and their world.” These surveys reached beyond right and wrong and helped to create a picture of each student as a whole.
Additionally, the feedback from students allowed me to uncover strengths and weaknesses in my own teaching practices.

**Interviews**

Student interviews were conducted in an informal manner, involving approximately five questions focusing on the individual strengths and weaknesses of the student. These were not done with all members of the class, but instead administered to a class sample, including an accelerated writer and an average writer. The interviews were done to expand upon the material learned through surveys and also to determine how to meet the needs of various levels of writers.

**Student Work**

Both formative and summative assessments are included in this action-research study. First, a twenty-five-question pretest created by our literature book, Write Source, was given to formatively assess to what extent students have mastered the grammatical conventions of the English language. This pretest, given within the first two weeks of the school year, showed that students had a proficient grasp on the conventions of the English language. This allowed me to confidently go ahead with my contextualized plans for the semester because students had a solid foundation on which I could build.

As part of the informative writing unit, students were asked to focus on vivid words in order to add greater imagery to their writing. To gauge the maturity, insightfulness, and even the sense humor of the students, I asked them to create captions for various pictures. Next, each student was required to create a color poem. This activity asked students, using similes and metaphors, to consider a color from all five senses. Finally, the students were summatively assessed using a personal narrative. DI was
hopeful that they would employ similes, metaphors, and specific words in order to enhance and clarify their writing and that they would make their personal experiences come alive for the reader.

Next, in order to get students to consider their sentence structures, I provided opportunity for **sentence combining**. The students took a story filled with short, choppy sentences and combined them to create a more readable text. They also commented on the impact on which it had on the piece. This allowed me to gauge not only whether students knew how to write varying types of sentences but also whether they understood the impact that sentence structure could have on a piece of their writing. As with all summative pieces in this study, the **informative essay** told me whether or not students were retaining the techniques studied and practiced and if they were able to transfer them to a larger piece of writing.

Other major assessments within this study centered on **pronouns**. The formative assessment was a group activity in which students created a theme poster. This was a fun, collaborative means of checking for student mastery over the rules and purposes surrounding seven different types of pronouns. Once students demonstrated mastery of pronouns, they completed a summative **poem** or **short story**.

The final stage of this action-research study involved experimenting with various types of **punctuation**. As a carryover from the intended studies on sentence variety, appositives and semicolons were addressed as part of this unit. Over the course of five weeks, students inductively concluded the impact that types of punctuation could have on a piece of writing as well as the manner in which to employ them. Students were given numerous opportunities for formative assessment, including **exit cards** that allowed them
to practice their skills and receive timely feedback. Finally, the students were summatively assessed on these techniques through a **persuasive essay**.

**Participant Observation**

Throughout the study, I acted as both a teacher and an observer. During instructional time, I used my computer and a notepad to jot down key observations. I later developed these notes in the form of a field log, which was used to keep a running account of happenings throughout the study. This log enabled me to study the effectiveness of new methods of instruction—was I presenting material in a tangible manner, was I truly teaching grammar as part of authentic writing, and were students “getting it”? The field logs also served as devices to recall events I may have otherwise forgotten. In order to prevent myself from becoming an historical revisionist, I adhered to Bogdan and Biklen’s (2003) advice on keeping thoughts separate from facts. When speaking of the participant observer, they state, “He or she renders a description of people, objects, places, events, activities, and conversations. In addition, as part of such notes, the researcher will record ideas, strategies, reflections, and hunches, as well as patterns that emerge” (110). I did this by placing factual events in regular print and my thoughts on what was happening in italics. The majority of these logs came from times in which I was presenting new material as well as observing the students experimenting through the formative assessments.

**Trustworthiness Statement**

Holly, Arthur, and Kasten’s (2000) chapter on ethical action research has been invaluable to the structure of this study. After receiving the green light from the HSIRB as well as the school principal (see Appendix A), I informed the students and parents or
guardians, both verbally and in writing, of the purpose of this action research project. I asked students and their parents or guardians to sign a research participation consent form (see Appendix B). I stressed to students that the decision to participate in the study would have no bearing on a student’s grade and that one could opt out of the study at any time without penalty. All students, whether participating or not, received the same instructional attention and, as always GIEPs were followed.

As per Wolcott (2009), observation became the basis of this study. I assessed, analyzed, and reflected upon instructional methods, student behavior, and student work and tracked participant action and dialogue in a field log, being careful to keep literal observations and interpretive feelings concerning the observations separate from one another. To ensure confidentiality, the field log, when not in my possession, was kept in a locket cabinet.

In addition to the field logs, data for this study also includes student work, and student interviews/surveys. Holly, Arhar, and Kasten (2000) speak to the importance of keeping and analyzing the field logs; therefore, observations as well as the student work and surveys/interviews allowed me to attempt the triangulation of data. According to Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997), the purpose behind the triangulation of data is to validate findings by comparing data acquired through various. Finally, when reporting data, I used pseudonyms when referring to the students. The key connecting the students’ names to the pseudonyms was also kept locked and confidential.

In order to minimize the risk to these subjects, I implemented my study using effective teaching methods based on the findings of topic-specific literature as discussed
in the literature review and followed the prescribed district curriculum for 8th grade students of English.

Throughout the study, I discussed my practices and findings with my professors, teacher support group, and students. At this point, I feel that a few basic principles kept me on the right path during this research study: open-mindedness, reflection, organization, and the willingness to provide the most effective learning environment and activities for my students.

**THIS YEAR’S STORY**

**Part I: Vivid Words in the Personal Narrative**

As coordinator of the English department at my district’s intermediate school campus (grades 7 and 8), I have been afforded several opportunities to visit with teachers from the middle school (grades 5 and 6) as well as the high school. The main purpose of these visits was to work on horizontal curriculum alignment. One problem mentioned regularly by teachers from fifth through twelfth grades was grammar. Teachers in fifth and sixth grade often feel they do not have enough time to teach it, while many teachers in seventh and eighth grade wonder why students are so grammatically deficient and scramble to cover everything grammatical in a matter of two years. Finally, high school teachers ask whether or not grammar is still taught at the middle and intermediate levels because students continue to struggle with it year after year.

In the past, teachers at the seventh and eighth grade levels prescribed a rigorous dose of grammar to relieve the writing maladies of the students. Drilling the students in grammar hadn’t solved these issues then, and doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results struck me as a foolish response, comfortable maybe, but
still foolish. The following is the tale of an eighth grade English teacher attempting to teach grammar as part of the writing process for the first time. Not since my first year of teaching eight years ago have I felt such a sense of uncertainty or vulnerability. While the students were more excited about choosing pseudonyms than becoming better writers, I decided to push forward.

To start off, I wanted to know how students felt about the grammar instruction they had received in previous years. If I am attempting to change the way in which I teach grammar, it is important for me to understand what knowledge and feelings the students are bringing to the table and track how they may or may not change over the course of this study. I conducted surveys throughout the course of the study in order to do so—the results of “Survey 1: Pre-Study Survey” are listed below. They are in no particular order; I looked too include all opinions, but for readability I excluded responses that were quite similar.

**What does grammar mean to you?**

*Grammar includes the parts of a proper sentence. Grammar also includes words, like nouns and verbs.*

*Grammar is underlining, italics, punctuation, and usage of words.*

*Grammar means to me that you know how to talk right.*

*Grammar to me means memerizing (sic) rules about punctuation, sentence structure, from the textbook.*

*I’ve had to underline direct objects, choose the right word to use, identify verbs, nouns, and etc., and spelling*

*It is correcting sentences doing homework, and taking tests.*
What grammar means to me is predicates, direct or indirect objects, nouns, verbs, and sentence structures.

It means proofreading and fixing sentences

Underline, circle, and answering questions on the exercise.

In Germany, we did narrative essays, informative essays, and persuasive essays to practice grammar.

Grammar means reading sentence after sentence correcting punctuation and underlining parts of speech.

Grammar is a way of writing and talking so everybody can understand you. In the past I have just copied exercises and did them.

In analyzing these responses, I found that most students had a view of grammar that was similar to my own at their age. Grammar to my students meant doing exercises out of a book; however, they knew it was important. It is interesting to note that Yoana, a girl who just moved to the United States from Germany, thinks of grammar as something that is examined through the process of writing narrative, informative, and persuasive essays.

Next, I asked students, “Do you like grammar?” and, when explaining the survey asked them to elaborate as to why or why not? I grouped the responses below according to their reactions to liking grammar—no, maybe, and yes. Again, I left out similar responses for the sake of readability.

**Do you like grammar?**

*No, not really. I have always hated doing the exercise pages.*

*I do not like grammar because it is boring.*
No, it doesn’t interest me.

I do not like grammar because it is boring and some of it we will never use again. Ex. Direct/indirect object.

No! It’s not fun!

I don’t like grammar because it is very boring to learn about and it is hard to learn all the rules.

No. To my best effort I never remember enjoying simply mindless corrections, which my previous teachers made me do.

I do not like grammar and there are always situations when you write where the punctuation or something is not like an example in the book and I don’t know what to do.

I personally do not like grammar. I would rather talk freely, although I prefer using correct grammar. By using correct grammar, we can better communicate. If grammar is only taught in formulas, I don’t like it. If you write and practice grammar, I like it.

Umm…I guess but it’s hard to use it while you are writing.

I think if I stopped paying attention to grammar I wouldn’t be able to write as I do now. I like grammar due to the fact that some of the stuff I learn helps me become a better writer.

Yes, I do like grammar because without it I would be lost not knowing when to pause while reading or what the sentence is all about.

Most students who like grammar feel this way because they are able to make a connection between grammar and talking and/or writing. The majority of students in the class do not like grammar and they do not make a connection between grammar and
writing or conversation. I was expecting students to write unflattering comments on past grammar experiences because I had heard them time and time again and had similar experiences when I was younger. One comment that really struck me was, “I do not like grammar and there are always situations when you write where the punctuation or something is not like an example in the book and I don’t know what to do.” This comment made me feel that I could throw example after example at my students in the hopes of preparing them for real writing but what I really need to do is give them more time to write when I am available to provide guidance.

Finally, I asked students, “Do you like writing?” and grouped responses according to “no” and “yes” so that I could further examine why students felt a particular way. Because grammar and writing are inextricably bound, it was important for me to understand the students’ feelings on both. I was interested in seeing if students would feel the same about both grammar and writing or if their opinions on the two would differ.

Do you like writing?

No, I do not like writing. The reason is that sometimes I can say something better than I can write it.

No!!!!! It hurts my hand.

I don’t like writing because I would rather talk about my opinions rather than writing them down.

I do like writing because I think it’s fun to be able to freely write about whatever you want.

Yes, I do like writing. In writing you can express yourself on paper instead of in words in front of everyone (I’m a little shy).
I like writing because I can express my feelings without feeling embarrassed or ashamed.

I usually do like writing. I just think it is neat to be able to make up things or write poetry.

I enjoy writing my own little stories. I can usually express myself through writing.

I like writing but only when I do it without being told what to write about.

I enjoy writing because I’ve had good teachers in the past, so I know how to or how not to write...but for some (like my brother) its harder because they don’t know how to apply stuff they’ve learned to their writing.

I like writing because I can describe things that I did or learned about.

I love to write. It allows me to envision which could never be encountered by humans and give ideas of the future and past.

Yes, because it helps me learn about stuff and I just think it is just fun to write stories or share your information or opinions with others.

I do like writing because it is fun to write fictional narratives. Most other kinds of writing are not interesting or enjoyable to me.

What I learned from this part of this survey is that the students in my class have various purposes for and feelings toward writing. Some enjoy it because they do not like or have trouble expressing themselves verbally; a few like to reflect upon things learned; others simply like to write freely; and the remaining, of course, do not like to write. How can I meet the needs of all of these students while addressing the curricular need to narrative, informative, and persuasive writing? Also, with grammar cited as one of the major deficiencies existing amongst students in grades five through twelve, how do I best improve it?
Part 1: Tapping into the Senses Through Vivid Words

The first major piece of writing I asked students to complete was the personal narrative—a one-paragraph piece focusing on a single experience. With this piece of writing, the students were to focus on bringing the experience alive with the use of vivid words. Before beginning the essay, the students compared and contrasted two personal narratives and completed two assignments meant to tap into the senses; to begin, they created captions to match various pictures and wrote a color poem.

Captions

I asked the students to create captions to match various images to help them to encapsulate in words the impact of the pictures—the colors, the actions, the feelings, and the noises, just to name a few possibilities. Basically, this was an initial exercise in showing rather than telling, and it also gave me a chance to get to know the personalities of the students. Other than asking students to try to put to words the impact the image had on them, I really did not set any rules with this exercise. The students and I spoke of the purpose of captions and where we had seen them before. I then displayed a few examples and sent them on their way.
Mike: ZZ Top Fans.

Paco: Barbershop quartet gone bad.

Figure 1. Caption Prompt

Lilly: Let’s get out of here.

Jerry: Hurry up—mom and dad are right behind us.

Nick: We shrunken.

Figure 2. Caption Prompt
Joe: Hey, you’re in a gang too?

Mikael: Ouch, that hurt.

Bella: I think he’s checking you out. Don’t be shy—you look hot.

Figure 3. Caption Prompt

Jerry: Tried and failed.

Yoana: Ouch.

William: Look out for that car.

Figure 4. Caption Prompt
While I was expecting responses with a bit more comedic flair and imagery, I was pleased that the students thought beyond what was literally on the page. The students wrote what they felt the characters were thinking, saying, and feeling—it was as if they were looking into the pictures. At the start of this exercise, we created class examples; unfortunately, quite a few students offered captions that simply spoke of what was going on in the picture. As a group we practiced looking beyond the literal and into the emotions of the moment; through verbal and written feedback I was under the impression that the lesson resonated with students. This is important to the personal narrative because, when writing the personal narratives, I don’t want students to merely walk through a timeline of events…of summer vacation, a first homeroom, getting a new pet, etc., but rather I want them to tell me the feelings, sights, and sounds they experienced at the time of the event.

**The Color Poem**

Another exercise I used to get students to tap into their senses was the color poem. I found this exercise in Constance Weaver’s *Lessons to share on teaching grammar in context* (1998). The color poem asks students to use imagery and metaphors in order to get readers to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste a single color. In order to encourage students to use imagery, metaphors, and similes in their own writing, it was first important that they could identify and understand them at work. The students were able to spew off basic definitions of simile and metaphor. At the end of a brief review, we had the following written on the board: *both similes and metaphors compare things but similes use the words like or as.* The students were leaving out an integral part of the definition—that similes and metaphors compare two unlike things in order to make a
descriptive point about one or the other. This is important because it impacts the depth of understanding students take away from reading and also impacts the detail with which students write. The purpose and components of similes and metaphors were further explored through instructional posters that provided definitions, examples, and drawings of similes and metaphors as well as the analysis of the color poem model provided in Peterson.

While Scott Peterson implemented color poems in his classroom in order to encourage students to use metaphors and connect abstract and concrete concepts, I encouraged students to use both similes and metaphors in their consideration and exploration of a single color from all five senses. After a clear understanding of similes, metaphors, and the concept of looking at things in a figurative manner had been established, each student picked a color and constructed his or her own color poem. The greater purpose behind the task was to use this poetic experience as a building block for the personal narrative. In getting students to look at their personal experiences from various sensory perspectives, the narrative would become descriptive and therefore more enjoyable to read. After the completion and sharing of the individual poems, each student chose his or her favorite line from the color poem in order to create a class rainbow poem. We arranged these lines, as best we could, according to the order of the rainbow. This was met with enthusiasm because students were able to share, compare, and receive feedback on their best work.

**Period 7’s Rainbow Poem**

*Pink is the sound of a baby girl laughing as she frolics in the yard without a care in the world.*
Pink is the feeling of embarrassment when your (sic) caught singing in the shower.

Yellow is the feeling of the sun warming our Earth each day.

Green is the sound of leaves flying and dancing in a cool breeze.

Green is the taste of a pear inside a tree.

Green is the feeling of a little brother when his older brother is complimented on his work.

Green is the sound of cars starting to drive after a red light ends.

Green is the feeling of joy when you recycle a bottle.

Green is the smell of fresh cut grass.

Green is the color of leaves falling off a tree.

Blue is the sound of the blue birds morning banter while preparing for a long day ahead.

Blue is the taste of juicy jolly ranchers resting on your tongue.

Blue is the sound of waves crashing onto the shore.

Blue is the feeling of losing a friend.

Blue is the feeling of sadness after your heart has been broken.

Blue is the feeling of water surrounding you in the ocean.

Blue is the smell of the bright saltwater ocean waves swaying back and forth.

Purple is the feeling of holding your breath under water.

Purple is the feeling of a dreary, rainy afternoon indoors.

White is the sound of snow lightly hitting the Earth’s surface.

The language and insight demonstrated through the color poems left me feeling better than the captions. Although some students looked at the colors in a pretty literal manner, the majority wrote figuratively about the sights, smells, sounds, feelings, and
tastes of them. The students enjoyed the process of creating the class color poem because they usually enjoy anything that gets them up and moving around. First, each student took his or her favorite line and wrote it on a note card; next, we arranged the note cards on the board according to the rainbow; then, each stood took a turn writing his or her line on a large piece of paper that was eventually displayed on the hall bulletin board.

I hoped that this activity would be a first attempt in helping students to use imagery as a natural part of the writing process. If students can do so, their writing will be more likely to come alive for the reader. What a better way to move in this direction, I hoped, than asking them to relive a memorable moment through the personal narrative. The students were there for the sights and sounds of the experience—through their writing they must make their personal memories real and vibrant for the reader.

**Comparing and Contrasting Personal Narratives**

It was almost time to test out vivid writing through the personal narrative. In order to determine what makes a strong personal narrative, I juxtaposed two personal narratives, “The Redwoods” and “Mouse Alert,” and encouraged students to examine their strengths and weaknesses. These pieces were written by Vicki Spandel and are found in Great Source’s “Write Traits: 6-Trait Instruction and Assessment.” The following charts are replicas of the ones the students created on the white board. In order to elicit responses from students, I had the charts drawn on the board, chose student volunteers to read the stories aloud, and just set them loose to talk. The students were great at coming up with conclusions regarding the two narratives—it did not take much probing on my part. Once the students came to conclusions on each piece, volunteers were selected to fill in the charts on the board.
Summary of “The Redwoods”

“The Redwoods” is a three-paragraph general account of a family vacation. The writer mentions the weather, the various activities in which the family participated, and concludes by stating how she had fun, loves her family, and hopes to go again next year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“The Redwoods”</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>Boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could relate to—swimming, taking pictures, eating</td>
<td>Topic is too broad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear opening and closing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5. “The Redwoods”*

Summary of “Mouse Alert”

“Mouse Alert” is a three-paragraph narrative that details one family’s trip to Yellowstone Park. Instead of attempting to cover every aspect of the trip, the writer focused on one major event—the family’s run-in with a mouse inside of their cabin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Mouse Alert”</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More specific topic</td>
<td>Some minor grammar errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could relate to—annoyed with brother/sister, Dad mad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear opening and closing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the students had read both of the pieces, they decided that “Mouse Alert” was a better piece of writing because it focused on a very specific event, trying to catch a mouse, and included more detail. While both pieces spoke of things the students could relate to, “The Redwoods” talked about things that were too general. In response to “The Redwoods”, Emma stated, “I think that just about every person in this room ate, swam, and took pictures this summer. I think we should be writing about something more unique.”

Reacting to this, Bella said, “If we write about something smaller, we can go into more detail about it.”

Mike said, “Wouldn’t we have more to write about if we covered more time?”

Bella answered by saying, “How can we do a good job of explaining an entire summer in a paragraph or two? It will be too rushed.”

With a very limited amount of moderating on my part, the students came to some important conclusions regarding the writing of the personal narrative—details, relatability, personality, grammar, and structure mattered. It was also surprising to them that they did not need to think so big when setting out to write a story. Based on the readings of the two stories, the students also decided to create a poster listing the qualities of good writing, something they hung in the room to keep them on track.
Planning for the Personal Narrative

Before turning the students loose to write their personal narratives, we read another example together from the Write Source textbook. I was hoping that identifying and examining the components of strong writing would make students aware of what they were doing in their own work. Finally, I walked the students through the creation of a planning web. We created a web as though we were planning to write about a sweet 16 party. Emma suggested the topic and the rest of the students agreed because almost all of them were familiar with the television show, “My Super Sweet Sixteen” on MTV, so they
I would have a lot of ideas from which to draw. I drew the web and filled it in while the students provided me the details.

Ms. Gray: (drawing first circle) “What goes in the middle?”

Class Response: “Topic”

Ms. Gray: “OK, so I will put sweet 16 in the middle.” What types of things might we want to talk about when writing about a sweet 16 party?” How many supporting points did the author use in the example from class yesterday?”

Class: Some blank stares

Ms. Gray: “We read the story about people overcoming odds to do great things. How many people were mentioned in that story?”

Class: “Three”

Ms. Gray: “Good. So, how many supporting points do you think we want to aim for?”

Class: “Three”

Ms. Gray: “Great—what should they be? Let’s make a list first.”

Class (calling out): Food, entertainment, guests, outfits, gifts, theme

Ms. Gray: “Which ones should we put into our web—pick the top 3.”

Jerry: “Food”

Jackie: “Guests”

Emily: “Theme”

Ms. Gray. “Now, what do we want to have coming out of each supporting point?”

Class: Details.

Ms. Gray: “How many?”

Class: “Three”
Ms. Gray: “Three is great. Two is fine. I would rather you have two awesome details than three so-so details. Got it?”

The students took a few minutes to independently jot down details for each supporting point. After walking around the room to peek at their ideas, I invited them to share their ideas with the group. We concentrated on one supporting point at a time; the students wrote the details that were met with a collective “yeah” on the board. Before we knew it, we had created a web that could be turned into a personal narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Web</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweet 16 Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-guys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-celebrities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8. Personal Narrative Web*

Me: “Awesome, are you ready to apply this to your personal narrative?”

Class: “Yes”

Me: “Great—get started. This is due on Monday. It will count as a homework grade.”

The students brought the webs to class and during the warm up I went around to check that all of the students had completed the assignment. Given the fact that this is an honors class and I provided drafting time in class, I was pleased but not surprised that all students have completed the assignment.
Students were reminded to make sure the topic was focused, detailed, and not repetitive—all of which we had discussed when completing the sample web. After discussing the rubric for narrative writing and being prompted to pay particular attention to stylistic components of writing, such as descriptive words and imagery, the students began the rough drafts of the personal narrative.

Once the rough drafts were completed, I asked the students to engage in peer editing in order to check the quality of their drafts. The purpose of this was multi-faceted: it helped the students as writers and allowed for immediate feedback. If students review the work of others, they can not only help that student, but can also become more aware of strengths and weaknesses in their own writing. Peer editing was also helpful in expediting the writing process because, as a teacher of over one hundred students, it can be very hard to provide immediate feedback on larger pieces of writing.

The desks were setup in pairs, so each student exchanged papers with the person sitting next to him or her. The students graded one another’s papers according to the “Middle School 7-8 Rubric for a Personal Narrative” and were encouraged to make comments supporting each score. This rubric is a hybrid of the “Pennsylvania Narrative Scoring Guideline” and the “Six-Traits of Writing Rubric.” I focused their energies on recalling our classroom activities from earlier in the year and drew their attention to the “Good Writing” poster they created after comparing and contrasting “The Redwoods” and “Mouse Alert.” “These are all things that you should have considered when writing your personal narrative,” I said pointing to the poster while reciting the list. “When you peer and self-revise, keep all of these things in mind because you will have to comment
on them when grading according to the FCOSC rubric (Focus, Content, Organization, Style, and Conventions).”

### Rubric for Narrative Writing

(Adapted from *PSSA Narrative Scoring Guideline & Six-Traits of Writing*).

**Focus**
- 4 - The narrative tells about an unforgettable experience.
- 3 - The writer tells about an interesting experience.
- 2 - The writer needs to focus on one experience.
- 1 - The writer needs to tell about an experience.

**Content**
- 4 - The details make the story truly memorable.
- 3 - More details are needed.
- 2 - Some details do not relate to the story.
- 1 - New details need to be selected.

**Organization**
- 4 - The narrative is well organized, with a clear beginning, middle, and ending, making it enjoyable and easy to read.
- 3 - The narrative is well organized. Transitions are used well.
- 2 - The order of events needs to be corrected. More transitions need to be used. One part of the narrative is weak.
- 1 - The beginning, middle, and ending all run together. The order is unclear.

**Style**
- 4 - The writer's personal voice creates interest in the story. Dialogue is used.
  - Specific nouns, strong verbs, and well-chosen modifiers create vivid pictures and express clear feelings.
  - The sentences are skillfully written and original. They keep the reader's interest.
- 3 - The writer's voice creates interest in the story. More dialogue is needed.
  - Specific nouns and strong verbs are used. Modifiers are needed to create a clear picture.
  - The sentences show variety. Most are easy to read and understand, but some should flow more smoothly.
- 2 - A voice can usually be heard. More dialogue is needed.
  - Strong nouns, verbs, and modifiers are needed to create a clear picture.
  - A better variety of sentences is needed. Sentences do not read smoothly.
- 1 - The voice is weak. Dialogue is needed.
  - General and overused words do not create a clear picture.
  - Many short or incomplete sentences make the writing choppy.

**Conventions**
- 4 - The narrative is error free.
- 3 - The narrative has several errors in punctuation, spelling, or grammar.
- 2 - Many errors make the narrative confusing and hard to read.
- 1 - Help is needed to make corrections.

*Figure 9. Rubric for Narrative Writing*
While the assignment only required students to write one paragraph focusing on a single event, the majority of the students ended up writing multi-paragraphed pieces of the same focus. The students did a great job with the focus, content, organization, and conventions areas of their essays and they agreed with me that it would be a good idea to spend some time editing the essays to make them more descriptive—working on the stylistic aspects of the essay. We had dedicated time in the pre-writing process to imagery and figurative language, so I decided to do a mini-lesson on something more specific before turning them loose to write their final drafts. I explained to the students that more specific verbs and nouns could make writing more vivid, help create a more detailed picture in the reader’s mind. Despite the fact that this is an honors class, it was immediately apparent that not all of the students were completely sure of the meaning of verb and how to identify one. I put a simple verb poster on the board and conducted a brief minilesson.

Ms. Gray: “What is a verb?”

Vlad: “An action word. It’s what you do.”

Ms. Gray: “Or…?”

Paco: “A state of being word?”

Ms. Gray: “What does that mean? I never knew what that meant when I was in school—a state of being—what is that? She is tall. How is that a state of being? How is tall a state of being? Tall is what you are…it is what you is, it is what you be. Ok, so look at the two very simple sentences on this poster. Which is the action verb and which is the state of being verb?”

Miss Gray: (reading the instructional poster) “Corals are soft. Corals build reefs.”
Nina: “*Are* is the state of being.”

Ms. Gray: Why?

Nina: “Because it is what they are.”

Ms. Gray: “Ok-so then *build* is…”

Emma: “The action verb.”

Ms. Gray: “Why?”

Emma: “Because they are doing something.”

Ms. Gray: “OK, now I want you to go through your paragraphs and underline all of the verbs. Why do you think I might be having you do this?”

Paco: “So that we know what verbs are.”

Ms. Gray: Ok, but what about for your writing?

Bella: “To make it more specific.”

Students underlined all of the verbs in their sentences and then did the same for a partner’s writing. After getting back their own papers, the students looked at the words that, if changed or made more specific, would add clarity to the piece. When asked how they could come up with appropriate, more specific synonyms for a word, a few students mentioned the thesaurus in Microsoft Word. I then told them about thesaurus.com but not before leaving them with a cautionary tale on inappropriate synonyms. The class laughed at this story taken from an episode of *Friends* in which the character of Joey uses a thesaurus in an attempt to sound educated but ends up being mistaken for a child. One thing he replaced was his own name, with “a baby kangaroo.” The students even came up with their own synonym mishaps, their favorite being one created by Jerry, “Instead of
saying good, like Ms. Gray’s class was good, we might say, Ms. Gray’s class was delicious.” With that said, they worked diligently to make their writing more specific.

A few days after this editing exercise, Paco told me he made similar revisions to his honor society application. He actually underlined weak words and sentences and used thesaurus.com and dictionary.com to make his statements more specific. I was quite pleased by Paco’s tale, but I can’t help but wonder if larger aspects of this course are regularly finding their way out of the language arts classroom.

Once students revised their work and the work of another for specific verbs, I advised and gave them time to judge their essay according to the Rubric for Narrative Writing and told them to then move on to the final draft.

The students peer revised according to the Rubric for Narrative Writing and were given time to conference with one another. The students in this class did not need much instruction on the ways of peer revising. A simple minilesson and question and answer session on the five-components of the rubric activated their previous knowledge. In general, they marked up each other’s papers just fine and even took the time to explain what they had written. In the other levels I teach, peer revising and self revising are much more tedious tasks—the students rarely have feedback, other than what is minimally required, and they seem to rush through the process with both their own writing and the writing of others. Based on the pre-study surveys, most of the students in this class enjoy writing and feel comfortable with their writing abilities. This could be why they participate in a fuller manner than others in the revising process—their abilities enable them to believe that their opinions count.
Personal Narrative: The Final Draft

For the most part, the students did a good job of using imagery to make the reader a part of their experiences. While reading, “The Best Thing a Four Year Old Gets” anxiety rose inside me as Bella walked up the stairs to meet her first kitten. She wrote, “It seemed that in this small apartment the stairs would never end, but determination kept me walking.” As we practiced, Bella looked beyond the superficial and the literal in this retelling. Through her description of the stairs and the desire that moved her forward, she helps create a feeling of anticipation inside of the reader.

William was also successful in using figurative language, specifically similes, to describe his family’s exotic vacation. His comparisons and vivid descriptions in “Osa de Penninsula” left me feeling dwarfed by the towering trees and awestruck by wildlife. William wrote, “Trees that have been growing for many centuries loomed over us like a ceiling of a house, blocking sunlight. Birds of many colors and sizes flew over our heads creating almost a rainbow of color.”

Finally, I grew nauseated by “Deer in Headlights” when Lola used a simile to describe her dad hitting a deer with the car, “It was too late, my dad had already plowed it over like it was a stick in the way of a lawnmower.”

What did I learn from reading these essays? Either that the students took something away from my lessons on writing with imagery or that they were good writers to begin with—I was hoping that it was a little bit of both, but it was still too early in the year for me to tell. The above are strong examples of students using vivid words and figurative language in order to create a picture or leave an impression in the minds of the
readers. All students played with these techniques in their writing, but some did a better job than others.

Those who were weaker than others demonstrated an understanding of the concepts but seemed to be more rudimentary and less comfortable in their writing styles. For example, Bob’s use of italics does not add conviction to his words. He states, “Listening to music would really give students a chance to relieve the stress they get from school.” Bob’s use of italics lacks feeling; it reads as though he just italicized to meet the requirements of the assignment. Similarly, Vlad’s use of the ellipsis also feels as though he merely used it in order to cross an item off of his “to do” list. He wrote, “Next time you say starting school at a later time would be a good idea…think of all the negatives to that statement.” The ellipsis does not create a feeling of dramatic pause or lead me to a statement to be carefully considered—it simply exists. Yes, Both Bob and Vlad are capable of using the techniques; however, they might need too see more of these techniques in action in order to understand the power they can bring to a piece of writing. Perhaps they just need more time to write and tweak their own styles.

I wanted to look more deeply into the skills students had improved upon since entering my classroom in August and also wondered whether or not they made connections between our preliminary lessons and the writing of the personal narrative. To help understand these questions more deeply, I surveyed the students and asked them to define vivid writing and clarify their responses.

Before the start of this unit, the students spoke nothing of imagery or the senses in the “Pre-Study Survey” on grammar and writing. As explicated by the samples above, the students had used vivid writing, in varying degrees, in their narratives; however, the fact
that these concepts showed up in almost every one of their survey responses made me feel as though it had become a conscious stylistic component of the writing process. Several responses spoke of vivid writing as including descriptive vocabulary that creates a picture in the reader’s mind while others mentioned figurative language and details. Finally, some answers were more detailed than others, such as those of Lilly and Bob. Lilly stated that vivid language is, “When I’m able to feel empathy or hate toward a character because it is developed really well.” Bob remarked, “Vivid language is writing that describes something so in depth that the text taps into your senses and you can see, taste, hear, or smell whatever is being described.” Just as some survey responses are more refined than others, so was the use of vivid words and figurative language in the personal narratives. At this point, I am not certain as to how this material could be taught more effectively, but I do realize that students will need multiple opportunities to read and discuss such language as well as multiple opportunities to practice it in their own writing.

Part II: Sentence Variety in the Informative Essay

I intended the second major portion of this action research study to focus on sentence variety; however, the middle school’s curriculum map also dictated that we examine pronouns. The eighth grade teachers at the middle school had identified pronouns, specifically pronoun and antecedent agreement, as an area of weakness.

Inductive Lesson: Sentence Combining

After eight years of teaching and dialoging with students, I have come to the simple conclusion that some students like to write and some do not. One recurring theme amongst students who do enjoy writing is that their interests are not always met through the topics provided; therefore, allowing students control over their writing topics
is imperative to excitability. There are always students who will, no matter their feeling on the topic, push beyond average, simply because they are good students and want to do their best work…but, on the flipside, there are ones who won’t.

The reality of modern education is that there are on-demand assessments, like the PSSA, where students do not have the luxury of choice; preparing them for such occasions, but not teaching to them, must also be considered in the writing curriculum. This train of thought was natural in the context of the informative writing unit because the informative essay shows up on the Writing PSSA. It was a priority for me to prepare students for this form while giving them skills that could extend into other areas of writing.

Many eighth grade students, even at the honors level, write short, choppy sentences without thinking of the impact that these structures will have on the reader. At this point, I had been working with the students for approximately two months and knew that they were capable of vivid writing, of composing compound, complex, and inverted sentences, and using appositives effectively. Now I wanted to see the students push themselves to use these and other constructions to make their writing come alive.

In order to make a point about sentence variety and the impact it can have on a piece of writing, I presented the students an exercise in sentence combining and sentence variety from Daiker, et al (1985). According to William Strong (1983), “The approach involves putting short, choppy sentences together to make more interesting, readable ones (xv).” Strong also makes the important note that there is more than a single way to accomplish this goal. “How to Get Ahead” contains twenty-two simple sentences that can
be reworked to tell a simple story more fluently. I have reproduced the activity in figure 10 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1: “How to Get Ahead”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.  A woman shuffled up to Bill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.  The woman was pudgy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.  Bill worked as a clerk at a supermarket.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.  The woman asked Bill about the price of lettuce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.  Bill told the woman that lettuce cost $1.00 a head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.  The woman complained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.  She said the lettuce would spoil before she could eat all of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.  She said she wanted only half a head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.  Bill said he couldn’t sell just half a head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Even after this, she asked again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Then she demanded to see the store manager.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Bill rolled his eyes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Bill stalked to the back office to tell his boss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Bill didn’t realize something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The woman was following him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Bill bothered his boss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. He told him some idiot woman wanted to buy only half a head of lettuce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Bill turned around.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Bill pointed to the front of the store.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Then Bill saw something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. The woman was right behind him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. “And this nice lady wants to buy the other half,” Bill said.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10. “How to Get Ahead”

The students completed the exercise independently, did a pair, share and compare with a partner to discuss different choices they made in altering the story, and they submitted their renditions, along with their thoughts on the value of sentence combining. This was an attempt at an inductive lesson. According to Weaver (1998) in inductive lessons, “students may be guided to notice grammatical patterns and derive generalizations themselves” (26). Students came to the important conclusion that the sentence variety that resulted from their revision made the story more readable due to the fact there were fewer pauses and less ineffective repetition. Reproduced below is the work of Mike and William, two learners juxtaposed due to their differing thoughts on and abilities in writing.
Mike:

A pudgy woman shuffled up to Bill, a supermarket clerk. The woman asked how much the lettuce was and Bill said $1.00. The woman complained and said that it would spoil before she could eat it all, so she only wanted half. Bill said he couldn’t sell half of a head, but she asked again and demanded to see the manager. Bill rolled his eyes and stalked back to tell his boss, but he didn’t realize the woman was following him. Bill bothered his boss, telling him some idiot woman wanted half a head of lettuce, then turned around and pointed to the front. Then Bill saw something: the woman was behind him. “And this nice lady wants the other half,” Bill said.

This particular sentence combining exercise seemed to be made for Mike, one of the few students in this class who tends to rush through assignments, does the minimal amount of work required, and seems to prefer being told what to do rather than being left to his imagination. Typically, when exploring literature or composition on his own, his efforts fall a bit flat. Part of the rationale for conducting this teacher action research study was to figure out how to motivate Mike and students like him to do the writing I know they are capable of producing.

From his class work, I know that Mike knows his stuff and from his interviews, I know that he is not that interested in using his solid foundation to improve his writing abilities. When asked whether or not my hunch that he is not pushing himself as a writer is correct, Mike sheepishly replied, “Yeah.” When pressed for a reason and asked if he just didn’t like English, Mike simply stated, “Not really. I don’t think I really like any of my classes. I like lunch—I think lunch is my favorite class.” When I am getting this apathetic response from a well behaved, generally successful, eighth grade honors student
from a stable home environment, I ponder and think ahead to the answers I might get from some of my other, more challenging, students. Mike seemed sincerely uninterested and yet his sentence combining proved to be quite effective. What more might I do to engage Mike and other seeming unmotivated students?

At this point in the study, I noticed that William had a solid foundation for writing but, unlike Mike, was very interested in pushing himself to become better at this craft. While there are a few unengaged yet above-average achievers, as compared to the school population, like Mike in the class, there is only one William, a student who has been writing on his own from a young age, has developed a taste for a specific genre of writing (science fiction) and typically goes above and beyond in improving his skills. Once I noticed the differences in Mike and William, I decided to focus on them in an attempt to understand how teaching grammar in the context of writing can help me understand and differentiate for various learners. Many questions popped into my head regarding these two types of writers: What makes one student in a class of honors-level English students stand head and shoulders over the writing abilities of others? Has William been a historically stronger writer? Have Mike and the students like him always approached writing in a disinterested manner? After these thoughts crossed my mind, I immediately began to wonder what shaped their various feelings toward writing.

I chose to include these excerpts by Mike and William because they demonstrate that both students have the understanding and ability to write pieces of semantic sophistication. After reading William’s paragraph, it appears that he and Mike are on similar ground in terms of writing ability; however, why does William take his talents and run with them while Mike uses them to coast?
William:

_A pudgy woman shuffled up to Bill, a clerk at the supermarket. The woman asked about the price of a head of lettuce which Bill said was $1.00. The woman complained saying that the head was too big and would spoil before she ate it unless she could get half the head. Bill said he couldn’t sell half a head, but the woman was persistent on buying it until she demanded to see the store manager. Bill rolled his eyes and stalked back to his boss’s office, not realizing the woman was following him. Bill bothered his boss, telling him an idiot woman wanted to buy half a lettuce head and he turned around at the front of the store. Bill then saw the lady was right behind him. “And this nice lady wants to buy the other half,” Bill said._

In many respects, William is the most naturally gifted writer in the class and has communicated that he is bored by writing assignments such as this one, ones that keep him confined. Here, I notice awkward constructions like, “the woman was persistent on buying it until she demanded to see the store manager.” William also fails to use a comma between the words “lettuce” and “which” in sentence two. During a writing conference, William and I discussed comma use with a nonrestrictive clause, and we discussed the awkward way in which the second sentence read. I was able to have similar meetings with the remaining students in the class. Shortly after meeting with William, he resubmitted the sentences in need of change. At the time, it appeared that William was simply going through the motions of this revision merely because I had asked him to, but he later told me through an interview that he found such one on one attention useful because he could use it to improve upon his personal writings.

_The woman asked about the price of a head of lettuce, which Bill said was $1.00._
Bill said he couldn’t sell half a head, but the woman persisted and eventually demanded to see the store manager.

The fact that I was exploring such constructions with an honors-level class made it fairly easy for me to provide quick and individualized feedback such as this to the students—students were well behaved and self-motivated while I worked with their classmates. Unfortunately meeting one on one with students in my other levels is not always such an easy task—the conferences take longer because the errors are more frequent and the students with whom I am not working need someone to keep them on task as well as offer guidance.

While I initially called this an exercise in sentence combining, it became so much more. Much like Mike and William, the class did not simply join simple sentences to make compound ones; they cut, added, rearranged and used various punctuation to show a sophisticated knowledge of semantics. I did little to elicit such writing; I merely asked a volunteer to read the original piece aloud and prompted students to rework and combine sentences to make it more readable. Did the students recognize, however, what the sentence variety did for this piece of writing? At the conclusion of this lesson, I surveyed the students to see if they noticed any differences in the piece before and after the students reworked the sentences. I administered the survey to all twenty-two students, and while I looked to include all opinions, I have removed those opinions that were quite similar to those already expressed.

**Student Survey 3: Reaction to Sentence Combining**

How did sentence combining impact the story?

Before

...
“Bill” and “woman” were said too much.

The story sounded less thought through.

It was bland.

It was very repetitive.

After

Combining...

made it easier to read.

made more of a story.

made it less choppy.

made it flow much nicer.

changed the tone and made the story more enjoyable for reading.

Instead of repeating their names, in sentence combining you can refer to them as he or she.

The students gained the insight that I intended from the sentence combining (reworking) activities; however, I was left to ponder whether or not these lessons would carry over to future writing experiences. I was especially concerned with those students who tended to rush through writing assignments of no interest to them or writing assignments in general—would they, specifically, recall the impact of sentence variety on this story and employ the same complexity in their own work? I was not expecting things to change overnight and had planned to work more fully in the area of sentence variety before I was smacked in the face with the constraints of a curriculum map, specifically pronouns.
Finally, my experiences with “How to Get Ahead” taught me that the students in this class are capable of advanced sentences structures. While I did not really teach them anything new through this exercise, I did feel success in encouraging them to utilize the strengths within them in order to better a piece of writing. Was this lesson inductive in that the students were guided to make generalizations? Yes. Was this lesson effective in encouraging and allowing for the implementation of such skills in their own work? No. Looking back, I would have liked to engage the students in such activities with their own writing—this is something I will make time for in the future.

**Pronouns**

It was at this point in the study that I felt a bit pressed for time—I took a look at the curriculum map and thought “Oh no!” after realizing that I had to squeeze in pronoun and antecedent agree sometime before Thanksgiving break. The previous sentence combining (reworking) activity took a bit longer than expected, but it taught me the simple truth that it takes time to teach grammar this new way, as part of the writing process.

Over the next three weeks, I spent a good deal of time covering the ins and outs of eight different types of pronouns: subject, object, possessive, intensive, relative, reflexive, demonstrative, and indefinite. Prior to the start of the 2008-2009 school year, the eighth grade English teachers decided that there were issues amongst our students regarding pronoun usage and we agreed to address them as one of our major grammar components. Originally, I had set out to remedy problems the English department had historically seen in this area, issues with pronoun and antecedent agreement; instead, I got carried away in an attempt to cover all things pronoun. I simply could not imagine
addressing one pronoun and not another. How did it turn into this? Because it felt good—it felt comfortable.

This school year brought many new things into my classroom: new literature and writing books, a completely reworked curriculum guide, and a sense of urgency for throwing myself into the teaching of grammar in the context of writing—not just for my students but for the completion of my master of education degree. Yes, in theory the latter should have been all about the students; but, in reality, I needed a diploma. All of the above brought on a sense of disorganization and unfamiliarity to which I was not accustomed. Almost everything I did in the classroom was new, both in literature and in writing. To be cliché, I was treading water. Perhaps because I was too naïve to question myself at the time, I cannot even remember feeling this way as a student teacher or a first year teacher over eight years ago. I let pronouns take me to a safe, familiar place while I caught my breath.

While the teaching of pronouns broke up the “grammar in the context of writing” flow that I had going with sentence variety and vivid words, I attempted to review pronouns in as “natural” a context as possible while covering the areas agreed upon by the department. I defined “natural” as allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge of pronouns by using them in the creation of original writing.

Despite the poor content, it is with this subject matter that I established a routine for the extended minilesson. I taught pronouns in clusters over the course of three weeks: subject, object, and possessive pronouns were addressed first; next, demonstrative, intensive, reflexive, and relative pronouns were addressed; finally, indefinite pronouns. Extended minilessons began with a period of explanation and practice. After using
textbook definitions and examples from Write Source to explicate the functions and examples of each type of pronoun, the students completed textbook exercises to demonstrate a basic understanding of the material. In keeping with the spirit of the extended minilesson, it seemed appropriate to ask the students to provide a more meaningful sample from which I could judge their “mastery” of pronouns. Sadly, “mastery” was thought of as the ability to use, underline, and label a given pronoun in the context of a forced writing exercise.

Following each pronoun lesson, I initiated some type of formative assessment. After the lessons on subject, object, and possessive pronouns, the students created original sentences on sentence strips. After the lessons on demonstrative, intensive, reflexive, and relative pronouns, the students worked collaboratively on a story or related sentences. Finally, after learning indefinite pronouns, the students created an original poem or short story using all eight types of pronouns we had studied—this acted as a summative piece.

For the first extended formative assessment, the students wrote an original sentence containing either a subject or object pronoun and a possessive pronoun; they also underlined and identified each type of pronoun. To edit, the students did a pair and share activity with their seat partners before handing the strips to be checked. At the time, I was happy to discover that very few errors were made in this formative assessment.
Figure 11. Pronoun Sentence Strips—Correct
As I look back on this activity, I realize that I assessed the students according to whether or not they could underline and label a pronoun, instead of correct pronoun usage, something all of them did well. This “labeling” was clearly a step in the wrong direction. Also, the students had no difficulty in using subject, object, and possessive pronouns to begin, so this instructional focus was a waste of time. Although I do not plan to teach this particular material in the future, an additional lesson in determining what students know before deciding what to teach finally resonated. While identifying student strengths and weaknesses in order to drive the curriculum can be initially time consuming, I feel that it will ultimately help me to make better use of valuable time.
The next extended formative assessment required students to work in groups of two or three to create either themed sentences or a short story using the seven types of pronouns we had studied thus far: subject, object, possessive, demonstrative, relative, and reflexive. All of the groups ended up writing themed sentences on subjects such as sports, Halloween, and the upcoming presidential election. The students wrote the sentences on poster-sized paper, hung the paper in the classroom and in the hallway, and went from poster to poster checking one another’s work—correcting and commenting where necessary.

![Pronoun Poster](image)

*Figure 13. Pronoun Poster*

In the example above, you can see that sentence one is crossed out and rewritten. As the groups circulated and studied the posters, several students pointed out that this “Halloween” group did not use “that” in a demonstrative manner. A few other groups had
issue with this as well, their peers pointed it out, and it was corrected. The meaning of the sentence did not change but type of pronoun within it did. Clearly, I had gone off track because, as a teacher of writing, I should have been pleased that the students were able to convey an intended meaning to the reader, not that they could label a specific type of pronoun.

The initial purpose of my lessons on pronouns was to teach pronoun and antecedent agreement; however, I wandered off track by adding nonessential material to this unit and, through my assessments, I had failed to create authentic writing situations. After some reflection, I believed that in order to make the learning experience real and concrete, I might simply look to address these agreement issues as they occurred within student writing; otherwise the connections might be forced and meaningless and no real learning would take place. Also, this exercise again raised questions about whether or not I truly cared if a student could properly label types of pronouns. I did not and I do not. What I care about is that students can write in a fluent manner. Yet, I continued onto the summative piece in order to give both my students and myself a sense of accomplishment and closure.

Finally, as a summative assessment piece, the students independently wrote either a poem or short story on a topic of their choice. This piece was to include all eight types of pronouns we had discussed over the previous few weeks: subject, object, possessive, intensive, relative, reflexive, demonstrative, and indefinite. Each pronoun was to be appropriately labeled. I scored the writing assignment out of forty points, with each correctly used pronoun worth five points. The charts below show the number of students earning a given score and the types of pronouns labeled incorrectly.
In analyzing the pronoun assessment, I found that the majority of the students were proficient in their “mastery” of pronouns—those who scored poorly did not use the pronouns incorrectly but instead labeled them improperly. Once I had completed all of this, I stopped and considered the fact that I had wasted a great deal of time. In each of the exercises mentioned above, I had graded students on their ability to use, underline, and properly identify each type of pronoun, and inauthentic and stifling practice. Why had I reverted to assessing the students based on the ability to identify pronoun types rather than the ability use each correctly—isn’t that what matters?

Once I got started with the teaching of pronouns, I could not stop. I had placed myself within the comfort of a former curriculum, and it felt nice. As mentioned earlier, grammar had become a means for establishing my authoritative role in the classroom—without it I had felt a loss of control and therefore a loss of confidence. The pronoun activities restored this sense of order, but the relief was short-lived because I eventually returned to consider the effectiveness in improving student writing through a natural and usable process. The research, the conversations with colleagues, my grammar school writing experiences, and the positive responses of my students all came together to remind me of this purpose and helped push through this initial period of uncertainty. I
had to come to understand that, although it would be uncomfortable a first, I could not consider myself a good practitioner unless I did what was best for the advancement of my students.

After reviewing this material well after the pronoun unit had come and gone, I noticed that the students included stylistic components (dialogue, vivid word choice, figurative language, and sentence variety) in their poems and stories that we had addressed earlier in the year. It was reassuring to know that these skills were not learned and forgotten, but had rather become part of a writing toolkit. The examples below were pulled from the “pronoun” stories and poems of the students because they represented good writing—good writing that I had overlooked because I had reverted to the old ways of skill and drill grammar.

**Zelia: Dialogue**

“Aww, man,” he said.
“Don’t worry,” his other brother Nick said, “You can wear my shirt.”
“Thanks bro, I owe you one.”

**William: Dialogue**

“Shim Rey!” she exclaimed as we walked into the chamber. “I’m sorry to call you so late into the night, but the General has commanded you two to explore an abandoned research facility of the Earth Alliance!” We looked at each other and in unison replied, “Of course Captain.” She smiled, “Very well. The coordinates have already been supplied in your hard drives. Follow them exactly!”

**Bella: Dialogue and End Rhyme**

She went to go back inside,

*But the door wouldn’t budge.*
She left the key inside,
She cried out, “Oh Fudge.”

**Paco: Metaphor**
I walk out onto the green blanket, hoping for that shot.

**Lilly: Figure of Speech**

*That was the last straw for me!*

**Lilly: Vivid Verbs**

*That made her so angry that she stomped up the stairs and forgot all about the park.*

**Joe: Vivid Verbs**

*I couldn’t get away from the screaming, so I cranked my ipod all the way up and tried to black them out.*

**Lola: Vivid Verbs**

*Every time Emily takes her dog for a walk she meanders past the show store and is reminded that she will never be able to afford those beautiful red flats in the store window.*

It is apparent that the students in this class can write, yet, rather than encouraging them to explore and build upon these talents and interests, I stifled them through the labeling of pronouns. Perhaps those who had an interest in writing prior to this will rebound, but I fear for those who did not.

While the English department had looked to remedy the problem of pronoun/antecedent agreement, I never checked to find if this was a problem for this particular group of students. I should have done so and plan to do so next year; however, at this point I am not sure if it would be best to address such issues as they arise or to develop an authentic assessment to determine if issues exist and then address them in a holistic manner. Additionally, I got carried away with this process. Once I taught one type of pronoun, I just kept going on to the next and to the next because it was to what I had become accustomed. For this, I cannot blame the chaos of new textbooks and a new
curriculum. I can only blame myself for not taking the time to reflect on what I was doing and the impact it was having on my students.

Other than a sense of self-understanding of things done wrong and remedies to consider for next year, some practices within the confines of the pronoun unit worked. The format of the extended minilesson was an effective method of presenting unfamiliar material to the students. It provided a timely explanation followed by various opportunities for practice and mastery. The extended practice exercises that accompanied the explanation and basic practice allowed for student choice and were small enough for the teacher to provide almost immediate feedback. The importance of student choice is one final lesson that resonates as I attempt to crystallize the insights gained during the teaching of pronouns and the reflection thereafter. In the pre-study survey detailed in Part 1 of this narrative, students said they like to write about what they want; therefore, it is logical to encourage this freedom when looking to assess a given grammatical or stylistic concept?

**The Informative Essay**

In getting back to the purpose behind this part of the study, the students each wrote a five-paragraph essay that explained their cultural, religious, and family customs. While this exercise does not directly relate to the topic of teaching grammar in the context of writing, it does speak to an understanding gained throughout this action-research process, the idea that writing will be of a higher quality when students have interest and choice in its creation. The piece also became powerful in that it stimulated meaningful conversation and action.
Dilg (1997) speaks to the fact that today’s society is still largely segregated and that students from different cultural backgrounds rarely have the chance to engage in meaningful conversation. While students are exposed to writers from various cultures, I feel that it is also important for them to find out more about their own traditions as well as those of their classmates. My classroom consists of students from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. I can see that these students have formed smaller communities within the larger school community. Many of these students will never have a chance to engage in deep cultural conversations unless we make it happen.

In an attempt to make writing meaningful to themselves and others, I asked students to write a five-paragraph informative essay on their cultural, religious, and/or family customs. The majority of this study focused on using stylistic tools to build upon strengths and make writing more enjoyable for both the writer and the reader; this essay is a case in which the subject matter makes the writing stronger. Students were interested in the topic because it allowed them to share pieces of themselves and their families with others.

There are many proud strong ethnic communities within our school community and this essay became the jumping off point for a showcasing of cultural and religious pride. Even students who considered themselves “culturally generic” explored and share their traditions, often finding that their families weren’t as boring as they initially thought. Another aspect of this piece that interested students was the fact that it was shared with peers and teachers through a multicultural celebration.

After reading the informative essays, I asked students to help me use them to plan a multicultural celebration for our team of students. Students in all five of my classes
attended and helped organize this celebration; the invitation was extended to parents as well. Parents made more than enough food and desserts to accommodate the approximately 120 students on the team. A cultural scavenger hunt was set up in my room using clues from student essays and artifacts brought in from home. In another room, the students completed a “How Well Do You Know Your Classmates” quiz that focused on the cultural, religious, and family traditions of the students. Finally, they learned of the history in our school community.

This celebration was a learning experience that demonstrated how writing can move off the page and into action, helped foster an appreciation for various cultures, and even instilled a sense of team pride within the students. As Bob put it, “I liked multicultural day because of all of the activities but also because it was something that our team worked together to make.”

In assessing the informative essay, I did not require students to demonstrate a mastery of sentence variety because, due to the pronoun pitstop, I felt as though we did not spend enough time on these skills. I simply judged this piece according to the Middle School Rubric for Informative Writing. Next year, I hope to help students improve the stylistic aspects of their essays through sentence variety while continuing the process of cultural exploration.

### Rubric for Informative Writing
(Adapted from PSSA Informational Scoring Guideline & Six-Traits of Writing)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>4 - The essay is informative with a clear focus.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 - The focus on the essay needs to be clearer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 - The topic needs to be narrowed or expanded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 - A new topic is needed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>4 - The essay is informative with specific details.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 - More specific details are needed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 14: Rubric for Informative Writing

**Part III: Creative Punctuation in the Persuasive Essay**

One goal in preparing students to write the persuasive essay was to invite them to experiment with variety and tone through the use of several types of punctuation: dashes, ellipses, and italics. The students had worked on using vivid language as well as sentence variety within the context of the previous two writing assignments and the thought behind teaching them to play with punctuation was to add another set of tools to their grammatical repertoire. Something as superficially simple as punctuation can bring a lot
to a piece of writing—greater detail, emphasis, natural speech patterns, and meaningful pauses.

The summative assessment piece at the conclusion of this unit required each student to write a five-paragraph persuasive essay on a current, controversial topic of his or her choice. The emotion and tone that such punctuation might lend to a piece of writing are a natural fit for the persuasive essay in that they can enhance the convincing nature of the language...add detail, emphasis, and dramatic pauses. In hoping to uphold Ehrenworth’s (2003) philosophy toward student interest levels and conceptual understanding, the driving thoughts behind this unit were that the students would be passionate about their topics and that the nuances created by dashes, ellipses, and italics would help them to communicate their feelings more effectively.

In an attempt to make up for lost time in the previous informative unit, I first gave students the opportunity to explore appositives and semicolons. I considered appositives an appropriate tool for adding greater detail to work and offered semicolons as another sentence combining mechanism as well as one for adding detail.

Within the context of this unit, I allowed myself to experiment with the inductive lessons championed by Constance Weaver (1998), who believes that learning can sometimes be more meaningful when students are led to deduce grammatical concepts rather than receiving them transmitted from the teacher. I found that inductive lessons with clear elements of creativity and playfulness as well as grammatical foundations seemed to lead to a more authentic and enjoyable grasp of concepts. In determining functions on their own and being given the freedom to explore personal interests, the
grammatical tools practiced through the inductive lessons easily made their way into the larger piece of writing, the persuasive essay.

We explored a variety of inductive lessons on punctuation over a five-week period, and all were all set up in a similar manner. First, I provided the students sentences using the punctuation on which we were focusing. From these sentences, they determined the purpose of the punctuation and elaborated by considering the feeling it added to the sentence. Finally, the students created their own sentences using the same type of punctuation and shared them with a partner and sometimes the class. The following is a sample sentence I provided to help students determine how they might use italics effectively in their own writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“You are not allowed to go out past dark,” Julia said to her young son.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the purpose of the italics in the above sentence?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What feeling does it add to the sentence?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create your own sentence by modeling the one above.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 15. Inductive Lesson: Italics*

Something as simple as allowing students to write sentences on topics of their choice was successful and allowed their personalities to shine. Jerry almost always attempted to be funny; Lola, Lilly, and Bella typically wrote with sensitivity and detailed the feelings of their subjects; William continued to explore his interest in science fiction; and Mike continued to write just enough to get by, his sentences almost always a mirror to the original. The students also enjoyed sharing their sentences (and personalities) with their seat partners.
Additional Formative Assessment: Exit Cards

Starting with the dash, students revisited each form of punctuation using exit slips later in the week. I began this activity with the dash after hearing positive feedback on the technique from colleagues who attended a common formative assessment workshop led by Dr. Connie Kamm of The Leadership and Learning Center. Because of the previous inductive lessons on appositives and semicolons, the students had become accustomed to exploring and learning new grammatical techniques at the beginning of the week. Adding another step to this process fit in well with the organization of the week as well as the overall goal to learn within the context of writing. It made sense to provide extended writing practice on various punctuation techniques, especially as students encountered new devices like the semicolon and ellipses.

While the minilesson on vivid words was taught while students were in the process of revising their personal narratives, I decided to practice the creative punctuation techniques prior to the start of the extended writing assignment because they were techniques with which many of the students did not have previous experience. Now that a foundation has been established, I can help students enhance the skills addressed throughout the year in the context of future writing processes, such as in the research paper and the end of the year writing reflection. I feel that rather than throwing something new at them for these writing assignments, the time can be better-spent achieving mastery over the tools already addressed. The idea behind this practice, and the year as a whole, is that students will leave my class with a few powerful writing tools in their belt.

In addition to providing extended practice and feedback, the note card exit slips were valuable, taking little time to provide students an opportunity to engage in
additional writing. The activity took approximately five minutes from the conclusion of class on one day and about ten minutes from the start of the next. Also, not only did these activities fit in well with the inductive practices I had established over the previous two weeks, but they also fit into the practice of completing warm ups at the start of class. The exit card activities actually made warm ups more meaningful because they were student produced, and after the first round of exit cards, the students made kind of an informal competition of seeing whose sentence would land on the board.

To begin the exit card practice, I gave each student a note card on which he or she wrote a sentence using the desired technique (dash, ellipsis, italics). Students gave me the cards at the end of the period, and I reviewed and commented on them that evening. The students returned the cards upon entered class the following day; the students with stars or stickers on their cards went to the board to share their sentences.

During this study of creative punctuation, we focused on the dash. It was decided that exit cards would be used to provide additional practice of the skill as well as provide me with formative feedback. The exit cards were completed at the conclusion of class on Thursday. On Friday, prior to the start of class, I stood in the doorway and handed back the note cards from the previous day. I asked William, Lilly, and Esperanza to write their examples on the board. I also had directions for the entire class—to copy the sentences and explain the impact the dashes had on each of the sentences. The students did this work in their journals, the place where they typically write warm ups and more extended reader response entries.
About five minutes after the bell had rung, we discussed the sentences. William read, “We must stand tall and face the true evil of the world—the Logos—that cherish our misfortune.”

As is typical, William attempted to annoy Mika and called on him to explain the impact of the dashes. Mika said, “It takes a break and tells us who is evil.”

“OK, good, what other grammatical structure does this remind us of?” I asked. Bob’s had shot up and he said, “Appositives.”

Next, Lilly read her sentence, “None of us were allowed to go skiing—all because my mother thought it was too cold outside.” She then called on Lola to explain the purpose of the dash.

Lola said, “The dash gives more information about what happened. It helps tell why the kids couldn’t go skiing.”

We then moved on and Esperanza read the final sentence, “No—what—wait a second—you can’t do that!”

Esperanza called on Tony, who simply said, “They break up someone talking.”

I was surprised that so many students used dashes this way in the note card assignment because I had not required them to do so. Gauging from this activity, the students seemed knowledgeable about the various uses for dashes and comfortable experimenting with them. It is noteworthy to mention that students have not yet made a distinction between that and who and do not realize that none is singular.

As we continued on our exploration of punctuation, students next practiced using the ellipsis. At the start of the next class, I stood in the doorway, handed back the cards, and asked Nick and Kevin to write their sentences on the board. The sentences were up
by the time the bell rang, and I asked for volunteers to read them: “Ok, Nick and Kevin
have written their sentences from yesterday. Who wants to read Nick’s—paying attention
to how it should be spoken?”

Most students raised their hands and I called on Bella, who scrunched up her nose
and said, “Gross…that dude just ate a bug.”

The look on her face and the pause in the sentence let me know that Bella knew
the intended meaning of the ellipsis.

Next, I called on Mika to read Kevin’s sentence, which he grudgingly agreed to
do, pausing in all the right places, “‘No…I never said I couldn’t; I said I wouldn’t,’ said
the man weakly.” This was a good opportunity to bring attention to the fact that Mika
paused after couldn’t.

I asked the students, “Why did Mika pause not only after no but also after
couldn’t?”

Bob responded, “Because there is a semicolon.”

I nodded and asked, “If you think the two clauses being separated by the
semicolon can stand alone, raise your hand.”

All students raise their hands. I then asked, “What other piece of punctuation
could be used here instead of the semicolon?”

Mike looked at me and blurted out, “A period.”

This brief review suggested to me that the students were doing well with
understanding how to use both the ellipsis and the semicolon.

The final punctuation explored was italics. In keeping with employing exit cards
as additional opportunity for practice and formative assessment, the students completed
them at the end of the next class for discussion at the beginning of the following class period. As the students entered, I stood in the doorway and handed back the note cards from the day before. I asked Lola and Jerry to write theirs on the board so they could be discussed as a warm up.

Lola read, “‘I am going to the movies and you can’t stop me,’ the rebellious girl shouted to her mother on her way out the door.”

I asked the class, “What does this make you picture?”

Zelia replied, “It makes you think that the girl is really mad at her mother.”

“Ok, good. Now what do the italics add to the sentence?”

Joe raised his hand and said in a sassy way, “Attitude.”

Next, I asked Apple to read Jerry’s sentence: “It looks like you are the father of my sixteen-month-old child.”

“So Jerry, How do you think this sentence should be read?

Jerry responded in an announcer-like voice: “It looks like you are the father of my sixteen-month-old child.”

“I have a feeling where you are coming from with this, but why don’t you explain. How did you come up with this sentence?”

“Well, I was thinking about Maury and how he always has those women on who don’t know the father of their babies. Maury always announces, you are the father of this child or you are not the father of this child.”

I was pleased to see that Jerry noticed the semantic patterns of a television personality and transferred it to his own writing to create the effect he desired.
The note card activities worked as both effective closings and opening for class. The students practiced a skill, got timely feedback, were confident to share with one another because they had that feedback, and all of this took no more than fifteen minutes over two days. The activities were beneficial for me because they provided a sense that students were ready to move on to the next level—examining these grammatical practices in a piece of literature and using them in their own writing.

**Creative Punctuation in The Persuasive Essay**

Prior to starting to write the persuasive essay, the students read the sample persuasive essay in *Write Source*, the grammar and writing textbook and analyzed the impact of punctuation in sentences taken from Richard Wright’s “The Kitten.” I had planned to read and discuss all of this narrative with the class but decided instead to examine excerpts. In Part 1 of the lesson (see Figure. 16), I provided students with a punctuation-free passage from the story. After placing this on the overhead, the students worked together to punctuate it as they saw fit. As we worked through five sentences taken from the story, we learned and discussed how Wright punctuated his tale and discussed his use of the dash, the ellipsis, italics, the semicolon, and commas. This exercise also provided students an additional opportunity to play with punctuation (see Figure. 16).

**Part 1:** What would writing be like without punctuation? Read the following excerpt from “The Kitten” without punctuation. Then put punctuation where you think it belongs.

the absence of green growing things made the city seem dead living space for the four of us my mother my brother my father and me was a kitchen and a bedroom in the front and rear were paved areas in which my brother and I could play but for days I was afraid to
go into the strange city streets alone

**Part 2: Let’s read sentences with creative punctuation choices.**

2. Oh yes…He had said to kill the kitten and I would kill it!

   ➢ How is the ellipsis used? What effect is the author trying to achieve?

   ➢ How does the exclamation point help the reader?

   ➢ Write a creative sentence of your own using an ellipsis.

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*Figure 16: Creative Punctuation in “The Kitten”*

Although “The Kitten” is a narrative rather than a work of creative nonfiction, it helped students to see powerful punctuation in action. The students simply needed to be made aware that the narrative was not the type of writing they were about to embark upon—a distinction that was easily understood. Next, it was time to move on to a greater understanding of the persuasive essay, a task made easier with this year’s new textbook, Write Source.

With the narrative and informative pieces, I provided topics to the students. The purpose of the narrative was to tell about a single memorable event, and the informative essay explained the family and cultural traditions of each student. With the previous assignments the students had to inform and entertain, but now they had to inform, entertain, and convince.
At this point in the year, the five-paragraph essay, a good foundation for organization and content as well as the preferred form of the PSSA, had become old hat to the students. They knew what was required in the opening paragraph, the body paragraphs, and the conclusion; however, choosing an issue of importance to them and defending that position was something with which they had limited experience. Write Source was invaluable in helping the students choose topics and, through the sample persuasive essay, “Open Study Halls” the students understood the nuances of presenting and defending a position.

When writing the persuasive essay the students used two of the five pieces of punctuation practiced in the previous weeks. They also followed the guidelines put forth in our school’s Rubric for Persuasive Writing (see Figure. 17). I was impressed not only by the sentence variety within the persuasive essays but also by the content of the essays. The students wrote about a topic of their choice as long as it was current and able to be argued from at least two sides. I received well-written essays on a variety of topics, including starting school later, spending money during an economic recession, homework limitations, more school field trips, standardized testing in schools, required athletic programs in schools, United States involvement in foreign affairs, healthier school lunches, and gum chewing, to name just a few. While the essays varied in seriousness, they were, for the most part, well-written and infused with student voice, created in part through the students’ conscious use of the constructions we had examined. The sentence variety and punctuation choices definitely impacted the essays in a positive manner. Finally, it is important to note that the majority of the students in the class did not simply
use the two types of punctuation and call it a day—most experimented with several or even all of the pieces we had covered.

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**Rubric for Persuasive Writing**  
(Adapted from *PSSA Persuasive Scoring Guideline & Six-Traits of Writing*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Conventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Focus** | 4: The essay has a clear position or opinion statement.  
3: The position statement is clear.  
2: The position statement is unclear.  
1: A new position statement is needed. | 4: Persuasive reasons support the writer's position.  
3: More persuasive reasons are needed.  
2: Persuasive reasons are needed.  
1: New reasons and details are needed. | 4: The beginning contains the position statement. The middle provides clear support. The ending reinforces the position.  
3: The beginning contains the position statement. The middle provides support. The ending needs work.  
2: The beginning has a position statement. The middle and ending need more work.  
1: The organization is unclear and incomplete. The reader is easily lost. | 4: The writer’s voice is confident and helps persuade the reader.  
- Precise words create a clear message to engage and persuade the audience.  
- The sentences flow smoothly, and people will enjoy reading the variety of sentences.  
3: The writer’s voice is confident. It needs to persuade the reader.  
- Accurate words create a message. More persuasive words are needed.  
- Varied sentence beginnings are used. Sentence variety would make the essay more interesting to read.  
2: The writer’s voice needs to be more confident and persuade the reader.  
- More precise and accurate words are needed to create a clear message.  
- Most sentences begin the same way. Most of the sentences are simple. Compound and complex sentences are needed.  
1: The writer has not considered voice.  
- The words do not create a clear message.  
- Sentence fluency has not been established. Ideas do not flow smoothly. | 4: The essay is free of errors.  
3: Grammar and punctuation errors are seen in a few sentences. They distract the reader in those areas. |
2. Frequent errors make the essay difficult to read.
1. Nearly every sentence contains errors.

**Figure 17. Rubric for Persuasive Writing**

In her defense of school field trips, Zelia used appositives to explain their educational value, “Museums and historic sites, very good sources of information, are two of the many places you can go on a field trip.” In promoting Jordan Sonneblick’s *Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie*, Esperanza used the semicolon to elaborate on the book’s readability, “The vocabulary in this novel is very understandable; no matter what level of reading a student is on, he or she can grasp the concept of the story and enjoy it.”

Students used the dash to show breaks in sentences and for emphasis. Advocating for school uniforms, Lola wrote, “Taking away at least one worry—like what to wear to school everyday—could help a person feel less stressed and more worry free.” Bob used the dash to show a break in the sentence and to add power to the thesis statement in his cleverly titled “Schoolhouse Rock.” He stated, “This and many other problems could be solved with one simple solution—students should be allowed to listen to music in school.” The students did not use it show interruption in speech, which is understandable due to the nature if the assignment. In this sense, it would be beneficial when teaching the writing of dialogue as part of the personal narrative.

When teaching the ellipsis, I did not present students with examples in which words were omitted because I felt this would be more appropriate in the teaching of the research paper. Historically, several students each year approach me about tweaking quotes for length and integral detail, so it seems like a natural fit within the context of that unit. I did teach them to use this punctuation to show pause, however, and Paco used the ellipsis to show dramatic pause in his essay supporting healthier eating habits.
amongst Americans: “America…land of the fast food industry and home of the Whopper.”

Finally, the students demonstrated an understanding of the purpose and usage of italics within the context of the persuasive essay. Italics, as in Nick’s essay on the use of ipods in school, were employed to show a subtle humor, “If we were listening to an ipod, we would not talk (as much).” Apple, instead, used italics to emphasize the negative impacts of standardized testing, “Standardized testing does not have the positive effect on school that the government thinks.” Kevin used them to draw attention to a responsibility of schools that many people might not have considered, “Isn’t school supposed to help students in all three aspects: physically, mentally, and socially?” Again, using italics for other purposes such as in titles or with scientific or foreign words would be better suited within the research unit, so they were not addressed here.

As usual, I was struck by the writing of both William and Mike—William, for his stylistic talents and Mike for his knack of doing just enough to get by. It was refreshing to read William’s essay on United States involvement in foreign affairs, since it was a topic he had selected and one that provided me with a deeper understanding of his abilities. William also writes science fiction when given the opportunity to choose his topic, and I had read a great deal of his work throughout the course of this study.

In order to more deeply understand the reasons behind William’s interest in writing, I interviewed him. The following account is a first person narrative constructed from that interview:

From a young age, my mother would take me into her library and read to me. The library is a little smaller than this classroom and is just cluttered with books—it is
always a mess but in a good, adventurous way. I would take the stories she read to me and expand upon them. At that point, I was interested in fantasy—like fairy tales. I added things to the fairy tales that I wanted to see happen. I would draw pictures to go along with the stories and make books. A few years ago, I became interested in Anime and science fiction, which is why I write a lot of science fiction.

I asked William if, over the course of the year, we had done anything in class to help him improve his writing. I also reminded William of how he stated at the start of the year that he found my topics boring and unimaginative. He continued

Well, sometimes when we say that we don’t like something, it isn’t always true. We just say it because we don’t feel like doing the work. I actually think the essays we did in class forced me to focus in my creative writing; like sometimes I get carried away and go off topic but it helped me to cut out the unnecessary stuff that makes people lose interest. It also helped me to add important details, things to make my stories more descriptive.

Throughout the year, I had felt that I was failing William, that I had nothing to offer him. The understanding that he had made connections between the writing we did in class and his personal writing left me with a feeling of professional satisfaction.

While William let the information pour of him in our brief interview, it was a tad more difficult attempting to learn more from Mike. When he saw that William had been interviewed before him he stated, “So, he is the good writer and I am the bad writer.” I explained that I was interviewing him because it seemed to me that he did not have much
of an interest in writing while William considered writing one of his hobbies. He agreed and provided some additional insight into this situation.

Mike left me at a bit of a loss. In our interview, he stated that there was really nothing I could do to increase his interest in writing. When asked if he enjoyed writing, he replied, “Not really.” When asked if he liked school the answer was the same. When prodded to consider his favorite class, Mike thought for a bit and coyly responded, “Lunch.” If this was a student like Jerry who was known for clowning around in class and showed a general disinterest in school, I would have been less surprised. However, this was Mike, a student who earned A’s and high B’s in all of his classes, had parents who were involved in his schooling and extra-curricular activities, and was a general pleasure to have in class. He does well in school but at the same time does not have much of an interest in it. If there was nothing I could do to increase his interest in school and writing, how was I to reach the plethora of students in my classes who were at a greater disadvantage than Mike? Maybe for some students the light will never come on, maybe for some, as I suspect with Mike, it will turn on at a later stage in his education. Whatever the case, I must do my best to bring out the thinker and writer within my students. As to whether they take advantage of it now, later or, never—maybe these are decisions I simply cannot control.

Within the unit on persuasive writing, I came to some valuable new understandings. First, I had fallen into a pattern with the way in which I presented material. I had been an almost constant prescriber to the minilesson, teacher-led discussions, to individual seatwork, and to occasional group work. These situations often involved me feeding material to the students and provided them little time for personal
reflection or contact with their peers. The inductive lessons in this unit involved students coming to their own understandings, sharing these understandings with one another, and having an overall greater involvement in the learning process. I noticed a positive difference in their interest levels, willingness to participate, and comprehension of the material. It was not always easy or familiar to lead the class in this manner, and there was some uncertainty on my part at time, but based on the results, I will use this approach in the future.

One additional understanding to which I came was the idea that some students are interested in school and some are not. This idea is simple, but as a teacher we always think that we can be dynamic and interesting and truly change the way in which some students view school or a particular aspect of it. While students seem to enjoy my class, I am not naïve enough to think there aren’t places they would rather be. What can I do to turn these students around? Maybe nothing—but that doesn’t mean I should stop trying. I know that I need to approach them with the same gusto and enthusiasm with which I approach the most interested and absorbed learners.

**METHODS OF ANALYSIS**

The purpose in collecting data is so that it can be analyzed in order to understand student learners and the effectiveness of teaching strategies. According to Hubbard & Power (2003) data analysis is “the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the data” so that we can understand the learning taking place in the classroom. However, the data collected throughout the action-research process can be overwhelming and, like Arhar (2001), I found that the task of analyzing data became possible only when I followed Bogdin and Biklen's prescribed means of organization—a process of reading
and re-reading to identify patterns in the data, followed by a further analysis to find commonalities, or themes, within these patterns.

My field log contained a retelling of classroom lessons, student work, survey results, and student interviews. I studied my field log weekly and frequently found myself revisiting previously analyzed material in order to shed light on new data or because the analysis of new data led me to a greater understanding of past data. This is a process that seems to have no finite end. I discussed findings with my professor, research partner, and colleagues in the English department. In the recording of classroom occurrences, it was important to make a distinction between what I truly saw and heard and what I felt. This was integral in allowing me to capture the reality of a given situation and enabling me to recreate the emotions of an experience.

As per the directive of Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul (1991), the field log was coded (in the margins) according to patterns found in the data; as the study progressed and new truths were uncovered, it was updated. A running list of codes and applicable page numbers was kept at the front of the log. A deeper step in the analysis of data occurred when I looked for patterns within the patterns and organized my codes according to thematic bins. Once the bins were created, I developed theme statements that encapsulated the major truths uncovered through the study. These theme statements were then more fully analyzed through my findings section and led me to conclusions about the future teaching of grammar in the context of writing.

Memo Analysis
During the course of this study, several types of memos were used to analyze data and reflect upon my teaching practices. First, data was analyzed through reflective memos studying educational theorists John Dewey (1938), Paulo Freire (1970), Lev Vygotsky (1978), and Lisa Delpit and Joanne Kilgour Dowdy (2002). After reading the work of these theorists, I analyzed their words, drawing connections between theory and the situations playing out in my classroom.

The next type of memo was a mid-study data assessment that reflected on work had been completed at that point in the study. This memo detailed work that had been accomplished and verbalized insights gained from this work, set a framework for future activities, and analyzed questions and sub-questions that arose from student feedback and collected work.

Finally, the most personally rewarding memo for this study analyzed figurative language in the field log. Although most of the figurative language in this memo came from my own pen, this exercise threw me into examining the nuanced personalities developing within my students’ writing. This was invaluable because it was the first time that I really had a chance to sit back, relax, and enjoy student writing within the context of this study—it was a wake up call that I needed to do this more often. It was through this memo that I first began to form an individualized, specific picture of the students as writers. Continuing this analysis in future practice, will allow me to determine the strengths and needs of my students so that I can effectively plan instruction. I do not want to misuse time by focusing on skills already mastered nor do I want to overlook areas that need attention.

**Surveys and Interviews**
I conducted five surveys throughout the course of the study: a pre-study survey on preconceived thoughts on grammar and writing, exit surveys on the narrative, informative, and persuasive units, and finally, a post-survey on grammar and writing. I conducted only two brief interviews—one with a high achieving student and one with an average student. Like other data collected, the surveys and interviews were coded according to pattern and were then used, through bins and theme statements, to uncover truths about my teaching practices as well as a greater understanding of student writers.

**Student Work**

For small assignments, such as white board or note card checks for understanding, I initially divided my comments into correct and incorrect and then coded data according to the skill being practiced. However, I later went back to code and bin these according to the manner in which the material was taught and according to the sophistication of skills within the writing.

When analyzing larger assignments such as poems, short stories and student essays, I first assessed according to the appropriate Pennsylvania rubric—narrative, informative, or persuasive. I then went back to peruse the essay and coded according to the techniques addressed within the context of that unit. For example, sensory words in the personal narrative, sentence variety in the informative essay, and sentence variety and creative punctuation in the persuasive essay. Not only did I consider the material taught throughout the coding and binning process, but I also looked at the successes and pitfalls I had in the presentation of the material. This was important to me as a practitioner in that I wanted to consider not just the validity of what was being taught but also the effectiveness with which it was taught. All work was eventually placed into thematic bins.
that helped me to more fully analyze the material taught, the manner in which it was taught, and the types of learners I was trying to reach (see *Figure 18: Codes and Bins; Theme Statements*).

### Codes and Bins

Research Question: What are the observed and reported experiences when grammar is taught, in a variety of ways, as part of the writing process?

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<th>1. What to teach?</th>
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<td>- Formative Assessment</td>
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<th>5. Incidental Lesson</th>
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<th>6. Summative Assessments</th>
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<td>- Sensory Words (Culmination of Inductive Lessons: Sensory Words)</td>
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<th>7. A Greater Understanding of Students Writers</th>
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<td>- Wow Moments</td>
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<td>- Figurative Language</td>
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<td>- Student Feedback</td>
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### Theme Statements

1. Teaching grammar in the context of writing is a more individualized approach to instruction than is traditional grammar instruction. By formatively assessing students, teachers can differentiate lessons to better accommodate the needs of individual writers.
2. Minilessons focused on activating prior knowledge can lead to a stronger foundation for future learning.

3. Unfamiliar material taught through extended minilessons followed by opportunities for practice may lead to understanding and confidence.

4. Learning can be more meaningful when students construct their own meanings. Inductive lessons with clear elements of creativity and playfulness as well as grammatical foundations may lead to a more authentic and enjoyable grasp of concepts.

5. Teachable moments, or incidental lessons are less structured and planned in comparison to other activities, but may provide an important sense of connectedness within the language arts curriculum.

6. If first given a chance to explore grammar in a concentrated yet natural context, students may be successful in extending these concepts to larger pieces.

7. The freedom each student has within a grammatical curriculum based in writing makes differentiation almost implicit. While all or the majority may reach proficiency in a given area, freedom within the writing allows gifted writers to accelerate.

Figure 18. Codes and Bins; Theme Statements

FINDINGS

I am left with the impression that the last several months were just as much about finding out about myself as a teacher as it was understanding the students as learners.

This year has been one of transitions—working with both a new writing and a new literature textbook and attempting to teach grammar in a more authentic manner.

Our school’s reading coach suggested that it takes about three years to fully create and implement a new curriculum. I need to remember this when I reflect on the school year because sometimes I get discouraged by the fact that not everything gelled together as I had hoped. In the future, I plan to integrate reading and writing more fully and engage the students through more individualized writing instruction. I must also consider the thematic realizations brought about through the analysis and triangulation of participant observations, student work, and student interviews and surveys. Through this
process, I was able to uncover understandings about my students as well as myself that I had not previously considered or spent enough time considering prior to the action-research process.

**What to Teach?**

Friere (1970) believed that domination and a desire for control are fueled by a fondness for death, not life.

*Teaching grammar in the context of writing is a more individualized approach to instruction than is traditional grammar instruction.*

In the past, I enjoyed the first month or two of school because it was filled with skill and drill grammar, a type of instruction that beat the students into a zombie-like submission. I appreciated this type of instruction and learning not because it allowed students to spread their wings but because it did quite the opposite—this seems contradictory to the reasons for which I became a teacher. This study marked the beginning of the abandonment of this philosophy and attempted to replace it with one that encouraged vivacity and a connectedness to life within my students.

Lessons removed from the informative writing process focused on pronouns. The original attempt was to address pronoun and antecedent agreement; unfortunately, I got caught up in teaching one pronoun after another. Once I got started, I could not stop. I felt as though the students simply could not get by as writers without knowing the material and it felt comfortable to fall back into this familiar approach to grammar. Yes, problems with pronoun and antecedent agreement do pop up quite frequently within the writing of my students but these issues may be better addressed in context and as they occur. Also,
it would have been beneficial to engage in some sort of formative assessment to see if this problem even existed amongst this particular group of students.

The pronoun exercises marked a return to the skill and drill grammar from which I had been trying to break free. After reflecting on my experiences in teaching pronouns, I realized that I had returned to this as a means to feel comfortable in classroom management as well as subject matter. This experience has led me to consider one core question when planning: How is what I am looking to teach valuable for the students?

The above question will aide me in the preliminary stages of lesson planning; however, once I get to know the strengths and weaknesses of my students, I should adapt instructional plans to better meet their needs. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that by formatively assessing students, teachers can differentiate lessons to better accommodate the needs of individual writers.

This study began by looking at how I planned the grammatical curriculum for the year. Obviously I had attempted to teach grammar in the context of writing, a philosophy that our English department is moving towards. We agreed upon the need to do so after considering the NCTE Standards for English Language Arts as well as the work of several grammar practitioners. Ehrenworth (2003), for one, speaks to the problem of students not retaining grammatical skills presented to them after the test, let alone those skills taught in previous years. She believes that one problem is that the material is presented in a manner that is meaningless to the students’ situations and interests. Peterson (1998) elaborates by making the case that grammar and writing cannot be exclusive of one another—grammar cannot be removed from the situation for which it is integral and expected to be remembered.
Once we decided to abandon traditional skill and drill grammar, we had to determine what to teach and the best methods for doing so. Peterson as well as Weaver, McNally & Moerman (2001) suggest focusing on a few skills over the course of the year. After considering the historical performances of our students, the seventh and eighth grade teachers came to an agreement on what to teach and when. In eighth grade we decided to focus on vivid words, sentence variety, creative punctuation, pronoun usage, and apostrophes; all but the latter are addressed within this study.

The personal narrative and accompanying sensory activities were effective ways to help students become comfortable again (or for the first time) in the classroom. Fun yet skill-building activities such as the captions and the color poems helped students get to know one another, find their writing styles, and improve imagery within writing; they also helped me to formatively assess the levels of mastery and sophistication in the students’ writing. It was through this gauging of abilities that I was able to make decisions regarding the manner in which I would teach subsequent material. For example, when it came time for revising the personal narrative for vivid word choice, I made the decision, based on student ability, to simply activate prior knowledge of nouns and verbs in a short minilesson.

**Minilessons**

*Minilessons focused on activating prior knowledge can lead to a stronger foundation for future learning.*

In keeping with Weaver’s (1998) guidelines for minilessons, the material taught through them, such as the above-mentioned review of nouns and verbs, was presented in a brief format. This teaching strategy was typically employed in order to help students
recall past learning. Basic understandings regarding brainstorming webs, peer editing, and verbs and nouns were activated through minilessons so that students could further develop this skills in context of the writing process. These lessons used time wisely in that, rather than teaching material already grasped, the students were encouraged to activate prior knowledge so that it could be built upon in accompanying activities. For example, the information activated in the noun and verb minilessons helped students to make these words stronger and more descriptive in their personal narratives.

**Extended Minilessons**

*Unfamiliar or problematic material approached through extended minilessons followed by opportunities for practice leads to understanding and confidence.*

Pronouns were taught through a series of extended minilessons. Again, I followed Weaver’s guidelines for such instruction; after the presentation of material, students were given multiple opportunities to practice the new strategies.

**Inductive Lessons**

*Learning can be more meaningful when students construct their own understandings.*

*Inductive lessons with clear elements of creativity and playfulness as well as grammatical foundations may o lead to a more authentic and enjoyable grasp of concepts.*

Inductive lessons allow students to create meaning. It is logical that this type of lesson works well for the thoughtful consideration and enhancement of skills because, rather than simply handing conceptual understandings to the students, we make them think and work for them; therefore making skills more personal and therefore remembered. Noden (1999) reminds his readers of a basic understanding—show don’t tell while Fletcher and Portalupi (2007) speak of the way in which vivid language can be
achieved through metaphorical comparisons. It was with these thoughts in mind that I moved forward in a hopeful and excited manner with the caption and color poem activities. Inductive practices were implemented through the caption and color poem activities. After reading and discussing models of both, the students played with language in order to create writing rich with imagery, metaphoric comparisons, and various moods.

I had never realized it prior to this study, but a good deal of what I already did in the classroom was inductive. In their study of eighth grade students, Simmons, Kameenui, Dickson, Chard, Gunn, and Baker (1993) discovered that exposing students to good writing positively impacts their writing. I had often employed the practice of dissecting sample essays in order to get students to come up with parameters and goals for a given piece of writing. This activity was revisited through the comparison of “The Redwoods” and “Mouse Alert” within the personal narrative unit. Students read and were guided to make generalizations about two essays in order to create their vision of the qualities of good writing.

Students were also encouraged to make their own meaning as part of the informative writing unit. Haussamen (2003) advocates sentences combining for enhancing the maturity of writers. The sentence combining activity gave students an opportunity to play with and demonstrate their strengths as writers. In doing this, they came to important realizations regarding the impact that sentence variety can have on the readability and diversity of a piece of writing.

In reading and dissecting the sample essay “Centuries of Protection,” students also inductively came to understandings about the content and organization required of this type of writing. Next year, I would like to add an additional sample piece from the
Elements of Literature series that not only follows the format of the informative essay but is also a testament to sentence variety. As a department, we are in the process of assessing literature that would best meet these needs.

Finally, inductive lessons were used to encourage students to identify the purposes of various types of punctuation. Noden speaks to the power of punctuation in creating special effects and deeper word meanings while Schuster (1985) reminds teachers that writing is a means of expressing creativity. By engaging students in experimenting with punctuation, we are supporting these creative instincts.

The inductive lessons in punctuation were more formal than the lesson in sentence combining that acted as part of the informative unit. The students looked at one piece of punctuation in action at a time and were given multiple opportunities to practice with it. The unit on punctuation took place over five weeks and managed to cover all five pieces of punctuation intended: commas, semicolons, dashes, ellipses, and italics. The weekly organization not only allowed for multiple opportunities for assessment but for formative feedback as well. It is with this unit that I gained confidence in teaching practices with which I did not have a great deal of experience. The fact that students did a wonderful job in transferring these pieces to the larger piece of writer is proof that this inductive approach was a success.

Incidental Lessons

Teachable moments, or incidental lessons are less structured and planned in comparison to other activities, but may provide an important sense of connectedness within the language arts curriculum.
Engaging students through incidental lessons is something that, with experience, becomes a natural occurrence in the classroom. It is important to distinguish between meaningful teachable moments and getting off task, something the students encourage and revel in. In certain instances valuable lessons have sprung from teachable moments; this is the case with dialogue in Gary Soto’s “The Broken Chain.” This piece acted as a model for focus within the personal narrative but also came to be a model for dialogue. Experimenting with dialogue just sort of popped into my head while reading the piece and, after examining dialogue within the story, I asked the students to include at least one exchange of it in their narratives. The students did a satisfactory job with this; however, for next year I would like to do a more formal lesson so that the intricacies of dialogue can be more fully understood—especially since I intend on presenting this to various levels of learners.

Incidental lessons also popped up during the one on one meetings following the sentence combining activity. As I sat down with students to discuss their work, we gained new insights on how to build upon their strengths and remedy weaknesses. Although I had assessed the work prior to these meetings, the conversations we had inevitable led us to greater understandings. To plan these meetings to the letter would be a bit disingenuous because, until I sit down with the students, I am not fully aware of what they need from me.

**Summative Assessments**

*If first given a chance to practice grammar in a concentrated yet natural context, students are successful in extending these concepts to larger pieces.*
Fletcher and Portalupi advocate for a writing curriculum in which forms such as the narrative, informative, and persuasive essays serve the students’ needs rather than the other way around. It was within these summative assessments that students could mature as writers and practice the tools acquired through the various methods of instruction and formative assignments. Although topics were suggested, students knew that they had ultimate control over the subject and style presented through the essays.

The personal narrative is a fitting way to begin the year because it provides a good transition from the lazy days of summer to the classroom; it pushes students to reflect on past personal and previous learning experiences. The type of vivid language practiced through the captions and color poem made its way into the summative piece. Because students had practiced this in the context of their own writing throughout the course of the unit, it was a natural occurrence for them to do the same in the personal narrative. Using vivid language had become a part of their writing toolkit.

Through the summative assessment of pronouns I came to realize how baseless the process of labeling parts of speech can be. With the summative poems and short stories that included the use and labeling of eight types of pronouns, I understood that although the students did not always label the pronouns correctly, they used them correctly—isn’t that what matters? Yes. The poems and stories created were also thoughtful, imaginative and demonstrated a mastery of the writing techniques we had studied, further evidence that teaching grammar in the context of writing sticks.

The informative essay was valuable not only in assessing the diversity of sentence structures in students’ writing but also in allowing them a chance to explore their diversity as individuals. The essay topic encouraged students to reflect upon and inform
others of their cultural, religious, and family traditions. The fact that these essays were used to plan a cultural celebration for our team made the piece even more meaningful and exciting. This is the second year that I have used this topic for the informative essay and the interest levels and quality of the writing has increased when compared to the previous topic of writing about an invention. This acts as evidence to the idea that students create a greater quality of work when the topic is personally meaningful to them.

The persuasive essay as a summative piece is appropriately placed at this point in the year. Students can take the knowledge and skills acquired through the personal narrative and informative essay in order to create a persuasive piece that demonstrates mastery of organizational patterns and semantics as well as a thoughtful, informed, and convincing argument. The skills acquired through the inductive lessons on punctuation worked to impact tone and conviction in the persuasive piece. The persuasive essay also serves as a good pathway to the research paper in that it asks students to support their opinions through evidence and examples, a process that will be more intricately explored when students are required to use research to do the same.

**Understanding Student Writers**

*The freedom each student has within a grammatical curriculum based in writing makes differentiation almost implicit. While all or the majority may reach proficiency in a given area, freedom within the writing allows gifted writers to accelerate.*

The open nature of grammar in the context activities allows students to achieve at their own level and pace. Success is not gauged in a yes or no format, but rather in a more individualized building of skills. This enables advanced and basic writers in the same classroom to improve. It took the caption and color poem writing activities to help me
come to this realization. Once I had formative and summative feedback from the students, the fears I had about meeting the needs of various learners slipped away.

One important theme that runs through the entire study is the value of checking for understanding through authentic writing assignments as opposed to skill and drill textbook exercises. Dewey (1938) believed that in order for something intangible or theoretical to become real, the ideas must be put into practice. Writing and speaking are meant for the real world, so it is logical that assessments mimic these situations. The students have stated that, in their writing, they sometimes come across issues for which the textbooks have not prepared them. By making in-class assignments as real as possible, we can work through these problems as they occur, just as the students would in real-life situations. Also, students have told me that they like to write about what they want. So, why not give them this freedom when looking to assess a given grammatical or stylistic concept?

Speaking of the needs and wants of various learners, it was through the sentence combining and pronoun exercises that I came to know and enjoy William’s writing and personality. His advanced style and continual exploration of science fiction reiterated that fact that grammar in the context activities allowed students to move at a pace appropriate for them and look at topics of interest to them. It truly is a more student centered, individualized approach to learning.

Over the course of the action research study, I came to know the personalities and writing abilities of students. Because of the juxtaposition of their abilities, William and Mike were two students who stood out most. While William expressed a deep interest in writing and took advantage of classroom exercises to personally better himself, Mike did
the work just to get it done. Through their interviews I came to realize that some students are interested in writing and some are not. While this is a simple concept it is important because it puts my role as a teacher into perspective. I must be able to challenge and help students improve but realize that not all students will take advantage of this to the extent that I would like. Some may choose to push themselves while others may decide to just get by. In the case of both, I must make sure these students have the grammatical foundations necessary for the future and continue to encourage them in their pursuits.

THE NEXT STEP

As evidenced through the teaching of pronouns, I did not always consider the needs and abilities of my students in order to plan meaningful instruction. In the future, it is imperative that I do more of this because it will help me to properly utilize instructional time by engaging students in activities that will improve, rather than stifle their writing.

Although the pronoun content was ill suited for my students, I would like to experiment in using the extended minilesson format in encouraging students to practice skills, such as sentence reworking, in the context of their writing. The multiple opportunities for practice should not be so removed from authentic writing as they were in the pronoun activities but might instead come in the form of journal entries, literature responses, and essays. By addressing concentrated areas and allowing multiple opportunities for practice, I would hope to also gain a better understanding of the strengths and needs of the individuals in my class. While it is not always easy to provide immediate feedback to the 100 or so students taught throughout the day, the multiple opportunities for practice could help in making this task more manageable. I would not have to peruse each and every piece by teach and every student, but might instead
develop a rotational system for analyzing, discussing, and working to improve the stylistic abilities of each writer.

Next year, I will continue to use inductive strategies where appropriate because I feel that encouraging students to construct their own meanings truly makes the learning a part of them instead of something forgotten soon after an assessment. One new formative tool with which I was particularly pleased was the implementation of the exit cards. They provided valuable feedback for both the students and me and led to a more student-driven classroom.

As always, the dissection of a sample piece of writing was invaluable in determining the necessary focus, content, and organizational aspects of the essay. “Open Study Halls” was also helpful in prompting students to recognize the similarities and differences between the persuasive essay and the two previous essays they had written. One aspect I would like to change for next year is the use of a professional piece of literature to exemplify the power of punctuation in action. This year, due to time, we grazed over Richard Wright’s “The Kitten” instead of analyzing the piece as a whole. Now that I have experience with the time it takes to teach grammar in the context of writing, I feel that will be able to plan more effectively.

Finally, after reading theorist after theorist, experimenting with various teaching practices, and the analysis of everything that came across my desk, I feel as though I have come very far in the understanding and practice of teaching grammar yet still have a ways to go. There are key philosophical understandings that I take away from this experience and must use to provide optimal instruction in the future. One, I must work through my issues regarding uncertainty and control in order to fully help students
improve their writing while writing, instead of through unauthentic and binding exercises. Two, in planning lessons, I cannot prescribe to a one-size fits all plan—through an activation of prior knowledge and the analysis of formative assessments, I must identify and build upon the strengths of my students and help them to remedy weaknesses.
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*Composition Chronicle: Newsletter for Writing Teachers*, 8(6), 1-4. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED 387813)


*Exceptionality*, 12(1), 19-37.


RESOURCES


Appendix A

September 23, 2008

Dear Mr. -----,

I am currently enrolled in a graduate program in curriculum and instruction at Moravian College. The purpose of this program is to help me examine and improve upon my current teaching practices.

As a degree requirement, it is necessary for me to conduct a teacher action research study; the focus of this study will be teaching grammar within the context of writing. In an attempt to increase interest and improve scores on writing assignments, I will be exposing students to a variety of writing techniques and prompts and monitoring their reactions to these techniques and prompts.

In order to gain a solid understanding of the impact that these assignments are having on the students, I will collect various types of data, including five short surveys, informal and formal interviews, and anecdotal records. As always, I will collect and grade the students’ writing assignments.

Part of this study requires that I report on the data collected during this study. The surveys, interviews, observed reactions, and writing assessments will all be part of the regular class instruction. However, I will only use data from students with signed consent forms when writing my research report. The decision to participate in or opt out of this study will have no bearing on a child’s grade. If a child initially decides to be a part of this study, he or she has the option to withdraw at any time without penalty.

If a child chooses to participate in the study, please be assured that his or her name will be kept confidential. The only name used in the paper will be my own. Certain parts of the data may be altered in order to ensure confidentiality.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this action research project, please feel free to contact me at ----- or my academic advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh, at jshosh@moravian.edu. If not, please sign and return one copy of this letter indicating that you grant approval for this study. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jennifer L. Gray
8th Grade English Teacher

I, Mr. -----, grant consent for Jennifer L. Gray to conduct an action research project on teaching grammar in the context of writing.

__________________________   __________
signature                  date
Dear Students & Parents/Guardians,

I am currently enrolled in a graduate course in curriculum and instruction at Moravian College. The purpose of this course is to help me examine and improve upon my current teaching practices.

This course requires me to conduct a teacher action research study; the focus of this study will be teaching grammar within the context of writing. In an attempt to increase interest and improve scores on writing assignments, I will be exposing students to a variety of writing techniques and prompts and monitoring their reactions to these techniques and prompts.

In order to gain a solid understanding of the impact that these assignments are having on the students, I will collect various types of data, including five short surveys, informal interviews, and anecdotal records. As always, I will collect and grade the students’ writing assignments.

Part of this study requires that I report on the data collected during this study. The surveys, interviews, observed reactions, and writing assignments will all be part of regular class instruction. However, I will only use data from students with signed consent forms in my research report. The decision to participate in or opt out of this study will have no bearing on a student’s grade. If a student initially decides to be a part of this study, he or she has the option to withdraw at any time without penalty. If a student chooses to participate in the study, please be assured that his or her name will be kept confidential. The only name used in the paper will be my own. Certain parts of the data may be altered in order to ensure confidentiality.

It is not anticipated that this study will cause students emotional uneasiness; however, if at anytime during the study your child feels distress due to the study, please contact the guidance department at-----.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this action research project, please feel free to contact me at ----- or my academic advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh, at jshosh@moravian.edu. If not, please sign and return the form indicating that your child may or may not participate in the study.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Students—you must also give your permission to participate in this study. Please know that you can, without parent approval, choose not to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Jennifer L. Gray
8th Grade English Teacher

By signing below, I declare that I am the child’s parent or legal guardian. I agree that I have received a copy, read, and understand this consent form.

Students-please circle one:
I wish to participate in the study.
I do not wish to participate in the study.

Signature of Student: ____________________________________________

Student Name: ________________________________________________

Parents-please circle one:
My child may participate in the study.
My child may not participate in the study.

Signature of Parent/Guardian: __________________________________
Appendix C

Student Survey 1: Pre-Study

Name:

What does grammar mean to you?

Do you like grammar? Why or why not?

How do you think grammar impacts your writing?

Do you like writing? Why or why not?

What might a teacher do to increase student interest in grammar and writing activities?

Additional Comments:
Appendix D

Student Survey 2: Vivid Descriptors

Name:

Personal Narrative

1. What do you consider vivid writing?

2. What do you do to make your writing more vivid?

3. Have you ever read anything that was written using strong, vivid language? What impact did it have on you? Name and explain.

4. Additional comments
Appendix E

Student Survey 3: Sentence Variety

Reflect on the sentence variety exercises we completed in class, keeping in mind how they impacted your final informative writing piece.

1. Write Source Explanation and Practice:

2. Sentence Combining

3. How do you think sentence variety impacts a piece of writing?
Appendix F

**Student Survey 4: Sentence Variety**

Reflect and comment on the punctuation exercises we completed in class, keeping in mind how they impacted your final persuasive writing piece.

1. **Appositive:**

2. **Semicolon:**

3. **The Dash:**

4. **Ellipsis:**

5. **Italics**

6. **“The Kitten” Activity**

7. How do you feel the above activities and skills impacted your persuasive essay?
Appendix G

Student Survey 5: Post Study

Name:

Now that you have completed three major writing assignments and accompanying grammar in writing activities, has your idea of grammar changed? Why or why not? Explain.

Have these activities increased your interest in writing? Why or why not? Explain.

Have these activities improved your writing? Why or why not? Explain.

Additional Comments: