

# Grammar Rules

*Properly taught, grammar can lead students to better composition skills.*

By Myra Linden and Arthur Whimbey

Scores on the exit exam in language arts rose from the 34<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 52<sup>nd</sup> at Yuba City High School (California) after the chair of the English Department convinced all of the English teachers to begin using a new approach for teaching grammar. The new approach has students use grammatical concepts to construct sentences.

The traditional method of teaching grammar gives students definitions for the established eight parts of speech and sample sentences to illustrate the definitions. Then it asks students to label the words in new sentences in terms of the eight parts of speech. For example, students might be given the following traditional definition of a verb.

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**Verb: A word representing an action or state**

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Students might then be given a dozen sample sentences with all types of verbs underlined, including passive, past perfect, present perfect, and progressive. Finally, students are presented with another set of sentences and asked to identify the verb in each.

Consider the following sentence.

Eating custard pie, Bobby is in a state of ecstasy.

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If a student answers that eating represents an action, so eating is the verb, he will be told that eating plays the role of a participle, not a verb, in this sentence. The word is expresses a state, so it is the verb. This explanation is completely meaningless to most students.

The traditional approach fails to effectively teach the fundamental concepts of English grammar. With the traditional approach, students learn only to label the words in sentences with grammatical terms by memorizing specific cases and utilizing functional but mindless strategies, such as picking is as the verb whenever it appears anywhere in any sentence.

The new method for teaching grammar that Yuba City High School began using last fall employs a completely different approach. It asks students to construct sentences using the grammatical concepts they learn. Thus, students learn a functional grammar, a grammar they come to understand by using it to express ideas in writing.

The new approach begins by explaining that a basic sentence pattern underlying many sentences — even the most complicated sentences — consists of three parts: a subject, a verb, and an object. That sentence pattern is illustrated by the following sentence.

A cow	eats	grass.
SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT

The subject names a person or thing that performs an action. The verb names the action. The object names the person or thing that receives the action.

This is a “prototype” sentence — a basic model sentence underlying many sentences. It includes a prototype subject, a prototype verb, and a prototype object — ideal examples of these grammatical concepts. These and other grammatical concepts are introduced with prototypes. More information is available in our book *Teaching and Learning Grammar: The Prototype Construction Approach*. ([www.bgfperformance.com](http://www.bgfperformance.com)).

The Prototype Construction Approach (P-C) explains to students that the subject in a sentence can be made plural by adding an s.

**Cows eat grass.**

↑  
But when an s is added to the verb, the s is deleted from the subject in standard English.

**A cow eats grass.**

↑  
Students are then asked to use this information in doing exercises of the following type.

*Rewrite this sentence so that the subject is plural and the verb is in the correct form.*

A car burns fuel.

Answer: Cars burn fuel.

These exercises reinforce the concept of a verb — its position and role in a sentence.

Once students have mastered the basic concepts of grammar, they are prepared to learn how to use the more advanced grammatical structures, such as relative clauses, participial phrases, and noun clauses.

With the traditional approach, most students never learn how to construct sentences with relative clauses or participial phrases because they never come to understand the most basic concepts such as nouns and verbs, nor are they systematically taught to construct such sentences.

Teachers who have used the P-C Approach report not only gains on standardized tests of language skills, but also improvement in student writing. Recently, a high school English teacher who is using a grammar workbook based on the P-C Approach asked her sophomores to write letters about how the workbook has helped them become better writers. In reporting her results to us, she wrote:

“I am including a sample because it floored me. This is from Taylor, a football player/snowboarder who . . . during the first semester couldn’t pick up a pencil without writing half a dozen run-on sentences. This is what Taylor wrote. ‘The grammar book has taught me so many things: how to expand what I already know, how to use that knowledge to create complete grammatically correct sentences, and how to gain more knowledge quickly and easily through detailed examples and exercises.’”

*(A longer version of this article is available from [mlinden9@aol.com](mailto:mlinden9@aol.com).)*