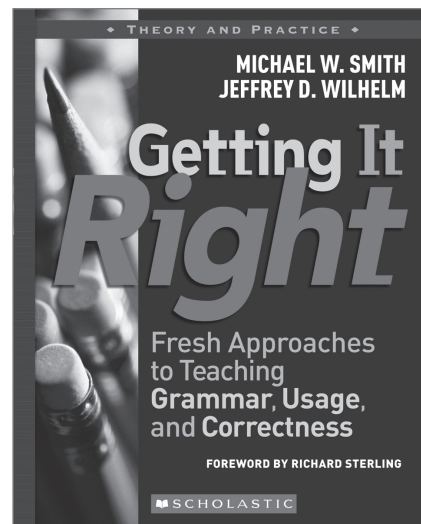


A Study Guide for
Getting It Right: Fresh Approaches to Teaching Grammar, Usage, and Correctness

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CHAPTER 1: The Elephant at the Party

Overview

In this introductory chapter, you'll see what you can expect from this book: a couple of friendly voices urging you to consider teaching grammar in a "wide-awake" way that will help you create the most effective contexts for teaching grammar. The authors will make the point that while traditional methods of teaching grammar may be counterproductive, correctness is still important.

React to

"We will argue that correctness is best taught when it is in the service of helping students be engaged and powerful readers, writers, and learners." (p. 4)

Discuss

- The authors point out that different people mean different things when they use the word *grammar*. How do you define *grammar*?
- How do you presently teach grammar? Why do you teach it that way? If you don't teach grammar, why have you chosen not to teach it? To what extent has your grammar instruction been effective? What ideas or standards do you base your judgments about what to teach? What constitutes correctness?

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- How do your students respond to grammar instruction? What is their attitude toward correctness in their writing?
 - Do you agree that correctness is best taught when students are “engaged and powerful readers, writers, and learners”? If so, why do teachers continue to provide grammar worksheets such as the ones Fiona brought home?
 - Why are you interested in reading this book?

Take Action

Create a survey for students as a means of assessing their attitudes toward grammar.

Following are sample questions for the survey:

- How important is it to you that your paper is free of errors?
- When is it important that your composing be error-free? When is it not that important?
- What do you consider to be your biggest challenge with grammar?
- What do you do when you are writing and don’t know how to use punctuation correctly or have other problems with grammar?
- How much time do you spend reading teachers’ comments when your paper is returned to you?
- Which grammatical errors do you think teachers consider to be most serious?

Reflect

Make a list of questions about the teaching of grammar that you would like to discuss with colleagues at your next meeting. Consider these issues:

- the interplay of correctness and content
- the fear of relinquishing traditional approaches to teaching grammar
- the challenge of working against the “salience of the traditional” and entrenched ways of thinking and doing things
- the meaning of Standard American English
- the role of usage and punctuation in grammar instruction
- a hierarchy of errors

CHAPTER 2: What We Know and What it Means

Overview

This chapter begins and ends with a review of the research regarding the teaching of writing. In short, teaching grammar as an analytical activity labeling, underlining, and filling in the blanks does not help kids become better writers (p. 46). The authors add that such

activities probably hinder kid's progress because activities of this sort keep them from doing more important things. Fortunately, the authors don't stop at providing the research; they also offer a rich variety of activities and specific examples to help students use grammar to shape and improve their writing. Here are some of the practices the authors discuss:

- teaching verbs through pantomimes
- discovering the power of participles by viewing film clips
- using menus to practice sentence combining and writing with specificity.

React to

“Rather than using terminology to label, we want students to learn the terms by using them to make meaning in their writing and/or reading, to inquire, and to explore and discuss language use issues in their own writing, that of their peers, and that of the authors they read and enjoy.” (p. 15)

Discuss

- Studies reveal that students simply don't seem to learn grammar, no matter how well or how often it is taught (p. 9). Why do you think this is true? To what degree does this match your experience?
- The authors conclude that learning grammatical rules “can actually undermine correct usage.” What would you say to the authors regarding this statement?
- Two justifications for teaching a grammatical term appear on page 13. Would you add other reasons to this list? If so, what are they?
- Hillocks found that sentence combining activities resulted in significantly improved writing (p. 27). A research report published by The Alliance for Excellent Education, “Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Middle and High Schools” (<http://www.all4ed.org/publications/WritingNext/WritingNext.pdf>) also found sentence combining to be an effective strategy for improving writing. Why do you think this strategy has consistently been found to be effective?

Take Action

- Conduct a bit of action research with your own students.
- Ask students to recall their experiences with learning grammar in earlier grades and what they remember being taught. Provide prompts to trigger their memories, such as their being asked to identify parts of speech or complete worksheets on correct verb usage or punctuation.
- Ask them to record their impressions and feelings about grammar instruction in a paragraph.
- At the end of the semester or year, ask students to record their experiences with learning grammar in your class.
- Compare their responses.
- What did you learn that will help you with your instruction in the future?

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- Help students create their own grammar terminology. For example, the authors suggest using the word name instead of proper noun or logical linker instead of adverbial conjunction (p. 13). Create a wall chart of traditional names of terms and words or phrases students would suggest to replace them.
 - Choose one of the activities for teaching verbs on pages 16–19 and use it with your students. At your next meeting, bring student work samples or observations to share. Consider allowing students to go into other classes to present their work. (You could have them perform their pantomimes, for example.)
 - In addition to using newspapers and short stories or novels as models of writing, look for text in unexpected places such as news magazines, graphic novels, and picture books—or even political cartoons (see [http:// www.politicalcartoons.com](http://www.politicalcartoons.com)). You could also create a box into which students can deposit writing that exemplifies what is being taught in class. Hang such examples on the wall, or allow students to share their contributions at the beginning of each class.
 - Before having students create their own Sensoriums (pp. 35–36), have them find examples of Sensoriums in their reading and use the Sensorium Peer Editing Sheet to help them understand how “real” writers use Sensoriums to “show” instead of “tell.” Authors such as Karen Hesse (*Out of the Dust*) and Ben Michaelson (*Touching Spirit Bear*) provide nice examples of sensory writing in their books.

Reflect

Some linguists believe that the bedrock rules of our native language are hardwired into us (p. 46). Recall times when you have been around young children and have observed their acquisition of language. How is the scaffolding of their language acquisition similar to or different from the way teachers scaffold the use of “correct” grammar?

CHAPTER 3: Getting in Role: Reading and Learning from Various Points of View

Overview

This chapter may challenge your thinking about Standard English and the notion of errors, as well as your role as a teacher of students who come to your class with various dialects. It may also cause you to rethink how you can most effectively help your students avoid errors that interfere with meaning in their written communication. The authors point out that teachers spend endless hours marking errors on students’ papers, an ineffective practice. They argue that an alternative method—establishing a hierarchy of errors and then addressing one issue at a time or one issue per grade—allows students to have the time and repetition necessary to ensure deep understanding of language conventions. Toward the end of this chapter, you will find several

helpful tools, specifically on pages 79–80, 85–86, and 88, that you can use immediately to help students look at their own compositions as real readers and writers might.

React to

“Instead of worrying about every error in every paper, we think it makes far more sense to focus our own and our students’ attention on one issue at a time. It means modeling, mentoring, and monitoring student practice until they truly understand how a language convention works and can really use it correctly.” (p. 61)

Discuss

- Discuss the concept of errors as they apply to Standard American English. Chart errors that each member of the group finds particularly egregious, and then use the chart as a springboard for discussion. How difficult would it be for the group to agree on a list of five to ten errors that would be most important to address in students’ written or spoken discourse?
- What difficulties might you encounter if your team or department established a hierarchy of errors, such as the authors suggest on page 61? How could you overcome such challenges? What would be the benefits of doing so? Discuss the authors’ hierarchy of errors on pages 61–63 and then create your own hierarchy.
- Do you typically mark all or most grammatical errors on a student’s paper? If so, why? If not, how do you decide which errors to mark?
- If possible, use an in-service day to meet with English teachers from your own district or nearby schools, grades 5–12. Give teachers a copy of the list of genres across grades (pp. 73–76) and ask them to customize the lists to reflect what they feel students should learn in their grades. Justify why these are appropriate genres to emphasize at that level. The teachers in each grade level should have time to discuss and then present their recommendations for each of the categories. Consider implementing the suggested lists for the following year and meeting again to discuss challenges, successes, and possible revisions. Discuss what grammatical conventions would be most helpful to teach in the context of learning to read and write these particular genres.
- Discuss what differentiated instruction looks like in a writing classroom. Go to <http://www.caroltomlinson.com> for more information about this topic. Read pages 81–84 and talk about how the response and editing sheets can help you meet your goals of differentiating instruction for all students.

Take Action

- Download 2–3 sample student papers from your state’s department of education website or from some other site. Mark every error that you see. Compare what you found to what several colleagues found. Consider what errors you agree on and what errors you don’t agree on.
- Do the favorite author test for several grammar/usage/punctuation issues.

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- Give students a sample spelling-rules sheet, similar to the one on pages 68–69. Divide the class into small groups and assign each group one of the rules. Have each group create a poster (or a portion of butcher block paper stretched across a wall) to illustrate their rule. Encourage students to use graphics, cartoons, song lyrics, or mnemonic devices to help others remember the rule.
 - Have students create their own spelling or grammar log for words they commonly misspell or for grammar errors they consistently forget. Demonstrate how such a log is helpful to all writers by showing them your own list of spelling “demons.”
 - Describe to other members of your group how peer editing looks in your class. What works best? What would you like to improve? How do you think you might do so? If possible, invite other members during their planning periods to visit your class and observe a peer editing session in progress. Ask visiting teachers to objectively note student behaviors to help you target ways of improving peer-editing sessions.

Reflect

- What will be challenging about giving students more authority and responsibility to correct their own writing?
- How do you feel about the prospect of putting aside your inner stickler? How might you explain your decision to do so to your students, their parents, and your administration?

CHAPTER 4: Cherchez le Cause

Overview

It is one thing to recognize errors in students’ writing and another to understand the causes of errors. Much of this chapter is devoted to identifying the underlying causes of errors and specific ways to address those causes. For example, the authors point out that one reason errors occur is that students don’t reread their work, so this chapter contains analytic scales that teachers can use to promote rereading. Another common cause of errors is students’ lack of confidence with text structure. The authors provide examples of various text structures and ways to help students understand how to approach each in their reading and writing. Applying problem-solving strategies to errors will help students learn to make language work for them as writers.

React to

“If errors happen for a reason, you can’t fix them simply by noting their existence!”
(p. 90)

Discuss

- Brainstorm common student errors in grammar and usage. Does a pattern emerge across grade levels or certain populations of students? Discuss possible causes for each type of error.

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- The authors point out that it is important to “do a little bit at a time, to be patient” (p. 91). Why is it difficult for teachers to be patient while teaching grammar and correctness?
 - Create a handout containing sentences from students’ writing that contain a specific error as well as sentences that avoid that error by exhibiting correct usage of that convention. Have students derive a rule that explains the differences between the two sets of sentences.
 - Ask an editor of your local newspaper to visit your class and talk with students about usage and grammar in the “real world.” Have students formulate questions before the guest arrives regarding their confusion about grammatical and usage errors. Encourage students to write articles, columns, or letters to the editor for the school or local newspaper.
 - Give students “Tips for Proofreading for Fragments” (p. 97). Place students in groups and have each group create a different chart of tips for proofreading, such as these:
 - Writing is strongly influenced by the writer’s belief in his or her abilities.
 - Writing improves with practice, but it must be paired with mentoring and modeling.
 - Writing without correctness lacks power.
 - The authors cite research stating that anywhere from 50 to 90 percent of paragraphs in published writing don’t possess a topic sentence. How should this insight inform your teaching of topic sentences?

Take Action

- Create a handout containing sentences from students’ writing that contain a specific error as well as sentences that avoid that error by exhibiting correct usage of that convention. Have students derive a rule that explains the differences between each pair of sentences.
- Ask an editor of your local newspaper to visit your class and talk with students about usage and grammar in the “real world.” Have students formulate questions before the guest arrives regarding their confusion about grammatical and usage errors. Encourage students to write articles, columns, or letters to the editor for the school or local newspaper.
- Give students “Tips for Proofreading for Fragments” (p. 97). Place students in groups and have each group create a different chart of tips for proofreading, such as these:
 - Tips for Proofreading for Comma Errors
 - Tips for Proofreading for Subject/Verb Agreement
 - Tips for Proofreading for Paragraphing
 - Tips for Proofreading for Parallel Structure
- Using the transitions on page 111, have students work in groups to create comic strips that illustrate various genres and text structures. Encourage them to use transition words appropriately within the text of the comics.
- After reading the section on “Teaching Text Structure” (pp. 115–121), consider working with your team or department to create similar lessons on teaching other types of text structure.

Graphic organizers (see <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/graphic-organizers/printable/6293.html>) are also helpful in illustrating why and how text follows specific patterns.

- Differentiate grammar and usage instruction by creating files of Inductive Exercises (see pages 127–130). As individual students need additional instruction on an aspect of grammar, refer them to the appropriate file for their own independent study. Ask students to create exercises for the file once they come to internalize particular rules.

Reflect

- Read the Instructional Principles on page 139. Choose one practice that you will use this year with your students. Keep a weekly log in which you outline your challenges and successes with the practice. Consider revising your log into an article for a professional journal, such as your state’s National Council of Teachers of English affiliate.

CHAPTER 5: Will It Work in the Real World?

Overview

In this final chapter, the authors make a convincing argument that their “less is more” ideas *will* work in the real world. In addition, the real world of school writing, at least as defined by national and state tests, corroborates their views by placing more of an emphasis on meaning than on grammar.

Respond to

“The old ways just aren’t working. They haven’t worked in the past. They aren’t working now. They won’t work in the future. It’s time to make some changes.”
(p. 146)

Discuss

- How have your views regarding “the old ways” of teaching grammar changed as a result of reading this book?
- Is there anything that you have read in this book that makes you uncomfortable? Discuss any doubts or concerns. How might you be helped to work through this discomfort?
- Discuss each of the recommendations on pages 141–142. Which of them will you incorporate into your instruction? What will you do immediately? What will you hope to do after making a start on changing your instruction of grammar and usage?

Take Action

- Examine the writing part of your state test, read carefully your state’s writing standards, and study any relevant guidelines or benchmarks for writing from your state department

of education or district. Develop a statement that reflects your state's current thinking regarding the role of grammar and conventions in writing.

- Continue your study by choosing one of the books in Appendix D (pp. 168–169) to read. Consider creating a notebook of research regarding the role of grammar and conventions to make available to your administrator, or to parents who may be concerned that the way you teach grammar is not effective.
- Share what you learned from reading this book with feeder schools and other members of the faculty as a way of developing a common understanding and consistent plan for the teaching of grammar.

Reflect

Your interest in this book indicates that you are willing to challenge traditional practices and consider new ways of approaching grammar. What does this say about you as a learner? A teacher? A member of your school's community? How can you transfer your willingness to try new things to your students? To other teachers? What practices are you committed to changing in the near term? Sometimes it is useful to write down your commitment or to articulate it to a colleague. What other things can you do to help you undertake your commitment to improving instruction and learning for your students?