Workshop 5

Usage and Mechanics

"[Grammar] is the structural means by which language allows us to express meaning.
It allows us to express information. It allows us to express feelings. It allows us to build a bond with our audience."

—Rebecca Wheeler, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia

Introduction

Usage. Mechanics. Grammar. People sometimes use these terms interchangeably, but what do they mean as they are used in our schools? *The American Heritage Dictionary* tells us that *usage* is "the way in which words or phrases are actually used, spoken, or written in a speech community." That is, the term describes the ways people from a particular linguistic community use language both in writing and in speaking. In classroom situations, when we speak of "correct usage," we are identifying the ways people who speak and write standard American English use language. We are identifying the conventions of diction (word choice) and syntax (sentence structure) that the American English-speaking community deems "correct." These are the conventions we teach students to appropriate for their own use.

Handbooks use the term *mechanics* in several different ways. Typically the term includes discussions of abbreviations and acronyms, the use of foreign words and phrases, numbers (written as figures or as words), and capitalization. Some handbooks include spelling and punctuation in their discussion of mechanics, while others treat those topics in separate sections. In whatever ways the topics are subdivided, *mechanics* refers to the functional aspects of written language.

The term *grammar* is often used when people are really talking about both usage and mechanics. However, *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines it as "the study of how words and their component parts combine to form sentences" in a language, and "the system of rules implicit in a language, viewed as a mechanism for generating all sentences possible in that language." While usage may vary regionally, basic rules of grammar do not. For example, no matter how different various aspects of usage might be among American English, British English, South African English, and Australian English, subject-verb-object is the most common sentence pattern used by English speakers worldwide. Grammar, then, is an internalized structure used for communicating in any language.

Video Overview

The teachers in this video know that it is important for their students to understand—and be able to use—the appropriate conventions of standard written English. Moving from an overarching discussion of the role of grammar in communication, the teachers present actual classroom practices where their activities stress the importance of teaching usage and mechanics within the context of student writing. They do so in recognition of years of research that clearly show that teaching standard conventions of writing in isolation has little or no effect on student writing.

These activities concentrate on encouraging students to be mindful of their readers and the way certain constructions can cloud meaning. Through further discussion and classroom examples, the teachers explore appropriate points in the processes of writing to examine elements of usage and mechanics, reiterating that student writers often need a chance to get their thoughts on paper before they sculpt them for other readers. The teachers also discuss and demonstrate the value of looking closely at classic and current literature as models that show how constructions can be supremely matched to meaning. In addition, they talk about style manuals and the reasons they use them in their classes.

Judith Ortiz Cofer leads a writing workshop session where she shares work from an upcoming collection of poetry. Each poem is crafted using only one sentence construction pattern. She challenges the teachers in the workshop to think in terms of common sentence types (declarative, interrogative, and exclamatory) to create a narrative.

Key Points

- In all kinds of writing, usage and mechanics should be sufficiently accurate so that they do not interfere with meaning. Unconventional usage can distract readers, destroying the writer's credibility.

- Elements of standard conventional English usage, mechanics, and grammar are most effectively taught in the context of a student's own writing.

- Teachers can use literary models to help students understand ways to use diction (word choice) and syntax (sentence structure) to enhance meaning.

- Premature concern with usage and mechanics can hinder inexperienced writers' fluency as well as their success in timed writing situations.

Learning Objectives

After participating in this session, you will be able to:

- Help students identify issues of usage and mechanics that they need to work on to improve as writers,

- Consider ways to turn students' attention to their own work as a basis for exploring generally accepted conventions of usage and mechanics,

- Consider ways to use the writing of professionals to help students develop expertise with diction and syntax, and

- Help students understand when attention to issues of usage and mechanics is most productive.

The Classrooms in This Video

- Joan Cone, Ph.D. 9th grade. El Cerrito High School, El Cerrito, California

- Charles Ellenbogen, 11th and 12th grade. Baltimore City College High School, Baltimore, Maryland

- Susie Lebryk-Chao, 12th grade. Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, Alexandria, Virginia

- Lori Mayo, 9th grade. Far Rockaway High School, Queens, New York

- Kelly Quintero, 12th grade. Huntington High School, Long Island, New York

Featured Voices in the Conversation

- Kylene Beers
- Amy Benjamin
- Lucy Calkins
- Judith Ortiz Cofer
- Brock Haussamen
- Margo Jefferson
- Martha Kolln
- Tracy Mack
- Ruthanne Lum McCunn
- Christopher Myers
- Amy Tan
- Rebecca Wheeler

Background Reading

Patricia A. Dunn and Kenneth Lindblom. "Why Revitalize Grammar?" *English Journal.* January 2003 43-50, and Julie Ann Hagemann. "Balancing Content and Form in the Writing Workshop." *English Journal.* January 2003 73-79. Both articles are available in the Appendix of this guide.

Optional: For additional resources, visit the *Developing Writers* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/writedevelop. Select Workshop 5 and Additional Resources.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready (30 minutes)

Discuss

Discuss the following questions:

- Why might it be important and useful for your students to learn the accepted standards for conventional written academic English?

- What do you feel are the most important conventions of usage and mechanics your students should master before they leave your course? Why?

> **Facilitator:** Use the questions below to spark discussion before viewing the workshop program. Participants may write answers to the questions in their workshop journals, as time permits. You may use all of the questions or select only a few.

Reflect in Workshop Journals

How did you learn the rules of grammar? The appropriate conventions of usage and mechanics? How might your experiences inform your classroom instruction? Briefly describe these experiences and their effect on your classroom practices in your journals.

Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

Watch and Discuss

Questions to think about and discuss as you watch the video:

Pause at the title card "Teaching Sentence Sense: A Writing Workshop with Judith Ortiz Cofer." This follows a teacher-student conference on editing and revising.

- As a student, did you enjoy and/or benefit from formal grammar instruction? Why or why not?

- Linguistically, why is it necessary to have grammar?

- Which benefits your students more: formal grammar instruction or less formal reminders, conferences, responses to their work, etc.?

- How can sentence combining help your students' writing? What successes or failures have you had with using this technique in your classroom? How could you improve the less-successful experiences?

- Do you think students should focus on developing their content before they concern themselves with usage and mechanics? What are some benefits and drawbacks of this practice?

> **Facilitator:** If you are watching on videocassette, you may pause at the segments indicated below to give participants opportunities to discuss, reflect, and interact with the program. If needed, rewind and replay segments of the program so that viewers can thoughtfully examine all pertinent information. If you are watching a real-time broadcast, ask participants to consider the questions as they view the program and discuss them later.
>
> You may select any or all of the questions below to discuss, as time permits and according to the interests of your participants. Encourage participants to respond to the questions they didn't have time to discuss as a group in their journals or on Channel-Talk.

- In this section of the video, a teacher-student conference about revising a paper was punctuated by comments from Amy Tan. If you were the teacher in this conference, what would you have done?

Workshop Session (On-Site), cont'd.

- What strategies that you saw demonstrated in the video would you like to adopt for use in your own class-room? Why do you think they would work well with your students?

- What questions or concerns come to mind as you watch the video?

View program until the end.

- What does "sentence sense" mean to you? What are some synonyms you could use for this term?

- The rhythm of a work of writing is often created by sentence lengths and their punctuations. As the teachers remark in the video, many professional writers build complex rhythmic patterns that include using sentence fragments, starting sentences with conjunctions, and the like—things that standard academic English says are not to be done. How can you help students know the difference between intended and unintended grammatical "errors"?

- What would you say to students who (like the one in the video) are simply scared of all the things they don't know about usage and mechanics?

- What are some of the benefits of having style guide(s) available for student writers?

- How can you honor the grammar of the language that your students use in their lives outside of school, while still making sure they can function as writers within the constraints of standard academic English?

- What strategies that you saw demonstrated in the video would you like to adopt for use in your own class-room? Why do you think they would work well with your students?

- What questions or concerns come to mind as you watch the video?

Going Further (30 minutes)

Form groups based on the grade level you teach (choose one if you teach several grades). In your groups, list the most common usage and/or mechanical issues you work on with your students. Then brainstorm strategies you use or might use to help students gain mastery of these issues. Share your findings with all participants.

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Journal

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- What are the differences you see between generally accepted conventions of standard written English and standard oral English? How have these standards changed over your lifetime?

- What do students need to know about these differences? How can it help enrich their writing?

In your journal, you may also want to include answers to any remaining questions from this session that you did not have time to discuss, as well as thoughts, questions, and discoveries from the workshop itself and learning experiences that take place in your own classroom.

Reading

In preparation for the next session, read the Background Reading for Workshop 6: The National Council of Teachers of English's guideline "Writing Assessment: A Position Statement." This statement is included in the Appendix of this guide.

Optional: For additional resources on topics discussed in this session, visit the *Developing Writers* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/writedevelop. Select Workshop 5 and Additional Resources.

Teacher Tools

The following Teacher Tools are included in this guide for your use in helping you plan classroom activities:

- "It Bothers My Ears"

- Grammar in Perspective

Ongoing Activities

Channel-Talk

Send comments and questions regarding the workshop to other participants around the country with Channel-Talk. Consider sharing ideas that came up as you wrote in your journal, questions you did not have time to discuss in this session, and experiences from your classroom.

The Web Site

Go online for materials and resources to deepen your understanding and implementation of the practices shown in the workshop.

Between Sessions (On Your Own), cont'd.

The Classroom Connection

Student Activities

Try these activities with your students.

- Student Survey: Use a survey such as the one that follows to assess students' grasp of standard English conventions of usage and mechanics. This kind of self-test serves as a baseline analysis for both the teacher and the student, pointing to areas of which individual students might want to be especially aware as they write.

  Edit the following sentences:

  Pronouns

    1. Hickam's book made me think of what a person can accomplish if they are determined.

    2. In the book it says that Winston Smith finds pleasure in the intricacy of his work.

    3. Many factories pollute environment. This affects people's health.

  Parallelism

    1. Before the war, the U.S. and other countries tried persuasion and to use diplomacy.

    2. I learned history while walking along the mall and toured through the Smithsonian.

    3. I want to explain both who I am and my beliefs.

  Modifiers

    1. At the age of eight, my parents sent me to camp.

    2. To drive a stick shift, your patience must match your skill.

    3. Reading the horror book, bad dreams invaded my sleep.

    4. Everyone should see a doctor to stay healthy at least once a year.

- In Context: Collect three or four writing samples from each student in your classroom. Scan the writing samples to observe places where writers have failed to observe the conventions of standard English. Draw on these examples as the basis for a series of mini-lessons on the conventions that have been misused. Use the sentence samples to introduce the mini-lesson, noting that these are examples of problem areas you have noticed in your student's writing in regard to the topic of the mini-lesson. Consider retyping sample sentences or using other sentences that replicate the problem areas in order to concentrate on the example and not the student who created the sentences.

  Follow-up the mini-lesson by distributing the collected writing samples to the students for their review. What suggestions do they have for the author? Do they notice this particular problem area in any of the papers?

Between Sessions (On Your Own), cont'd.

- Grammar Experts: Make each student responsible for helping the other members of the writing community learn about one aspect of grammar. Prepare and post a chart listing the grammar experts and their area of expertise. Ask them to prepare and present a mini-lesson for the entire class on one grammatical error. Some suggestions for topics include the following, which are considered to be the most common grammatical errors students make in their writing:

No comma after introductory phrase	Unnecessary shift in person
Vague pronoun reference	Sentence fragment
No comma in compound sentence	Lack of comma in a series
Wrong word	Pronoun agreement error
No comma in non-restrictive	Unnecessary commas with restrictive
Wrong/missing inflected end	Run-on, fused sentence
Wrong/missing preposition	Dangling, misplaced modifier
Comma splice	Its/it's error
Possessive apostrophe error	Wrong tense or verb form
Tense shift	Subject-verb agreement

When students make a grammatical mistake on subsequent writing assignments, refer them to the "expert" for a refresher course in the correct way to handle such constructions.

Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner

Think about your past practices in helping your students master standard academic English grammar. Have you generally relied on teaching grammar *per se* as opposed to teaching grammar in context? How has this method affected your students' writing?

Notes