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ATEG Journal Editorial Policy

Founded in 1989, the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) is an official Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English that provides a national forum for all those interested in teaching grammar. We welcome all views on the role of grammar in our schools.

Published twice a year, *ATEG Journal* seeks to foster discussion of teaching English grammar at all grade levels from kindergarten through graduate school. We solicit articles that describe, analyze, and/or critique any and all aspects of teaching grammar. For example, the following are some suggested topics:

- Classroom practices in the teaching of grammar
- Traditional vs. linguistic approaches to grammar
- Why and how grammar should or should not be taught
- How we handle language varieties in the classroom
- Teacher education and the teaching of grammar
- Integration of grammar with writing, speech, literature, and all forms of discourse

On these matters, we welcome articles, reports from the schools and from teacher education programs, as well as book reviews, textbook evaluations, and other critical responses. Submissions should conform to MLA style and should not exceed 3,500 words. All submissions will be reviewed by two anonymous referees. Please submit your submission as an MS Word .doc or .rtf file sent as an email attachment to:

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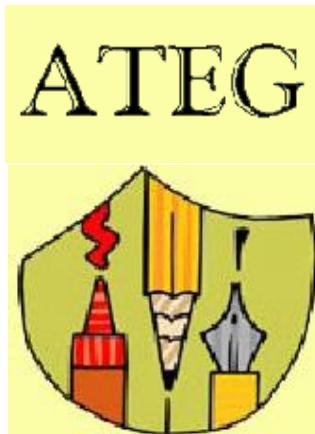
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The ATEG Journal

Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar



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Messages from ATEG Presidents

Amy Benjamin, Past President

I spent my entire thirty-three year classroom career in the same school district in Westchester, New York, a job I was fortunate to snag while the ink was still wet on my undergraduate diploma, and before I knew it, I was a lifer. And so I probably would have stayed if not for a serendipitous discovery of a small branch of NCTE devoted to teaching grammar. My life has never been the same since. I would never have believed that I would come to be president of this wonderful organization. Last year, I passed the torch of leadership to Sean Ruday and Sharon (Sherry) Saylor. Many thanks, all, for helping me more than you know.

Sean Ruday, Co-President

With Common Core Standards' emphasis on grammar along with society's increased focus on grammar and mechanics, ATEG is well-positioned to be a positive force for the next generation of grammar instruction. ATEG is working to be highly visible through our Facebook page, Twitter account, and revamped website so that we can continue to connect with educators and make a positive impact on how grammar is taught. This year's conference theme of *#Grammar* is meant to represent ATEG's potential influence on the future of literacy instruction, while honoring our history as a national forum for discussing grammar instruction.

Sherry Saylor, Co-President

Twenty- six years ago, ATEG was created so that grammar teachers might have the opportunity to share their ideas at conferences, in a professional journal, and through an on-line listserv. Today we are using these means and more, including a Facebook page and a Twitter feed. Even though the technology is changing, our purpose remains the same—to be an organization dedicated to supporting fellow teachers and sharing methods of grammar instruction that will produce both versatile writers and discriminating readers. In the future, we would like to become more of a resource for school systems by having our members work with individual teachers, helping them create programs that will make grammar an exciting and essential body of knowledge for a whole new generation of students.



#Grammar: Grammar Instruction for the Next Generation

Welcome to the 26th Annual ATEG Conference

Prince George's Community College ♦ Largo, MD

July 24 and 25, 2015

Last year, The Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, an affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English, celebrated its 25th anniversary. Now, ATEG looks forward to its next 25 years! The theme of this year's conference—*#Grammar: Grammar Instruction for the Next Generation*—will focus on grammar instruction designed to meet the challenges of today's schools and embrace new developments in effective teaching. Grammar teachers are well-positioned in today's society to help students consider language varieties, linguistic developments, and technological innovations that enhance our abilities to communicate. As it has done throughout its 25 years of existence, ATEG plans to lead the way by helping teachers learn new ideas, strategies, lessons, and activities that can ensure effective grammar instruction for the next generation!

Sean Ruday and Sherry Saylor
Co-Presidents



*A Call (Demand, Appeal, Order, Entreaty, Command, Plea,
Prayer, Petition, “Shout-Out”) for Conference Papers—
Create a “Proceedings” issue of the ATEG Journal!*

ATEG conference attendees always marvel at their wonderful experiences, and one major reason for their exuberance is the quality of the presentations. However, each year there is one sad result—nothing that anyone said or heard (or thought they heard) survives because there is no record of the presentations, merely ephemeral memories. Therefore, a month after this conference ends (or perhaps three months for younger attendees, or even six months for the truly blessed), the content of your exciting presentations will at some point forever fade from memory.

Therefore, I ask ***EVERY PRESENTER***—no, I plead and beg with you, order and entreat you, command you, petition you, appeal and even pray to you—to submit a 1,000 word summary (maximum) of your presentation (500 word minimum) as an MS Word document in MLA format including a Works Cited page. Unfortunately, PowerPoint and Prezi presentations cannot be accepted, so if you used these programs, you will need to re-work them into an MS Word document using standard MLA format. ***Please submit your summaries no later than December 1, the end of the fall semester (no excuses—plenty of time!).***

Won't you please help start this new ATEG tradition? Let's create a “Proceedings” issue that will both preserve your thoughts and ideas and also create a record of what we can achieve as an organization. However, it can happen only if you submit a summary of your presentations. So to all you presenters, please—get to work on your summaries!

Pretty please with sugar on it? 😊

Geoffrey Layton, Editor
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Putting the Power of Place into Grammar Instruction

Amy Price Azano, Assistant Professor of Adolescent Literacy, Virginia Tech,
and Sean Ruday, Assistant Professor of English Education, Longwood University

In our work as English teachers and teacher educators, we have heard grammar described in myriad ways—some using rather creative expletives and others calling it a necessary evil. Grammar has become the broccoli of the language arts curriculum—we know it’s good for you, but it’s still broccoli! In brainstorming solutions to the broccoli-grammar problem, we started looking across our areas of scholarly interests—place-based education, which is Amy’s area of interest, and grammar instruction, which is Sean’s specialty. Not surprisingly, an idea started percolating, and we asked: Is it possible to use *place* as a way of teaching grammar? It was more than just an “a-ha” or “light bulb” moment. It was a watershed, “You-Got-Chocolate-In-My-Peanut-Butter” kind of moment! We decided not only is place-based grammar possible but that it might be a missing ingredient in grammar instruction.

Often when people think of grammar, they imagine the banking model of education (Freire) with the teacher at the front of the classroom drawing complicated diagrams with lines at various angles to show the relationship among parts of speech. Completely devoid of context or mentor texts or even a writing assignment, this model occurs in a vacuum with little thought given to cultural relevance, student engagement, or personal connections between grammar and speech itself. Therefore, students are left with little choice but to sit in neat rows, pinching their noses, while trying to swallow the broccoli-flavored grammar lessons. (Sorry, broccoli!)

Place-based instruction challenges this antiquated image of grammar instruction. When using place, students are no longer the depositories for teacher knowledge, where they “patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (Freire 72) information. Rather they become the creators and meaning makers of knowledge. Place-based pedagogy can serve as an underpinning to the language arts curriculum, making grammar instruction much more palatable for teachers and learners. In this article, we discuss the challenges and possibilities of grammar



instruction, provide an overview of place-based pedagogy, and introduce a place-based approach for teaching grammar.

Grammar Instruction: Challenges and Possibilities

In our work as teacher-educators and professional developers, we frequently notice what can be called “Grammar Anxiety” when talking with future and practicing teachers about grammar instruction. During a recent conversation with a group of elementary and middle school teachers about the best practices of grammar instruction, Sean noticed a teacher in the front of the room visibly tense up at the mention of specific grammatical terms such as “absolute phrase” and “intensive pronoun.” Concerned for this individual’s health, he leaned over and asked if she was okay.

“It’s grammar,” she replied, shaking her head. “I had such a horrible experience learning grammar when I was in school. My teachers either didn’t teach it at all or just made us do worksheets that didn’t help us learn anything. I really have no idea how to teach it.”

This teacher’s reaction is not unusual. Traditional grammar instruction, taught out of context from writing and literature, frequently reduces student interest levels (Woltjer) and has very little impact on student writing (Weaver). When students who have learned grammar through out-of-context worksheets and exercises that are not connected to writing instruction grow up to be teachers, they may resist teaching grammar and perhaps even harbor serious anxiety about it, as did the previously described teacher.

The focus on grammar instruction is especially pronounced in today’s educational climate, as new and increasingly rigorous standards such as the Common Core State Standards emphasize grammar and language study. How then can teachers teach grammatical concepts in ways that keep students engaged and help them grow as writers, while reducing any “Grammar Anxiety” that teachers might have? An especially effective way is the “toolkit” approach (Ruday), which helps students see specific grammatical concepts as “tools” for effective writing. To enable students to visualize grammar in this way, teachers show students examples of grammatical concepts used in literature and discuss with their students how the authors of those literary works use grammatical



concepts as “tools” to enhance their writing. For example, a teacher can call attention to an author’s use of a prepositional phrase and talk with students about why that prepositional phrase plays an important role in the piece. Discussions like this can help students see the elements of grammar as writing-enhancing tools instead of simply terms that need to be memorized for tests and worksheets.

This instructional approach is rooted in two major concepts: the reading-writing connection and metacognition. As students learn to see grammar concepts as “tools” for effective writing, they are exploring the relationship between published texts they read and the choices authors make to maximize their effectiveness. The National Council of Teachers of English asserts that “writing and reading are related” and calls for teachers and students to understand “how writers read in a special way, with an eye toward not just what the text says but how it is put together” (NCTE).

As students begin to see grammatical concepts as “tools,” they can also think about how they can apply those concepts in purposeful ways to their own works. When students do this, they are learning how to think metacognitively about the importance of grammatical concepts. In the context of grammar instruction, metacognition, knowledge of cognitive phenomena (Flavell), can mean understanding why a writer may have used a specific grammatical concept and what impact the use of that concept might have on the piece of writing.

Place-Based Pedagogy

In addition to using literature and the reading-writing connection, teachers can also access students’ sense of place during grammar instruction as yet another tool for understanding grammar and its impact on writing. Place-based pedagogy is a method and practice of grounding learning in a student’s sense of place. Informed by individual experiences, histories, memories, and cultures, a student’s sense of place serves as a powerful critical literacy lens in the classroom. Place was at the heart of Dewey’s argument when he stated that “school must represent present life – life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground” (Dewey).

Too often, the school curriculum can seem arbitrary to students, with the “What’s in it for me?” question rarely answered. Place-based pedagogy provides



an opportunity to close the gap between the realities of students' lived experiences and the day-to-day activities that take place in school. Science teachers can use their local environment as a place laboratory. Math teachers can use the local economy to ask and solve questions. Social studies teachers can use the history of place to engender civic engagement and community participation. For English teachers, place serves as a powerful context for learning. Students can read local texts or make place-to-text connections with canonical novels and poems. In the *Foxfire* tradition (Wigginton), students can interview community residents and document local history and living. And while many of these place practices become part of the curriculum, grammar often stands apart from engaging pedagogical efforts. However, place serves as yet another tool for students to understand grammatical concepts and how grammar is also contextualized by place.

Place-based grammar is an opportunity for the language arts curriculum to be relevant to a student's sense of place. In an article about code-switching and language ideologies, Devereaux and Wheeler provide strategies for using contrastive analysis and code-switching to explore identity, power, and society in dialectically diverse literature. They explain that language is varied and structured, that there are grammatical patterns in Standard or Academic English just as there are in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). They position contrastive analysis (i.e., using a "t-chart" to compare language varieties and look for patterns) as a way of identifying which aspects are contrasted and code-switching as a way of revealing how language is contextualized. Place-based grammar instruction builds on this work.

Introducing a PLACE Framework for Grammar Instruction

Here we discuss how "place" can further contextualize grammar instruction. Using the acronym PLACE, teachers can invite students to consider critical understandings about language varieties. Devereaux and Wheeler use contrastive analysis and code-switching to interrogate how language positions a speaker in society. The PLACE Framework (see Figure 1) provides structure to that examination, further empowering teachers to teach grammar and to teach it in a way that might seem personally relevant for students.



Teachers can use the PLACE Framework to examine grammatical concepts and to ask critical questions about the intersection of place and grammar. To start, teachers can discuss grammar in terms of Place, People, and Parts of Speech (the “P” component), exploring how the people in a certain community use literacy as a function or way of life. The “L” represents Life, Literacies, and Language varieties. Teachers can explore how life in a particular community influences literacies or discourse communities and language varieties. For “A,” students can look at the Accents and Actions of dialect and consider how the vernacular positions us in our local and global contexts. With a focus on Community (“C”), teachers can situate grammar as a tool for Conversation and investigate how that might vary from place to place (Culture). Finally, for “E,” teachers can frame grammar instruction as a way of being engaged in their community. Together this framework offers a critical lens for teaching grammar.

PLACE Framework	Components	Critical questions about place and grammar
P	Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is my sense of place? • Who are the people in my place? • How do we use reading writing, and speaking in my place?
	People	
	Parts of Speech	
L	Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is life like in my place? • What are the literacies in my place? • What are the language varieties?
	Literacies	
	Language varieties	
A	Accents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the accents in my place? • How is literacy used in actions?
	Actions	
C	Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is it like to live in my community? • Which cultures are represented? • What are conversations like in my place?
	Culture	
	Conversation	
E	Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are people engaged in this place?

Figure 1. PLACE Framework



PLACE Framework in Practice

In this section, we describe how to put the PLACE Framework into action in the classroom by using the critical questions in Figure 1 to help students think critically about the importance of grammatical concepts. An essential premise to using the PLACE Framework in grammar instruction is that grammatical concepts are specific tools that writers use with particular objectives in mind. When applying this idea specifically to PLACE, teachers can help their students identify specific grammatical components that authors use to provide a sense of place to their works. Once students develop a mastery of how authors do this, they can ultimately apply this conceptual framework to their own writing, allowing them to craft pieces that use grammatical concepts to purposefully and critically shed light on a piece's sense of place. In this section, we present and describe three key instructional recommendations for teachers to implement when helping their students understand the relationship between particular grammatical concepts and the sense of place in a piece of writing.

Recommendation #1: Show Students Specific Grammatical Concepts in Published Works.

This instructional process begins with showing students specific grammatical concepts in published works. By identifying these aspects of grammar for students, teachers can provide systematic grammar instruction while still teaching grammar in the context of writing instruction. For example, a teacher focusing on strong verb use (a grammatical concept associated with Common Core Language Standard 7.3.A) might use the following sentence from Paul Fleischman's novel, *Seedfolks*: "When Lateesha found out, she slammed the door in my face so hard the paint cracked" (54). In this excerpt, Fleischman uses the strong verb "slammed" to clearly illustrate Lateesha's action, as this word tells us exactly how she closed the door. A teacher could compare this strong verb with less-specific or wordier alternatives, such as "closed" or "forcefully closed" and talk with students about why these alternate phrasings are not as effective as the original strong verb.



Similarly, a teacher focusing on dialect and language variations (a grammatical concept addressed in Common Core Language Standard 5.3) might identify the following text from *Seedfolks* as an example of informal language:

“Deltoids—awesome. Pecs—check ’em out. Quads—now playing on a body near you. Can’t help being born with this body—or living three doors down from Kapp’s Gym” (51).

Phrased more formally, this text could read: “I have very defined and prominent deltoids, pectorals, and quadriceps. My body is impressive because of my genetics and the proximity of my home to Kapp’s Gymnasium.”

Teachers could present their students with each of these versions and identify specific ways the original version features informal language, while the revised version reveals formal language instead. Students and teachers could then talk about which language form is more similar to the kinds they hear in their community, and why one might use informal language in some situations and formal in others. Examining each of these versions could clearly demonstrate to students the differences in formal and informal language, while also fostering connections to the communication styles the students hear in their everyday lives, reinforcing the way grammar is contextualized by place.

Recommendation #2: Talk with Students about How Those Concepts Apply to the PLACE Framework.

After identifying specific grammatical concepts in published works, the next step is to have a conversation with students about how those concepts apply to the PLACE Framework. The specific connections will vary with different concepts, but each grammatical concept has the potential to provide insight into some element of the critical questions that comprise the PLACE Framework. For example, the strong verb “slammed” identified in the preceding example from *Seedfolks* provides insight into the narrator’s relationship with Lateesha and allows readers to draw conclusions regarding PLACE questions such as “What is life like in my place?” “How is literacy used in actions?” and “What are conversations like in my place?” An effective way to engage students in questions from the PLACE Framework is to show them the questions in Figure 1



and ask them which questions they think they can try to answer based on the grammatical concept you have pointed out to them.

While a conversation about the strong verb “slammed” might lead to a discussion of the three questions listed above, a different grammatical concept from the same text could facilitate a conversation about other PLACE questions. For example, the excerpt “I put chicken wire around ‘em, and even on top, but people could still reach in if they tried” from *Seedfolks* (56) lends itself to a conversation about prepositions (a grammatical concept associated with Common Core Language Standard 4.1.E), as “around,” “on top,” and “in” represent prepositions that are important to the meaning of the sentence. Some PLACE questions that students and teachers might identify as related to this excerpt are: “Who are the people in my place?” and “What is it like to live in my community?” Once students have identified and responded to these questions, they are ready for the next step of this process, in which they create their own works that purposefully use grammatical concepts.

Recommendation #3: Ask Students to Create their Own Works that Purposefully Use Grammatical Concepts

Once students have analyzed a piece of published writing for its use of grammatical concepts that apply to the PLACE Framework, they are ready to take even more of an active role in this process by creating their own works that purposefully use grammatical concepts to address one or more of the PLACE questions. Asking students to create their own works that utilize grammar in this way aligns with the idea of mentor texts (Calkins)—examples of great writing that students use as models for their own works—as well as the gradual “release-of-responsibility” method of instruction (Pearson and Gallagher), which calls for students to gradually take increased ownership of their learning.

While students are creating their own pieces that purposefully use grammatical concepts, we suggest that teachers hold one-on-one conferences with them. To maximize the effectiveness of these conferences, teachers can ask students what specific grammatical concepts they are using and how those concepts inform the piece of writing. For example, a student might identify his or her use of a relative clause (a grammatical concept associated with Common



Core Language Standard 4.1.A) as important to the PLACE Framework in a piece. A student who uses the relative clause “where my family has lived for generations” to describe a particular town or community would shed light on the student’s sense of place and what it is like for that individual to live in this particular community. Finally, it’s important to note that asking students to reflect on how these grammatical concepts are important to the sense of place in their pieces requires the students to think metacognitively about the impact that grammar has on their writing.

Conclusion

Grammar can be tough for the teachers teaching it and the students learning it. Contextualizing grammar instruction helps students learn the “tools” for writers and promotes their metacognitive growth in understanding grammatical concepts. Using place further supports this deep, metacognitive growth by providing students with the opportunity to connect grammar and the ways we speak and read and write to their personal sense of place. Often people limit their thinking of place-based instruction to environmental science or outdoor education; however, place can be a heavy hitter in a language arts classroom. Not only can the power of place help students connect to literature, it can also deepen their connection to writing, speaking, and critical understandings of how our personal literacies position us in the local and global context.

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The Case for Grammar-Supported Composition

By Rudolph Brathwaite, Assistant Professor,
The Community College of Baltimore County

This semester, the English Department at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) included six sections of a course named “Grammar and Usage.” The increased number of sections illustrates that there is a growing interest in grammar instruction. One hopes that this interest presages a changing outlook on the role of grammar instruction in composition classes. I am suggesting that grammar awareness and its integration into composition writing become an integral part of composition instruction, rather than just peripheral. This must be admitted: as a general rule, instructors teach constituents of grammar—the comma splice, the fragment, dangling and misplaced modifiers, the various types of grammatical sentences, the use of the comma, and so forth. What seems to be missing, or at least less emphasized, is the immersion of grammar in composition, where grammar becomes a natural and inevitable part of pre-writing and other parts of the writing process.

Grammar-supported instruction in composition is not the same as grammar-centered instruction, in which grammar is the dominant factor, nor is it instruction in which grammar is incidental, adventitious, and retrospective. Instead, it encourages students to see the relationship between grammar and writing not as one in which grammar is used solely as an editing, corrective tool, but as one in which it is a generative, creative, and vibrant instrument in the composing process. Grammar taught in this way is known as rhetorical grammar. In her book *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, 4th edition, Martha Kolln (a founding member of ATEG, The Association for Teachers of English Grammar, and a pioneer in rhetorical grammar) defines the term. She notes that “[u]nderstanding rhetorical grammar... means understanding the grammatical choices available to you when you write and the rhetorical effects those choices will have on your reader” (3). Similarly, in *Grammar Alive: A Guide for Teachers*, Brock Haussamen asserts that “[g]rammatical choices have rhetorical effects” (44). Haussamen adds that the



word *rhetoric* “refers to the way we arrange language to have the desired effect on our readers or listeners,” noting that “[w]e organize our sentences differently depending on who our audience is, what we want to emphasize, and how we want to sound” (44). In short, rhetorical grammar is audience-based.

While textbooks routinely discuss the importance of audience awareness, they do not mention how grammar can sharpen this awareness. My presentation will attempt to demonstrate the relevance of grammar-enhanced composition instruction by showing how such an approach can undergird a successful composition program.

In *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy distinguishes between the writing approaches of the experienced writer and those of the basic writer, noting that

[b]efore a practiced writer begins a sentence, he has – or feels that he has— almost an infinite number of ways of saying what he or she has to say. However BW [basic writing] students at the beginning of their apprenticeship seldom enjoy this kind of ease with formal written sentences [because] [f]or them, as for the foreign language student, the question is rarely “How can I make this sentence better” but “How can I make this sentence right?” (44)

Shaughnessy adds that the major concern of the basic writer is “with the syntax of competence, not of style, for they lack a sure sense of what the written code will allow” (44). The challenge of the instructor is to help the basic writer to acquire the syntax of style that Shaughnessy mentions.

Don Killgallon identifies this central difference between professional writers and basic writers: “[u]nlike professional writers, students tend to write sentences similar to the sentences they speak” (*Sentence Composing for College xi*). His goal is to enable students to “see how professional writers write their sentences... and [to] practice writing similar sentences by using four easy-to-learn techniques: *sentence unscrambling, sentence imitating, sentence combining and sentence expanding*” (xi). Killgallon then discusses the role of the participial phrase, absolute phrase, and appositives in the process demonstrating strategies that teachers can use to promote a better understanding of grammar and its crucial



role in writing. All of these approaches demonstrate that if taught in relation to rhetoric, grammar will not be seen as an arid, rule-based element, but as a creative aspect of writing.

I propose to discuss some ways in which the instructor can help students acquire a syntax of style.

Writing Introductions

Beginning an essay often presents students with difficulty as they struggle “to find the correct words.” They sometimes begin with the titles of the assigned topics, a habit that deprives the introduction of a context. Essays need background information, which provides an implicit reason for their being. The inspiration for an essay might be a quotation that an event evokes, a proverb, a reflection on a situation, or a story one remembers. Students who want to use quotations have a wide store from which to draw:

- “Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.” (Sir Francis Bacon) *This statement can be the opening sentence of an essay that will discuss the importance of reading, conversation, or writing.*
- “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” (Alexander Pope) *Students can begin with this quotation in an essay that discusses rashness or the need for deliberation.*
- “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” (James Baldwin) *Baldwin’s insight can launch an essay that will discuss the need to frankly face one’s problems.*
- “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music that he hears, however measured or far away.” (Thoreau) *Thoreau’s observation can introduce a discussion of individualism.*
- “We do not write because we want to; we write because we have to.” (Somerset Maugham) *Maugham’s comment can be the beginning sentence of an essay on the importance or value of writing.*

Another way to begin an essay is with a reminiscence or an anecdote. In *A Long Way Gone*, Ismael Beah employs this strategy repeatedly:



- “When I was a child my grandmother told me that the sky speaks to those who look and listen. She said, ‘In the sky there are always answers and explanations for everything; every pain every suffering, joy, and confusion’” (166).
- “When I was very little, my father used to say, ‘If you are alive, there is hope for a better day and something good to happen. If there is nothing left in the destiny of a person, he or she will die’” (54).

By invoking their parents or grandparents (the voices of experience), students can draw on a pool of information. This strategy also demonstrates that they have learned from the advice given to them. For this reason, I encourage students to recall parental advice.

Imitation

In the Preface to the *Art of Styling Sentences*, Ann Longknife and K.D. Sullivan make this comment:

The authors of the original text compiled their book to help students improve their writing style. The principles they advocated—and that have been used throughout history—of learning to write by imitating patterns, are valid today as shown in this revised edition. They devised the idea of the book from their extensive classroom experience, and we have built on that from our own classroom and editing experience. (v)

The idea of imitation in instruction is an old one, although of late it has become an object of criticism. Samuel Butler in his article “Imitation as Freedom: (Re)Forming Student Writing,” refers to many of the criticisms of imitation and demonstrates its benefits (1-8). He attributes the decline of imitation to the simultaneous growth of the process method, the latter, according to a popular school of thought, being associated with reflection, discovery, self-expression and creativity (1-4).

This view of the process method, Butler argues, is often derogatorily contrasted with the product method (imitation). Butler invokes Edgar V. Roberts’s *Writing About Literature*, whose “models and explanations helped me make new discoveries on my own and showed me that form and content are inextricably linked in the writing process... [and] gave me the freedom to



develop ideas by offering a form for me to imitate, a model from which to structure my own essays” (1).

As Butler has shown in his essay, when they imitate models, students can derive many advantages. Imitation is especially appropriate for non-traditional writers most of whom, unaccustomed to reading, have not yet absorbed and internalized the structures that reading widely provides. In my composition classrooms, therefore, I use the imitative method, among others. And what are some examples of rhetorical structures that students can imitate? They can imitate sentences written by professionals, in the process internalizing the structure of the original.

Longknife and Sullivan provide examples of sentence patterns that enhance the quality of writing. Among these is a list of appositives followed by a dash and a summarizing idea. The authors add that “[t]he key summarizing word before the subject may be one of these: *such, all, those, this, many, each, which, what, these, something, [and] someone*” (33). They give this example:

Hawaiians, Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese—these ethnic groups make up much of Hawaii’s diverse population. (33)

The summarizing clause after the dash produces a singular impact on the reader since it so definitive. In a definition essay (where students have explored the meaning of a term), such a sentence at the end provides a definitive clarity that enables the reader to understand the term’s meaning. The sentence below is an example.

Self-confidence, optimism, a sense of exploration—these are the defining characteristics of individualism.

Students can also use the summarizing pattern in the cause and effect essay, in which they are “wrapping up” a discussion of the causes or effects. In identifying the defining traits of an individual, students can end with this sentence:

Honesty, dedication, perseverance—these are the qualities that she demonstrates.

In a descriptive essay, they can use a sentence written like this:

The full moon, the fresh air, the tranquility—these are what made it a beautiful evening.



Another pattern that an instructor can ask students to imitate is the contrast, often an emphatic one, produced by “not.” Consider, for example, these statements and how the use of “not” produces an effective, definitive, contrasting statement:

- “A sunset is not criticized; it is admired.” (George Santayana)
- “True ease in writing comes from art, not chance.” (Alexander Pope)

In *No Impact Man*, Colin Beavan illustrates how *not* can be used for emphasis:

However much my grandparents’ ghosts might cluck their tongues at my way of life, it is not that my family alone had turned into some sort of monstrous, garbage-making machine. It’s not that I am a marred human being who took a wrong turn, or that I have turned bad in the twenty-five years since my grandparents wielded their influence over me. It’s not that I am the lazy ingrate I thought I was. But it may be that, as a member of the crew of the huge steamship that is our culture, I had acquiesced to some decisions that caused the boat to take a wrong turn, and possibly sink. (40)

Beavan’s repetition of the *not*-pattern demonstrates how it can produce a dissociative effect.

In *The Art of Styling Sentences*, Longknife and Sullivan refer to the “not” pattern as “a paired construction for contrast only” (93). They add:

This type of paired construction—the simple contrast—illustrates the differences between two ideas and usually a reversal... which... may be dramatically emphatic or may simply reinforce an ironic purpose... . To show a reversal in the middle of your statement, simply say something is “*this*, not *that*” or “not *this*, but *that*.” (93)

The authors add that “[p]unctuation marks—especially commas, dashes, or parentheses—will help indicate a break in your sentence and establish your point of reversal or contrast” (93). They then provide examples, among which are the following:

- “The famous actor was convinced that it was his personality, not his money, that attracted women”
- “Hard work, not luck, gets you promoted in business.”



- “For many people now, it is football—not basketball—that is the National Pastime.” (93)

Students can review these patterns and try them out in their own essays, changing the wording, but retaining the spirit of the original. I usually encourage students to use this pattern in the definition essay, in which they are employing the strategy of differentiation, explaining what a term being defined is not: “*Courage is not _____; it is not _____, nor is it _____. *Courage is _____.*”*

The Absolute Construction

An absolute construction (made up of a noun and a participle) plays no grammatical role in a sentence, its function being stylistic or rhetorical as these examples indicate:

- The work completed, the men returned home.
The phrase “the work completed” can be reworded as “the work having been completed.”
- The sun having set, the players ended their practice session.
- The drivers, caught in heavy traffic, became frustrated.
- The shoppers happily left the store, being satisfied that they obtained many bargains.

With its moveability – it is used at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the sentences—the absolute phrase enables students to achieve more variety in their writing. This construction is suitable for the narrative essay or any piece of writing that involves narration, and students can occasionally use it as an alternative to the predictable and “safe” dependent clause:

- After the work had been completed, the men returned home.
- After the sun had set, the players ended their practice session.
- The drivers, because they were caught in heavy traffic, became frustrated.
- The shoppers left the store happily since they were satisfied that they had obtained many bargains.

The absolute phrase can also be changed to a main clause:



- The men completed the work, and they returned home.
- The sun set, and the players ended their practice session.
- The drivers were caught in heavy traffic; they became frustrated.
- The shoppers left the store happily; they were satisfied that they had obtained many bargains.

Of the patterns illustrated here, the two main clauses seem the least satisfactory perhaps because they do not show a clear relationship between the two ideas.

Using the Noun Clause as Subject

In writing their papers, students can also draw on the noun clause (sometimes referred to as a substantive clause), which embodies an idea and can be replaced by the pronoun “it.” Noun clauses begin with a limited number of words, among which are *how*, *that*, *what*, *whatever*, *where*, *whichever*, *whoever*, and *why*. These clauses can be used as subjects, objects, and complements. Used as subjects of sentences, noun clauses give a ring of authority and assertiveness, thus attracting the reader’s attention. A study of Samuel Johnson’s *Rambler*, *Idler*, and *Adventurer* essays, for example, reveals that much of his assertive and authoritative style derives from his frequent use of noun clauses. Discussing the noun clause, Longknife and Sullivan comment:

Although a sophisticated pattern, it is (strangely enough) quite common in speech; it is easy to use in your written work, as well, if you understand that the dependent clause is merely a part (subject, object, or complement) of the independent clause. (97)

The follow are some examples:

- “What is done cannot be undone.” (Lady Macbeth) Earlier in the play, Lady Macbeth had remarked: “What is done, is done.” The subject of each sentence is the noun clause “What is done.” Notice that the clauses can logically be replaced by the pronoun “it”: “it is done.” If such a replacement cannot be made, then the clause is not a noun clause. Almost always, the verb immediately follows the noun clause. In some instances, an interrupter may occur; it should be set off by two commas.
- How one reacts to a crisis is a test of one’s character.



- That good writing skills is important cannot be denied.
- Whoever steals my purse steals trash.

Another sentence pattern worthy of imitation is parallelism. Students can be encouraged to study the use of parallelism in famous speeches. President Kennedy's "ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country" is a memorable example of parallelism and inversion.

Here the imperative mood and the parallel structure make the statement memorable. Reverend Martin Luther King provides a similar mixture of parallelism and inversion:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

One sees parallel prepositional phrases: "by the color of their skin" and "by the content of their character." The inversion is produced by ("color") and ("content").

I usually assign students a number of these sentences to imitate, hoping that the moving language will inspire them. These quotations are memorable because of their structure, their symmetry.

Sentence Combining

Sentence combining also helps to bring together grammar and composition. It is a useful technique because it enables the student to compose a wide variety of sentences, thus enhancing the quality of an essay. In summary, these advantages accrue from sentence combining:

1. It enables the writer to identify relatedness between ideas and therefore to weave initially disparate parts into a cohesive whole and thus compose more fluent, concise sentences.
2. It provides the student with a variety of rhetorical options by which he or she can appropriately address a variety of audiences. To require students to write for a specific audience is to ask them to consider a variety of rhetorical options.



3. It removes sentence construction from the sphere of the random to the deliberate, where the student purposely manipulates the language to achieve his or her rhetorical goals.
4. It militates against choppy sentences, which detract from writing and diminish its impact on the reader.
5. It helps to promote the concept of rhetorical grammar and enables students to appreciate the role of grammar in writing.

Tips When Combining Sentences

Teachers can give students tips on sentence combining. In my classes, I distribute this handout on how they can use sentence combining as they edit their essays:

1. You should approach a group of sentences with the belief that you can combine them in a variety of ways. Any group of sentences can be combined in five or more ways through techniques such as deleting and embedding of information and coordinating and subordinating ideas.
Delay the main verb. If you include the main verb early in the sentence, your combining options will be reduced, and you will not be able to expand the sentence easily.
2. **Use coordination and subordination**, especially the latter. Instead of using “, and it,” (which indicates a compound sentence), use “which,” a pronoun that introduces an adjective clause and creates a complex sentence (a sentence that contains one main clause and at least one subordinate clause).
3. **Seek opportunities to double adjective clauses through the use of parallelism.** For example, think of patterns such as the following: “which... and which...”; “whose... and whose,” and so on. Where the opportunity arises, try to include parallel triplets (three matching grammatical constituents). Consider, for example, Lincoln’s “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” in which each preposition phrase functions as an adjective modifying the noun “government.”



4. **Use appositives whenever possible.** Appositives rename nouns that precede them and are useful features of sentence expansion.
5. **Use parentheses** in which to include information that you want to make secondary. In this respect, parentheses can function as a closet in which you throw extra items: shoes, clothing, umbrellas, and so on.

The following illustration demonstrates how, through sentence combining exercises, students might achieve more variety in their writing.

Sentences to be combined

1. Walden Pond is now the site of many tourist stands.
2. Walden Pond was once praised by Thoreau for its beauty.
3. Whitman was a contemporary of Thoreau.

Option 1: Walden Pond, once praised for its beauty by Thoreau, a contemporary of Whitman, is now the site of many tourist stands.

- ◆ **Strategy:** Notice that in each of the original sentences the main verb occurs early, thus reducing the possibility for sentence amplification. In the combination, however, a participial phrase (“once praised for its beauty by Thoreau”) replaces the verb.

Option 2: Once praised for its beauty by Thoreau, a contemporary of Whitman, Walden Pond is now the site of many tourist stands.

- ◆ **Strategy:** Begin with the participial phrase. Notice that, as in the first example, the participial phrase (which functions as an adjective) modifies the subject, *Walden Pond*.

Option 3: Walden Pond, which was once praised for its beauty by Thoreau, Whitman’s contemporary, is now the site of many tourist stands.

- ◆ **Strategy:** Use a subordinate clause, *which was once praised for its beauty by Thoreau, Whitman’s contemporary*. The *which-* clause (a nonrestrictive adjective clause) modifies *Walden Pond*.

Option 4: Walden Pond is now the site of many tourist stands, although it was once praised for its beauty by Thoreau, a contemporary of Whitman.

- ◆ **Strategy:** Use a subordinate clause (an adverb clause), *although it was once praised for its beauty by Thoreau, Whitman’s contemporary*.



Option 5: Although it was once praised for its beauty by Thoreau, a contemporary of Whitman, Walden Pond is now the site of many tourist stands.

- ◆ **Strategy:** Begin with the subordinate clause. Note that the position of the clause at the beginning of the sentence shifts the emphasis, making the idea of Thoreau’s praise more important than it is in the previous sentence, where the clause is at the end.

Option 6: Walden Pond (though it was once praised for its beauty by Thoreau, a contemporary of Whitman) is now the site of many tourist stands.

- ◆ **Strategy:** Put the subordinate clause in the middle. One problem arises, however: the main verb (*is*) might be too far from the subject, *Walden Pond*. In this case, parentheses solve the problem. Since parentheses include afterthoughts, the reader is less likely to be distracted.

Option 7: Walden Pond is now the site of many tourist stands, yet it was once praised for its beauty by Thoreau, a contemporary of Whitman.

- ◆ **Strategy:** Use the coordinating conjunction *yet* to create a compound sentence. Consider the impact of “yet” on the sentence. It introduces a sharp and sudden reversal, and the reader perhaps derives a sense that this turn of events should not have occurred. Another feature of this sentence is the appositive “a contemporary of Whitman.”

Option 8: Walden Pond is now the site of many tourist stands, yet Thoreau, a contemporary of Whitman, had once praised it for its beauty.

- ◆ **Strategy:** This is a compound sentence that contains two main clauses that are joined by the coordinating conjunction “yet.” In this option, the active voice gives prominence to Thoreau, the individual. Also, the appositive is in the middle rather than at the end of the sentence.

Option 9: Thoreau, Whitman’s contemporary, once praised Walden Pond for its beauty; today, however, the pond is the site of many tourist stands.

- ◆ **Strategy:** The active voice gives prominence to Thoreau. In addition, the possessive case (“Whitman’s contemporary”) affects



the sentence differently from “a contemporary of Whitman”) because it achieves a greater sense of intimacy. In addition, the use of the semicolon and the conjunctive adverb *however*, creates a compound sentence.

Option 10: A contemporary of Walt Whitman, Thoreau once praised Walden Pond for its beauty; however, today, the pond is the site of many tourist stands.

- ◆ **Strategy:** The sentence begins with an appositive (“a contemporary of Whitman”), a structure that is more difficult than placing the appositive in the middle. Such a beginning enhances the quality of the sentence. Like the previous sentence, this one is compound since it contains the conjunctive adverb. Notice that, unlike the previous sentence, “however,” is given more prominence and creates a sharper, more noticeable edge than Option 9 does.

All in all, sentence combining gives a writer the tools to evoke specific responses from the reader.

Sentence Generation

Yet another strategy to promote grammar-supported composition is sentence generation. I assign students specific constituents to integrate into their essays. In the fall semester, for example, I gave the following assignment: *Write a five-paragraph essay on one of the given topics. Include five of the specified grammatical patterns listed. Identify the patterns that you have used.*

Topics (Choose one)

1. Why _____ is My Favorite Day of the Week
2. Why Internet Shopping Has Grown in Popularity
3. Why _____ is My Favorite Sitcom
4. Some Reasons for the Popularity of Reality Shows
5. Telecommuting and Working in an Office: A Comparison-Contrast
6. The Importance of Reading Widely
7. Some Causes and Effects of the Growth in Online Courses
8. Some Causes and Effects of the Decline of the Personal Letter
9. Skills I Would Like to Acquire in College



10. The Case for (against) Longer Vacations (Choose one position.)

Grammar Patterns to Include in the Essay:

1. A simple sentence that begins with a phrase
2. A compound sentence that includes a semicolon
3. A sentence with commas used in two ways
4. A sentence that begins with a noun clause as subject
5. A sentence with two parallel clauses
6. A sentence with a nonessential (nonrestrictive) clause
7. A sentence that contains both a colon and a semicolon
8. A sentence that imitates the following:

“The students, the teachers, the parents—these are people responsible for the school’s success.”

Note the pattern: appositive, appositive, appositive—a summarizing clause

9. A sentence with coordinate adjectives
10. A sentence that includes information between two dashes

In composing the assignment, I tried to assign topics with which students would be comfortable, the idea being to enable them to focus on integrating the patterns assigned. I also provided a wide choice of patterns. Future essays would include other patterns so that by the end of the semester students will have worked with a wide range.

Word Usage

Word usage is an important part of writing because it is the words and their arrangement that transmit the idea that the writer or speaker wants to get across to the reader or the listener. A major challenge of the writer is to avoid wordiness, which can obscure the idea that he or she is attempting to get across.

Prepositional Phrases and Wordiness

One of the most common errors that prepositional phrases cause is prolixity or wordiness. Claire Cook points out that these phrases “often keep company with weak verbs and ponderous nouns” (8), producing nominalized sentences. In



Style: The Basics of Clarity and Coherence, Joseph M. Williams defines nominalization:

A noun derived from a verb or adjective has a technical name: *nominalization*. The word [itself] illustrates its meaning: when we nominalize the verb *nominalize*, we create the nominalization *nominalization*. (31)

Williams cites examples of verbs and adjectives that are turned into nouns: the verb “resist” becomes “resistance,” “react” is changed to “reaction”; and the adjective “careless” is changed into the noun “carelessness,” “different” into “difference,” and “proficient” into “proficiency” (31). Williams then provides this example of a nominalized sentence:

- A revision of the program will result in increases in our efficiency in the servicing of clients.

The sentence, which contains seventeen words, has five prepositional phrases, a cluster indicating that it is wordy. The author revises the nominalized sentence:

- If we revise the program, we can serve clients more efficiently.

The abstract “a revision of the program” becomes a subordinate clause, “If we revise the program,” which is more concise, and a main clause “we can serve clients more efficiently” replaces “will result in increases in our efficiency in the servicing of clients.”

For all of its circumlocution, the original is a simple sentence; the revision is a complex sentence that uses the subject + verb + object (SVO) pattern that textbooks in composition recommend. Summarizing the benefits of this approach, Williams observes:

When you nominalize verbs, you have to link actions with fuzzy prepositions such as *of*, *by*, and *on the part of*. But when you use verbs, you link clauses with precise subordinating conjunctions such as *because*, *although*, and *if*. (37)

By integrating grammar and composition, the teacher can demonstrate how wordiness is not a whim but is often derived from incorrect grammatical and rhetorical choices. The idea is to try to express the sentiment in the fewest words possible. As they edit their papers, students can eliminate the following expressions and include the recommended substitutes.



Incorporating grammar more skillfully in the composition curriculum can inspire students to appreciate the elasticity of the language and its beauty. It can encourage them to play with the language, to go beyond the boundaries of their own style. In this respect, Professor Constance Weaver's remarks are instructive: "We need to have a playful attitude about our teaching, a playful attitude toward students' learning. Playful when it comes to trying new things, and playful about new kinds of errors..." (91). She concludes this part of her discussion with this exhortation:

Let's help our students... rediscover this playfulness, this attitude that language and grammar are to be played with, toyed with, bent, expanded, crafted, enjoyed. Let's free our students from their fears about 'being wrong', releasing and guiding them to become the writers they are capable of being. (92)

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Prescriptivism, Grammar Checkers, and *That* vs. *Which*

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Abstract

Grammar checkers don't just enforce the rules we care about, they tell us which rules we should care about. The *that/which* rule is an example. The rule has been embraced primarily by American English, where its increasing popularity coincides with the adoption of grammar checker software. This article outlines how handbooks began to promote this rule as grammar checkers became widespread, and it analyzes relative clauses in the Corpus of Historical American English to show how the rule was increasingly obeyed during the same period. Because grammar checkers are an important, if often unacknowledged, prescriptive force, we should teach students enough grammar to use this software effectively.

Introduction

Type the sentence which you are reading now into your word processor and a wiggly line might appear underneath the words *which you are reading now*. That wiggly line will go away if you change the *which* to a *that*: *the sentence that you are reading now*.

The wiggly line is alerting you to a violation of the *that/which* rule, the rule requiring *that* in restrictive relative clauses and *which* in nonrestrictive relative clauses. For example, consider these sentences:

- Sentence A: I bought a tablet computer that has the faster A7 chip.
- Sentence B: I bought a tablet computer, which will be easier to carry on trips.

In Sentence A, the pronoun *that* introduces a clause that is necessary to identify the kind of tablet computer I bought—the kind with an A7 chip. In Sentence B, the pronoun *which* introduces a clause that is nice to know—it explains why I bought a tablet computer—but not necessary to identify the kind of tablet computer I bought. After all, every tablet computer on the market is easier to carry on trips than my desktop model.



Occasionally, a relative clause could be either restrictive or nonrestrictive. Do I want to say that I purchased the specific type of computer recommended by my daughter (Sentence C)? Or did my daughter recommend that I buy a tablet computer instead of, say, a laptop (Sentence D)?

- Sentence C: I bought a tablet computer that was recommended by my daughter.
- Sentence D: I bought a tablet computer, which was recommended by my daughter.

The *that/which* distinction isn't necessary to convey meaning, however, because the commas convey the same information.

This redundancy may explain the rule's unimportance in British English, where *which* is normal for nonrestrictive clauses while either *that* or *which* will do for restrictive clauses (Leech, et al.). In fact, one study found that British news uses restrictive *which* three times more often than American news does; in conversation, American speakers use restrictive *that* about twice as often as British speakers (Algeo 113). A comparison of the Corpus of Contemporary American English to the British National Corpus found that the British use *which* nine times as often as Americans do, and that American newspapers are strictest of all in following the rule (Owen). British standard usage is so different from American that when editors adapted the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* to the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English*, they had to change many pronouns from *which* to *that* (Algeo 113).

Thirty years ago, as an undergraduate tutor in my college's writing center, I asked for a rule about when to use *which* and when to use *that*, and was told the choice didn't matter as long as my meaning was clear. (The then-current 10th edition of the *Harbrace Handbook* agreed: "Although some writers prefer to use *that* at the beginning of restrictive clauses, *which* is also acceptable" (Hodges and Whitten 126). A few years later, a graduate school professor called the rule unrealistic pedantry—and it was the first time any of my classmates had heard of it. Yet by the time I was a newly minted assistant professor, directing a writing center of my own, students and faculty frequently asked me to explain the rule.



What had changed? Writing technology. Everyone had started using word processing software, complete with “grammar checker.” I became convinced that, were it not for the wiggly lines underneath our *that*’s and *which*’s, most of us would still be unaware of the rule.

Recently, another new technology has made it easier to research this phenomenon: digital corpora. This article draws on the Corpus of Historical American Usage (Davies) to show how increasing adherence to the *that/which* rule coincides with the rise of grammar check software.

History of the *that/which* rule

The *that/which* rule was proposed in 1906, yet widely ignored, except for a few militant usage guides, until very recently.

In 1906, Henry Watson and Francis George Fowler proposed the rule in their wildly popular usage guide *The King’s English* in order to correct the “regrettable” practice of regarding *that* as “ornamental variation for ‘who’ and *which*” They conclude pessimistically:

The reader will find that our rules are quite as often violated as observed
... . (*King’s English*)

Nearly twenty years later, H.W. Fowler in *The Dictionary of Modern English Usage* was equally pessimistic:

[I]f writers would agree to regard *that* as the defining relative pronoun, & *which* as the non-defining, there would be much gain both in lucidity & in ease. Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers.

Despite this pessimism, the rule was adopted by a few style guides (McDavid), most notably, *The Elements of Style*—not the original 1918 handbook by William Strunk (Strunk never mentioned the rule), but the 1959 revision by Strunk’s famous student, E.B. White, who added the *that/which* rule and revised away any of Strunk’s examples that did not conform.

Still, many influential texts ignored the rule. For example, the *Harbrace Handbook*, the prescriptive paradigm for composition handbooks since 1941 (Hawhee), didn’t embrace the rule until the mid-90s, as these examples show:



<i>Harbrace Handbook: Advice about That vs. Which</i>	
Edition	Advice
3 rd (1951)	"The car <i>which is parked across the street</i> is ready" is an example of a restrictive clause (127).
9 th (1982)	Note: Although some writers prefer to use the connective <i>that</i> at the beginning of restrictive clauses, <i>which</i> is also acceptable" (139).
11 th (1990)	Includes the same note as the 9th, but provides an example that violates it: "The party opposed taxes <i>which</i> would be a burden to working Americans" (135-46).
12 th (1994)	Note: Sometimes only the omission or the use of commas indicates whether a modifier is restrictive or nonrestrictive and thus signals the writer's exact meaning. Although many writers prefer to use <i>that</i> at the beginning of restrictive clauses, <i>which</i> has become acceptable if it does not cause confusion. (135)"
14 th (2001)	" <i>That</i> has traditionally been used with a restrictive clause: The cup that is on the table is full [distinguishes a specific cup that is full]. <i>Which</i> has traditionally been used with a nonrestrictive clause: The cup, which is on the table, is full ["which is on the table" gives nonessential information]. Increasingly, however, writers are using these interchangeably and the distinction between them is becoming blurred. (761)"
18 th (2013)	"Both <i>that</i> and <i>which</i> occur in essential (restrictive) clauses, although traditionally only <i>that</i> was considered acceptable" (Glenn and Gray 721).

Though the 1994 advice is sound, it implies that the restrictive *which* is some kind of newfangled usage, which is incorrect. The 14th (2001) edition is also wrong because *that/which* restrictions have, if anything, become more rigid, not blurred. By 2013, the rule has acquired the patina of tradition.

Another text, *The Associated Press Stylebook*, also adopted the rule surprisingly recently. In the twelve editions I was able to locate (1960, 1963, 1942, 1970, 1977, 1984, 1987, 2000, 2004, 2009, 2011, and 2013), the earliest mention of the *that/which* rule was 1987:



That is the preferred pronoun to introduce essential clauses that refer to an inanimate object or an animal without a name. *Which* is the only acceptable pronoun to introduce a nonessential clause that refers to an inanimate object or an animal without a name.

The pronoun *which* occasionally may be substituted for *that* in the introduction of an essential clause that refers to an inanimate object or an animal without a name. In general, this use of *which* should appear only when *that* is used as a conjunction to introduce another clause in the same sentence: *He said Monday that the part of the army which suffered severe casualties needs reinforcement.* (75)

The same wording is used in the 2013 edition.

In short, my experience—that the rule became more important after the mid-90s—matches the advice given by two influential handbooks, the *Harbrace Handbook* and the *Associated Press Stylebook*.

History of Grammar Check Software

As handbooks began to embrace the rule, grammar checking software became ubiquitous. Word processors were invented first. WordStar was released in 1978 for CP/M-based personal computers, the IBM PC (and DOS) became available in 1981, WordPerfect was released in DOS format in 1982, and MacWrite and Microsoft Word were released in 1984 (Haswell). The technology spread quickly, particularly in schools; the ratio of computers to students shrank from 1 to 125 in 1983, to 1 to 4.2 in 2001 (Pemberton 52). By 2013, the U.S. Department of Commerce found that 76% of American households reported having a desktop, laptop, or tablet computer at home, the vast majority of which would supply a word processor (3).

Initially, word processors did not check grammar or even spelling—people purchased stand-alone software to do that. Spell-checkers were integrated into word processors WordStar and WordPerfect in 1985, into Microsoft Word 3.0 in 1986, and into MacWrite in 1990 (Haswell; Connors and Lunsford). Grammar checkers remained stand-alone packages for a few more years; in 1987, stand-alone grammar checkers such as Grammatik were the most commonly used programs in writing centers (Palmquist 17). In 1992, Microsoft Word 5.0 was the



first to acquire and integrate a grammar-checker. Still, the grammar check, along with the spell check, ran as a separate process until 1995, when the squiggly lines arrived (Haswell).

Early grammar checkers worked by “pattern matching,” comparing text to a pre-existing database. For example, a spelling checker would maintain a list of all allowable word forms and compare every word in the text to that list. These early grammar checkers would also compare text to vocabulary lists (such as sexist words, redundant phrases, clichés, etc.) This type of program was unable to locate run-on sentences, agreement problems, mixed tenses, or similar syntactic issues (Costanzo 147). A 1993 review noted wryly, “As a general rule, the less useful a piece of ‘style’ information is to a writer, the easier it is to implement and therefore the more frequently will you find it in postwriting systems!” (Williams 117).

These rules were apparently drawn from contemporary writing handbooks. For example, the back cover of the instruction manual for Grammatik II says, “Grammatik II runs your word processing documents through its extensive English rulebook. These include the same basic rules your English teacher tried to teach you. And some more advanced rules even professional writers are proud to follow” (Bauer). The manual includes an appendix of 25 “useful reference books,” including Fowler’s *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* and Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*. Thus from their very earliest days, grammar checkers enforced the *that/which* rule (Smith, et al 218).

In 1997, Microsoft began to use a hybrid system that incorporated both pattern matching and Natural Language Processing (NLP) (Leacock, et al 7). NLP grammar checking is complex because the software must be able to parse sentences, identify errors, and then figure out what corrections to suggest. A single problem sentence might require several layers of analysis. Still, NLP relies on prescriptive rules, as this example (from Leacock, et al.) illustrates:

Three new text which deal with this problem has been written in the last year.
This example contains three errors:



1. The noun phrase *three new text* reflects number disagreement: the quantifier *three* doesn't agree with the noun headword *text*. Is this phrase supposed to be singular or plural?
2. The relative pronoun *which* refers to *three new text* but the headword *text* doesn't agree with the verb *deal* in that relative clause
3. The relative clause is assumed to be non-restrictive, which means that it should be bracketed with commas.

After identifying these three errors and parsing the sentence (labeling each word according to its potential form, function, and other grammatical features), the algorithm then tries to resolve the problems.

1. Because the word *three* indicates that the writer intended a plural, the software suggests the correction *three new texts*.
2. If the writer accepts this correction, the software re-parses the sentence. This time, it detects subject verb disagreement between the plural subject and the verb *has*, so it suggests a change to *have*.
3. The verb *deal* agrees with the now-plural subject, so that error is dropped.
4. The relative clause “is identified as a potential non-restrictive relative, based on the choice of relative pronoun,” so the software suggests adding commas before and after it. (Leacock et al 9-11)

As you can see, despite the complexity of the analysis, this example still uses a simple binary to assess relative clause pronouns: because the writer uses *which*, the software concludes that the clause must be nonrestrictive. But based on meaning, this clause is more likely to be restrictive, because more than three texts (overall) were written over the course of a year. NLP is more sophisticated than earlier grammar checkers, but still it unthinkingly obeys the *that/which* rule.

Errors like this lead Tim McGee and Patricia Ericsson to complain that “some points of careful usage that better grammar handbooks try to preserve get flattened by the binary Grammar Checker, thereby depriving users of a subtle marker of formal tone” (456). McGee and Ericsson use the *that/which* rule as an example:



[S]everal recent handbooks insist upon *which* for nonrestrictive relative clauses and recommend *that* for restrictive clauses, but will allow *which* for restrictive clauses, noting that such usage indicates a more informal tone. The MSGC [Microsoft Grammar Checker], however, takes a strictly binary approach. It flags any *which* that is not bracketed by commas, thereby suggesting that restrictive clauses ought to use a *that*. It is difficult to determine whether the MSGC does this because it's easier for the program to handle a simple binary or because the computational linguists had loaded in the more restrictive prescriptions of Strunk and White, rather than the more accurate description of more recent handbooks. (456)

It is no wonder so many people began asking about the *that/which* rule at the same time that the software became ubiquitous.

Analysis of Usage in the Corpus of Historical American Usage

So some handbooks changed as grammar checkers became more widely available. I don't know about you, but I turned off those squiggly lines long ago. So how can we tell whether grammar checkers made any difference? Did actual usage change?

To answer this question, I checked the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), which contains more than 400 million words of text of American English from 1810 to 2009. Obviously it would be impossible to read through 400 million words, so I had to devise a way to locate relative pronouns, which, though I didn't realize it when I started, is a notoriously difficult task (Hundt et al.). A search simply for the words *that* and *which* would return huge quantities of irrelevant hits, such as questions ("Which store did you go to?") and demonstrative pronouns ("Why did you go to that store?")

So instead, I constructed four search queries:

- A. "nonrestrictive *which*": [noun] + [comma] + *which* + [verb]
- B. "nonrestrictive *that*": [noun] + [comma] + *that* + [verb]
- C. "restrictive *which*": [noun] + *which* + [verb]
- D. "restrictive *that*": [noun] + *that* + [verb]

These queries retrieved primarily relative clauses, though they did not completely eliminate false positives. For example, search B for nonrestrictive *that* clauses



also found, “Girl, that is strange coming out of a vampire.” More significantly, these searches excluded all relative clauses that didn’t fit those patterns, including:

- relative clauses that follow interrupting text that doesn’t end with a noun (e.g., *There were clauses, after all was said and done, that were omitted from the results*—pattern is [verb] + [comma] + that + [verb])
- relative clauses in which the relative pronoun serves as the direct object (e.g., *I found clauses that I expected to find*—pattern is [noun] + that + [noun] + [verb])
- relative clauses in which the relative pronoun serves as the object of a preposition, aka “pied piped” clauses (e.g., *I found clauses within which some surprises lurked*—pattern is [noun] + [preposition] + which + [noun] + [verb])

Expanding the search to include those additional patterns would have yielded many false positives, so I didn’t expand the search.

Another caveat is that these searches defined restrictive/nonrestrictive clauses according to the presence or absence of commas. To the extent that the comma use violated the rule, the categories can be misleading—but to categorize clauses according to meaning would have required so much more time that I couldn’t have conducted the study.

The four searches I constructed yielded interesting results. The nonrestrictive uses have been fairly stable, but restrictive uses show a dramatic trend toward restrictive *that* and away from restrictive *which*. This trend predates the invention of grammar checker software.

To investigate whether the development of grammar checker software explains any portion of the trend, I conducted a statistical test called multiple regression. This test helps to determine how well different factors can explain a particular variable. Because the nonrestrictive pronoun results were noisier, and because they didn’t change much, I didn’t analyze them; I also couldn’t analyze restrictive *which* because the data didn’t meet the requisite assumptions for the test (the correlation between year and frequency was too high).



However, restrictive *that* could be analyzed. So I ran a hierarchical multiple regression to determine whether using software availability was more effective than using just the year alone to predict restrictive "that" usage. Using both software and year to predict restrictive "that" usage was statistically significant: $R^2 = .705$, $F(2, 195) = 232.640$, $p < .001$; adjusted $R^2 = .702$. Adding grammar software availability to the year led to a statistically significant increase in R^2 of $.169$, $F(1, 195) = 111.389$, $p < .001$.

The R^2 figure in these results gives the strength of the correlation; this figure can range from 0 (no correlation) to 1 (perfect correlation). The p is the probability that the result is due to chance. What these results show is that grammar software availability helps predict how frequently restrictive *that* is used. The effect, though small ($R^2 = .169$), is statistically meaningful, with a very low probability of happening by chance ($p < .001$). These results are consistent with other corpus studies (Ball; Bohmann and Schultz; Moon).

In short, yes, usage changed. At the same time that grammar software became available, American publications increasingly began to follow the *that/which* rule.

Discussion

Although correlation isn't causation, the phenomenon I noticed—increasing attention to the *that/which* rule—is reflected in handbook revisions, grammar checker adoption, and relative pronoun choice.

It's important to remember that most, if not all, of the COHA texts are professionally edited. Because of this, the strict adherence to the *that/which* rule might have been prompted by editors rather than by writers. In a passionate *Language Log* post, Arnold Zwicky makes this argument, saying "what appears in the corpora is not, exactly, what people wrote; instead, it's what got published, and in the U.S. there's an almost religious attachment to the That Rule in the editorial establishment, which intervenes between the writer's original text and the version that appears in print" ("That's American"). In a related post, Zwicky tells the story of his own interactions with editors on this point:

Every so often, I've had to deal with editors from presses who are genuinely puzzled by the passion I have invested in protesting the That Rule... Twice,



my aggressive truculence about the That Rule (and a collection of other zombie rules) has prompted editors to cave in to my craziness and let me do whatever I want. Me. Not anyone else, just me, for this one book. They were then baffled that I didn't view this response as really satisfactory. I pointed out that the scholarly books their firms published on English grammar uniformly failed to subscribe to the That Rule, so that their presses looked like packs of hypocrites and fools. They simply didn't get it. For them, one thing is scholarship, the other thing is practice. They're just different. ("Five More")

Zwicky fears that once a rule has achieved this sort of status in copy editing, "the prescription might well go on forever as a 'zombie rule'; no matter how many times, and how thoroughly, it is executed by authorities (like Quirk, Biber, Huddleston & Pullum, or, for that matter, me), it continues its wretched life-in-death in style sheets and grammar checkers and the like" ("Five More").

A recent M.A. thesis by Jonathon Owen finds that this rule is indeed one of editors' most-enforced rules. Owen examined the usage and grammar changes made by student editorial interns; then he persuaded volunteer professional editors to edit the same articles and compared the professionals' changes to the interns' changes. The largest category of changes involved relative pronouns and adverbs, and "far and away" the most popular of those changes was the substitution of *that* for *which* (49). Owen notes that this rule "does not seem to have much to do with copy editors' stated objectives of clarity or correctness, unless one defines correctness simply as adherence to rules, which is entirely circular" (66-67). He points out that circularity

seems to be an unsatisfactory way to determine whether a rule should be followed, since usage commentators could invent any baseless rule, editors could diligently enforce it in print, and the resulting text would then be taken as evidence that the rule is valid and should continue to be enforced... . [T]raditional corpus data may tell us that the *that/which* rule is followed in print, but it does not tell us who is enforcing it (the writer or editor), who views adherence to the rule as correct or departures from it as incorrect, or whether it is worth an editor's time to enforce it. (64-65)



As Owen makes clear, this study can't determine whether it is writers who increasingly obey the *that/which* rule, or editors who compel them to do so, or both. Of course, editors use word processors, too. Whether editors or writers have led the switch to restrictive *that*, the change coincides with the growing popularity of grammar checkers.

If grammar checkers actually caused a change in usage, would it matter? Some hold strong views on the subject. For example, Zwicky objects to the fact that the *that/which* rule "CHANGE[S] the formal written standard, by removing some of its flexibility" and that it increases redundancy by requiring two signals of restriction, commas and pronoun, rather than just commas ("Five Thoughts"). On the other end of the spectrum, Bryan Garner writes in *Garner's Modern American Usage*:

You'll encounter two schools of thought on this point. First are those who don't care about any distinction between these words, who think that *which* is more formal than *that*, and who point to many historical examples of copious *whiches*. They say that modern usage is a muddle. Second are those who insist that both words have useful functions that ought to be separated, and who observe the distinction rigorously in their own writing. They view departures from this distinction as "mistakes."

Before reading any further, you ought to know something more about these two groups: those in the first probably don't write very well; those in the second just might... .

The only retrospective blame that might lie with the Fowler brothers is that they pressed their point too diffidently. The distinction between *that* and *which* makes good sense. It enhances clarity. And the best American editors follow it. (806-807)

Those with similarly passionate opinions will either lament or rejoice at the notion that grammar checkers have influenced American usage.

Those of us who teach grammar have another reason to care whether grammar checkers influence usage: the software's influence shows how important grammar instruction is. Grammar checkers are notoriously unreliable, yet the software is "the most ubiquitous prescriptive grammatical force in the



world at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (Curzan 92). Ideally, we will teach students enough grammar that they can make intelligent revision choices, rather than blindly following software recommendations (McAlexander; Potter and Fuller; Vernon). Our students will become the writers and editors who produce and polish the words that will become tomorrow’s standard. They deserve the opportunity to learn enough grammar to base their choices, not on mechanical feedback, but on their own informed judgment.

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Teaching about Language Change: The Case of *Relatable*¹

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As I read my students' writing, I often find their idiomatic usages peculiar: they write *on accident* where I would use *by accident*; *based off* where I would write *based on*; *more supportive for* where I would write *more supportive of*; or they use *relatable* as an adjective meaning roughly "that someone can identify with or relate to," as in "I liked his story because it was really relatable" (that is, "I liked his story because I could identify with it").

When, as teachers, we are faced with a large stack of papers, the most expeditious approach to such oddities, which we generally think of as errors, is simply to correct them and move on. But when we just strike out the *on* in *on accident* and replace it with *by*, we reinforce the entrenched notion that "correctness" is simply black or white, and that there are People Who Know What Is Correct—language authorities—*US*—and then there are People Who Don't Know—*THEM*—our students—for whom "correctness" may always be something of a mystery: they must either learn the "correct" forms by rote (according to whatever the authority of the moment says), or simply resign themselves to being "wrong" and "bad writers."

However, we could educate our students in a different way, by showing them that "correctness" is often not black-and-white, that they have choices in any language context, and that they can control those choices. Then, rather than simply "correcting" students' non-Standard idioms, we could use those idioms as opportunities to teach students to become more discerning judges of language choice and language change. We can flag such usages, and suggest the alternative(s) that we think would be more appropriate. We can then have our students compare their usage and the alternatives, using a small number of tools that will provide a range of information about the current state of that usage in the language. These tools include the following:

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the national meeting of the College English Association in Baltimore, MD on March 27, 2014. My thanks to Mara Katz for her help in analyzing and processing the *LexisNexis* data on *relatable*.



- any of the major free online dictionaries (e.g. *Merriam-Webster Online*; *Dictionary.com*; *Cambridge Free English Dictionary*; *Longman English Dictionary Online*);
- the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*;
- a free online thesaurus (e.g. *Thesaurus.com* or *merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/*);
- the Google Ngram Viewer;
- the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*;
- *LexisNexis*; and
- plain Google searches.

Each of these sources will provide different information about the acceptability of a particular usage, and based on the sum of that information we can have a conversation about when and where it might be appropriate to use a particular word, phrase, or other construction. In this way, we can teach our students how to discern language change as it is happening and to make more thoughtful word and grammar choices based on how far their idioms have entered general usage; the audience they are addressing; and the formality of the context.

Let's take the case of *relatable*, which, in the sense I have offered, frequently shows up in my students' writing. Given the sentence *I liked his story because it was really relatable*, depending on the larger context, our inclination might be to suggest revising it to something like *I liked his story because it was really interesting* or *engaging*, or *I liked his story because I could relate to it* (if that sense of the verb *relate* is not too informal), or a stronger revision that prompted the writer to further articulate their thinking: *I liked his story because I could understand* or *empathize with the characters and the situation*. My sense, and I suspect yours, is that *relatable* may be part of our students' spoken idiom, but we may not yet be comfortable with admitting it as a formal written usage. With a little research, we can show our students the basis for our sense about and judgment of *relatable*, beyond the apparently arbitrary workings of a Mysterious Authority.



In the free online dictionaries, while we find *relatable* listed as the adjective form of the verb *relate*, we simply don't find that adjective defined in the sense we mean here. However, in the current online edition of the *OED*, we find three definitions of *relatable*, the third and newest of which being the sense of the word that we are considering here.

1. Able to be told or narrated; suitable for relating (originating about 1825; hereafter *OED1*).
2. Able to be brought into relation with something else; capable of being related or connected (to something) (originating about 1868; hereafter *OED2*).
3. That can be related to (*RELATE* *v.* 9); with which one can identify or empathize (hereafter *OED3*).

1965 *Theory into Pract.* 4 119 The research indicated that boys saw teachers as more directive, while girls saw them as more 'relatable'.

1981 *Washington Post* (Nexis) 19 Oct. D1 It's relatable humor, the kind that takes place in every home.

2003 *Sci Fi* Oct. 59/1 We aren't murder of the week; we have a much broader spectrum to look into... which I think will be very relatable to the WB audience.

2007 *N.Y. Times Mag.* 4 Mar. 47/2 This is what's going on in sex and in college right now, and these are real people, and you're more relatable if you're a real person. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

By contrast, the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* presents only *OED3* and *OED2*, in that order:

relatable ► **adj.** **1** enabling a person to feel that they can relate to someone or something: *some characters feel more relatable than others.* **2** able to be related to something else. (*Concise*)

The *OED* entry tells us that its third sense of *relatable* has been in English usage for about 50 years; and the ordering of the senses in the *Concise OED* acknowledges—or asserts—that this sense of *relatable* is the most common. But in what context?



In their original contexts, all of the examples given with *OED3* are quoted speech; all four examples are from interviews. The fuller context of the 1965 example reads,

It therefore seems necessary to raise the question: How do elementary boys and girls perceive the social and emotional contexts of classrooms? Such a study was done using 400 fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade pupils. The research indicated that boys saw teachers as more directive, while girls saw them as more “relatable” and interested in a “factual orientation.” (Waetjen 118-119)

The scare quotes seem to indicate that the word *relatable* is quoted from the study subjects’ own language. The 1981 example is a direct quote from an interview with Bob Eubanks, host of the TV gameshow *The Newlywed Game*, talking about the show in the *Style* section of *The Washington Post* newspaper (Darling). I have not yet been able to find a copy of the original context of the 2003 example, but it comes from the pages of *SciFi* magazine, published by the cable television *SyFy* channel. The text seems pretty clearly to be a quote from an interview.

The final *OED* example, from 2007, is once again quoted speech, taken from an interview with the student editor of a collegiate sex magazine (Jacobs). Thus, at least according to the examples in *OED3*, the word *relatable* is something people say (at least as recently as 2007), part of their conversational idiom; and in three of these four examples, it is associated with entertainment media. It is true that new words and usages often enter the written language from the spoken language by first appearing as quoted speech. But has *relatable* made that transition yet: is it something people write in formal contexts, outside of the frame or insulation of quoted speech?

The *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)* offers a variety of sources on the state of the language, both spoken and written, providing searchable texts from popular and academic periodicals, as well as transcripts of radio and TV interview and news shows. A search in *COCA* for *relatable* returns 106 examples, dating from 1990 to 2012. Of these examples, all are from transcripts of spoken word sources use the *OED3* sense of *relatable*; and all that are from newspapers, magazines and fiction use the *OED3* sense of *relatable*, but



only in quoted speech. Of the 15 examples from academic journals, seven use *OED2*, “Able to be brought into relation with something else; capable of being related or connected (to something).”

Of the remaining eight *COCA* examples of *relatable* from academic journals, one appears in quoted speech, and four appear in articles about film and popular culture (which may be related to Freeman’s assertion that the common use of *relatable* emerges from Southern California’s film culture). Of those four uses, however, two are clearly flagged as uncommon: one by scare quotes, and one by a parenthetical explanation:

What makes the film both “**relatable**” and convenient for straight audiences is that they can feel good about feeling bad for the gay characters on screen. (Piontek 129)

In order to justify the expense, the banks that underwrite productions require further insurance that their investment will be recouped, all of which leaves the financial burden on producers, who assume that the surest way of reaching the widest possible audience is to dumb down the script by appealing to universal (familiar) themes and **relatable (stock)** characters. (Rose 97)

By contrast, in a scholarly article about *kung fu* films, Dumas uses *relatable* without any indication that it might be, even potentially, unacceptable:

Hark’s re-imaginings of wuxia were some of the first to incorporate both Western film technology and genre conventions, arguably creating a more universally **relatable** conceptualization of the wuxia genre. (70)

That said, such films are by and large subtle in their references to historical events and local concerns and thus, arguably, neither as **relatable** nor cross-culturally translatable as the works of more mainstream Hong Kong directors. (72)

Finally, in a 2009 article in the *Journal of Instructional Psychology* titled “Building Interpersonal Relationships as a Key to Effective Speaking Center



Consultations,” Ward and Schwartzman use *relatable* three times in the context of talking about building effective relationships in a clinical setting:

If consultants understand their clients’ actions, they will better be able to help them within consultations. Specifically, in one survey a client wrote, “She **related** with my past experiences.” Another client said, “She used personal examples that gave me an idea of what was appropriate.” Here, the consultant evidently was focused on bringing to the surface **relatable** experiences shared between the consultant and client. (366)

Research on speech labs shows that when clients feel as if their consultants are **relatable** or empathetic, they “will perform more positively” (Hill & Courtright, 1981, p. 223). Such **relatable** behavior can change the communication behavior and outlook of clients (Hill & Courtright, 1981). Empathy is more than a single action. Rather, empathetic behavior encompasses a range of skills, including those associated with active listening: attending behaviors, verifying content, and listening for feelings (Schwartzman, 2007). (368)

So, since 1990, *COCA* records only 106 total uses of *relatable*, 99 of which are examples of *OED3*. Of those 99 only five, in two formal scholarly articles, are clearly unmarked non-conversational usages.

A search of *LexisNexis* provides the most up-to-date evidence about the state of the language from newspapers and other popular print and web sources, not only in US English, but in a broad range of world Englishes. An analysis of the 524 most recent tokens of *relatable* (from November 27, 2012 to May 31, 2014) shows that the *OED3* sense is used overwhelmingly (514 tokens, versus only ten examples of *OED2*). Of those 514 tokens of *OED3*, the overwhelming majority are from articles about entertainment-related topics (459 tokens). Of the rest, 32 are from news articles; 21 from advertising; and 2 from scholarly articles. And in the entertainment-related articles that use *relatable* with the *OED3* sense, the great majority of examples are from articles about movies (124 tokens), TV (104), and theater (69).



It is notable, however, that out of the 514 tokens of *OED3*, the number of tokens of *relatable* with sense *OED3* that are not quoted (276 [54%]) exceeds the number that are quoted (227 [44%]; 11 [2%] are in scare quotes). The same distribution holds overall for all tokens of *OED3* from articles about entertainment-related topics, and for the subset of articles about movies. However, the proportions are flipped for articles about TV and theater. Figure 1 adds another nuance, showing that while, in the US, entertainment writers in the popular press have embraced the use of *relatable* in unquoted language, their colleagues in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada are as yet not so committed to the unquoted use of this sense of *relatable*; and in India, this use of *relatable* is still more regarded as a feature of speech than as appropriate to the written language.

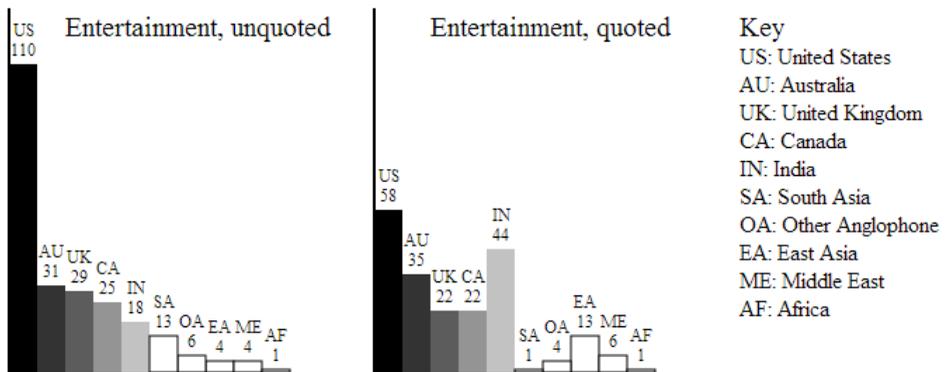


Figure 1: Distribution of *LexisNexis* tokens of ‘relatable’ from articles on ‘entertainment,’ based on 524 tokens from Nov 27, 2012 to May 31, 2014

The Google Books Ngram Viewer provides another approach to a nuanced position on the use of *relatable*. Using the digitized Google Books collection, which comprises about 6,000 books per year, a simple search for just the word *relatable* returns the following graph (Figure 2):



Google books Ngram Viewer

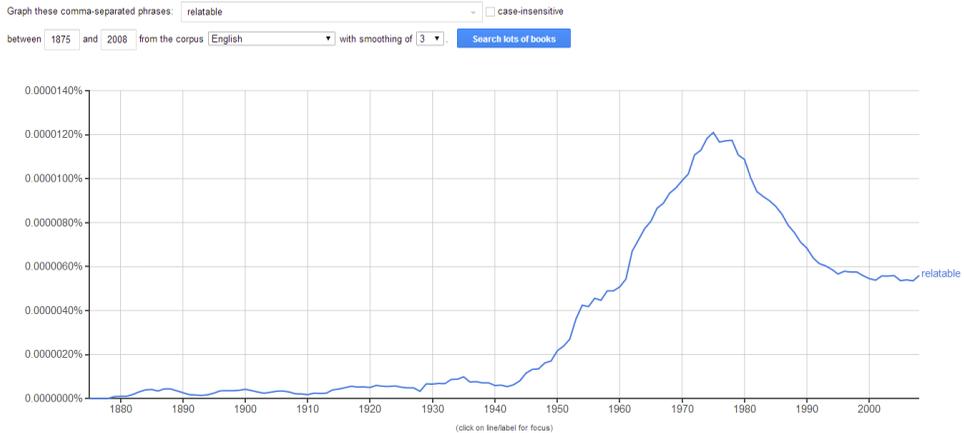


Figure 2: Google Ngram search results for *reliable*.

Note that this graph includes uses of *reliable* with all three meanings, and that the use of all senses of *reliable*, both quoted and unquoted, apparently peaked in 1975.

And when we compare the use of *reliable* to the use of its common synonyms, the results are even more revealing. A quick side trip to *Thesaurus.com* shows that, while its parent *Dictionary.com* (like other popular dictionaries) does not include the *OED3* meaning of *reliable*, this thesaurus does, providing us with several words that we could substitute for *reliable* in a frame sentence, including *accessible*, *approachable*, *engaging*, *interesting*, and *understandable*:

You're more *reliable* if you're a real person.

You're more

accessible/approachable/engaging/interesting/understandable if you're a real person.

Conveniently, *Google Ngram* provides access to the texts from which it derives its graphs. By examining a large set of the examples of actual uses of *reliable* in their original contexts, we can expand the list of synonyms; note that Google has



tagged each word in the database with a part-of-speech label, so one can search for *engaging* used as an adjective or as a verb by adding the tag *_ADJ* or *_VERB* to the search. The larger list of synonyms includes *accessible*, *endearing_ADJ*, *engaging_ADJ*, *interesting_ADJ*, *likable*, *personable*, *relatable*, *relevant*, *sympathetic*, *trustworthy*, *understandable*, and *understanding_ADJ*. Querying Google Ngram for these terms, and graphing their use against each other, shows that their frequency of use falls into three tiers. In the lowest tier, along with *relatable*, are the synonyms, *likable*, *personable*, *endearing_ADJ*, *understanding_ADJ*, and *engaging_ADJ* (Figure 3):

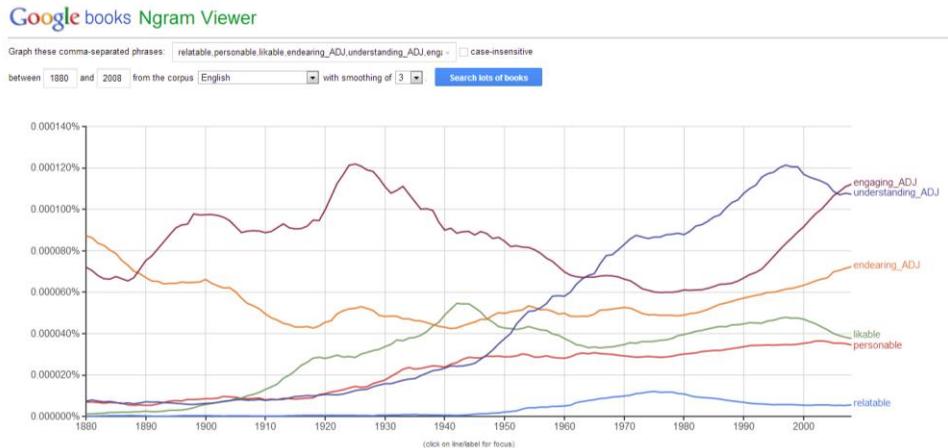


Figure 3: Google Ngram search results for *relatable*, *likable*, *personable*, *endearing_ADJ*, *understanding_ADJ*, and *engaging_ADJ*.

Clearly, among this range of words with similar meaning, all competing for usage in published writing, *relatable* has not gained traction, not even keeping pace with other words whose use entered the language at roughly the same time (most notably the adjective use of *understanding*).

The middle tier of synonyms of *relatable* includes *accessible*, *sympathetic*, and *understandable* (Figure 4):



Google books Ngram Viewer

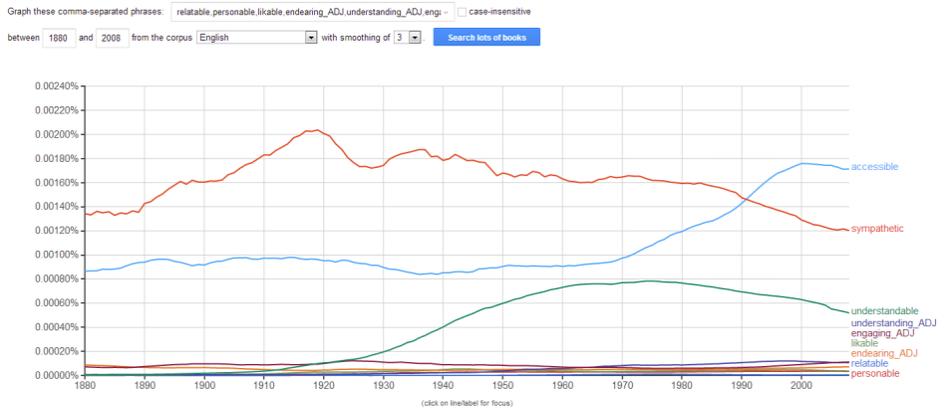


Figure 4: Google Ngram search results for *relatable*, *likable*, *personable*, *endearing_ADJ*, *understanding_ADJ*, *engaging_ADJ*, *accessible*, *sympathetic*, and *understandable*.

Note how *understandable*, which comes into written usage around the same time as *understanding_ADJ*, has far outpaced all of the lower tier synonyms. The upper tier of synonyms for *relatable* (OED3) comprises *relevant* and *interesting* (Figure 5):

Google books Ngram Viewer

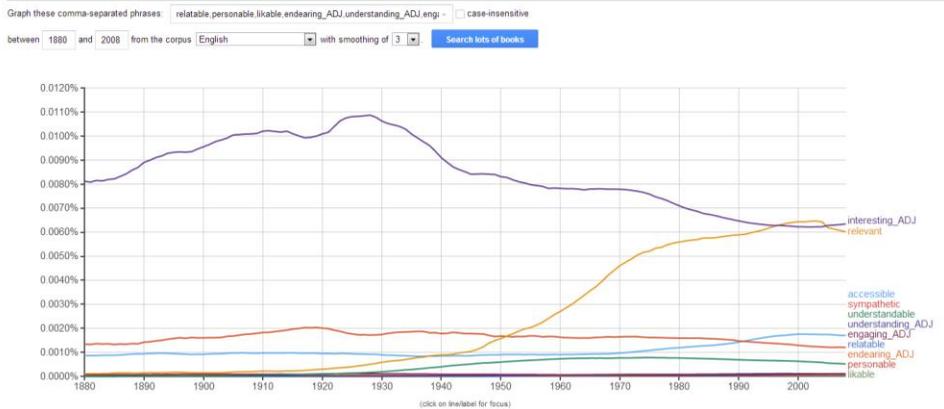




Figure 6: Google Ngram search results for *relatable*, *likable*, *personable*, *endearing_ADJ*, *understanding_ADJ*, *engaging_ADJ*, *accessible*, *sympathetic*, *understandable*, *relevant* and *interesting*.

Here are the frequencies of use for *relatable* and these eleven synonyms, as of 2008, the latest year for which Google Ngrams provides such information:

Google Ngrams 2008	
0.0063412394%	interesting_ADJ
0.0060212367%	relevant
0.0017131182%	accessible
0.0012023079%	sympathetic
0.0005194267%	understandable
0.0003192292%	trustworthy
0.0001121165%	engaging_ADJ
0.0001072745%	understanding_ADJ
0.0000722854%	endearing_ADJ
0.0000376608%	likable
0.0000345163%	personable
0.0000055999%	relatable

According to *Google Ngram*, *relatable* comprises a miniscule percentage of words used in comparison to its synonyms. As recorded by Google Books, even at the peak of its use in 1975, it still appeared less than half as often as *personable*, and a third as often as *likable*.

A plain Google search is merely a coda. Google has no tagging, and so provides no distinction between *understanding* used as an adjective and as a verb. So we just have raw, rough counts of the use of *relatable* and its synonyms:

Google Searches 2014 (all totals in millions of hits)					
	Feb 8	Feb 12	Mar 24	May 21	Average
interesting	281	320	309	330	310
relevant	228	283	262	270	260.75
understanding	180	232	225	236	218.25
accessible	129	158	142	151	145
engaging	39.8	47	45	62.6	48.6



trustworthy	16	23.1	17.7	21.2	19.5
understandable	10.6	13.9	12.6	12.7	12.45
sympathetic	10.1	10.8	10.6	11.3	10.7
personable	3.68	4.43	4.25	4.47	4.21
endearing	3.17	3.81	3.34	3.37	3.42
reliable	2.49	2.88	2.69	3.99	3.01
likable	2.31	2.42	1.77	2.5	2.25

Note that *reliable* appears a little more frequently than *likable*. This may be because writing on the web is often less formal and more conversational than writing published in print, and so it would make sense for *reliable*—which seems to be well established as a conversational usage—to appear more often than *likable*, which seems to be more established in the formal written language. And although we cannot look at all two-million-plus examples of either word, a short look at the first hundred hits for *reliable* shows us the kinds of sites—and authors—who are using the word: they are mostly personal bloggers, conveying personal stories, opinions, commentary and humor in a popular, conversational voice for a popular audience. These are not formal pieces of writing, nor do they seem to have passed through any editorial process other than the writer’s own revision.

So, if we ask whether *reliable*, as our students seem to increasingly use it, “is a word,” then the answer is “yes.” But is it a word that our student writers should use in their school-based assignments? In most cases, the answer is probably no. That said, perhaps the best way to use the information we have gathered is to ask, in formal or published writing, who uses *reliable* with this newest meaning, and where do they use it? Do we want to sound like those people? If we think of writing and style and word choice and grammar as a wardrobe, is this use of *reliable* an item we should choose to wear, and if so, on what sorts of occasions?

The answer is “yes,” if we are writing informally: in a journal, for our friends, in a conversational voice for our age-peers. And “yes,” if we are writing and want to sound amiable and approachable, especially if we are talking about movies, TV shows, or theater. This use of *reliable* is one piece in a package of



devices that cues readers to what kind of person they are “listening to” and what kind of story or information that authorial voice is trying to convey. Since the vast majority of examples of *reliable* in edited publications are still found in newspaper reporting on a limited set of topics in popular culture, it is safe to say that *reliable* is not yet acceptable as a commonplace usage in most genres of formal writing. And as the *Google Ngram* results show, the use of *reliable* may already have peaked. Then again, in the contexts where it is used commonly, *reliable* is appearing more frequently outside of quoted speech, at least in the U.S.; and in the less formal, but still increasingly ubiquitous world of writing on the web, *reliable* seems to be doing pretty well. So let’s check back again in a few years.

I recognize that, while college and university libraries routinely have access to the *OED* online and *LexisNexis*, these subscription services are less likely to be available to high school classes. However, the other resources I have listed are all freely available; and the Google Ngram Viewer and *COCA* in particular offer the opportunity to see the shifting use of words and phrases, in terms of both context and frequency. There is certainly enough searchable material freely available on the internet to help our students become more conscious of—and to take more control over—their language choices. And by demystifying the process of determining whether something like *reliable* has entered the language and ‘is a word,’ we can enable our students to participate in the conversation about ‘wordhood,’ and so to make more judicious decisions about when and whether to use spoken idioms in their writing. In this way, we can help our students take greater and more effective control over their use of written English.

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Book Review

Behrens, Susan J. *Understanding Language Use in the Classroom: A Linguistic Guide for College Educators*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2014. 168 pages.

Reviewed by Amy Benjamin, ATEG Past-President

No one wants college students to drop out. While it is true that Bill Gates, Steven Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg seem to have made a decent showing of themselves despite having dropped out of Harvard, Reed, and Harvard, respectively, the high number of college dropouts does not speak well about whatever it is that we purport to be doing as educators.

Sudden freedom from parental supervision, availability of social diversions, attention paid to sports, and, of course, lack of funds all contribute to less-than-stellar academic performance and persistence on the college level. But while college teachers cannot control these external conditions in students' lives, there is one tool for college success that we can do something about: We can strengthen students' capacity for using academic language. The good news is that Susan J. Behrens has written an accessible, well-organized, well-researched book that makes it easy to do so.

Understanding Language use in the Classroom: A Linguistic Guide for College Educators (Multilingual Matters, 2014) explains why college teachers need keener awareness of what academic language is, the extent to which so many college freshmen need both explicit and implicit instruction in it, and exactly what such instruction might look like in the context of the courses that we already teach.

To clarify, Behrens is not advocating that colleges offer a separate, sealed-off course in linguistics. She is advocating that teachers in all disciplines (particularly those dealing directly with language, such as those offered by the English department) inform themselves about what their students probably need in order to handle the cognitive challenges in the four modes of language: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.



From the linguists, college educators can learn the details about the obstacles to mastering academic English that many students face. These obstacles are not limited to multisyllabic vocabulary. Phraseology that teachers use naturally, such as “Let us now turn to...” or “Drawing from the text...” can be opaque to students. In this book, Behrens helps us recognize those “expert blind spots” that impede communication in the college classroom, often leaving us mystified as to why students fare poorly despite a desire to learn.

Behrens takes an analytical approach to helping teachers understand exactly what is meant by academic language, which features of it might impede communication, and what teachers can do to make college learning accessible. Part 1 is a convincing argument for the book’s thesis: that many college students would fare better academically if their teachers were more aware of the linguistic obstacles detailed in the book. Part 2 gets down to business by discussing morphology, semantics, grammatical markers (“morphosyntax”), pronunciation, and prosody. Lest these descriptions be too technical or dry, the information is set up in a Q & A format, and the questions are phrased in two ways: what a teacher (non-linguist) might ask, and what that question would sound like using terminology and concepts familiar to a linguist. Part 3 consists of classroom-ready study sheets and templates that correspond to the key points in Part 2. In short, what Behrens has masterfully done is to translate the esoterica of linguistics into accessible language, just as she asserts the need for teachers to do the same (make academic language accessible to students) in their own discourse.

Although college teachers are the intended audience, I know that K-12 teachers could benefit greatly from this book, as it is never too early to expand the language capacity of teenagers and young children. The Common Core State Standards stress competency in academic vocabulary, but the Standards only glance at the other features of academic language that Behrens discusses: syntactical patterns, punctuation, text structure, and prosody. All teachers—K-12 or college—in all subject areas would become better at building communication skills in their classrooms, as well as in professional discourse, by reading this very readable book.



NOTES

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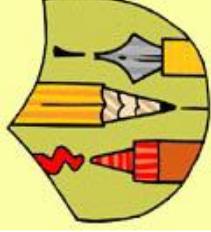
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