Grammar Challenge:
Renewed Concerns, A New Approach

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Journalism professors gripe about it, job recruiters are shocked by it: College students don’t know grammar. But don’t give up hope, friends. Members of the Magazine Division community are hard at work assessing students’ grammar skills and offering remedial classes.

I’m included in that group. For the last six years, I’ve supervised Columbia College Chicago’s Grammar for Journalists. This required course, which students must earn at least a C in to advance to our first reporting course, is currently going through its biggest transformation. We’ve updated our existing grammar proficiency test, which allows our students to test out of the class; created an intensive level of the course for students who score on the lower end of the test; changed the textbook and reworked the syllabus; and even added a spiffy, laminated study guide.

But even with all these changes, I’m still cautious about how many students will meet our learning outcomes at the end of the course. The more we’ve assessed the class, the more concerned we’ve grown. When we pre- and post-tested grammar students using our department test, the improvement in scores was low. That prompted us to create a new version of the class: Grammar for Journalists Enhanced, which has a smaller class size and required tutoring.

Setting up this new course has taken some guesswork. I’ve set the cutoff score for placement in the course at a 60 percent score on our existing department grammar proficiency test. Students who score 60 percent and above are placed in the regular version of the course; those who score below 60 percent are placed in the new intensive version. (As before, students who score 80 percent and above are waived from the class.)

I had intended to set the cutoff at 73 percent, which is what Columbia College Chicago uses to place freshmen students in composition courses. However, that would have placed very few students in the upper level of Grammar for Journalists. In fall 2008, for

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instance, only 14 percent of test-takers would have placed in the upper level of the course, and 77 percent would have placed in the lower scoring, intensive version.

That just didn’t ring right. We have a healthy cohort of students who need a brush-up of their grammar skills, not a complete remediation. So, with some anecdotal input from our Grammar for Journalists teachers, I set the cutoff point at 60 percent and took another look at our department proficiency test to make sure it was testing what it should. For fall 2010, the first run of this new setup, we expect to have at least twice as many Enhanced sections as regular sections. However, the whole undertaking is an experiment. Once we assess both versions of the class, including longitudinally, I’ll have plenty of data to share.

As we move forward, I’ll be relying heavily on our excellent corps of Grammar for Journalists teachers. Most have requested to teach a section of the intensive class. These teachers are all journalists, many of them veteran teachers of our writing courses, who saw a chance to get at the root of the problems they saw in their students’ writing. The first semester they teach is always rocky. However, in my years overseeing the class, I’ve seen only two teachers opt out of teaching a second semester. I’ve even managed to lure two tenured professors to teach the course. They, like the rest, have caught the bug.

Of course, grammar teachers aren’t the only journalism instructors who care deeply about student writing. Our students, however, care at varying degrees. In his 2006 article “When Journalism Students Don’t Know Grammar,” Gerald Grow, a journalism professor at Florida A&M University (now retired), articulated something many of us suspect: For students who are weak in grammar, “lack of knowledge is apparently not the only problem: there may well be a gap in something besides grammar—in motivation, confidence, persistence, learning skills, or some other key factor that causes many who are weak in grammar to avoid taking advantage of the many resources that could help them.”

That reflects the frustrations of Columbia College’s grammar teachers and is echoed in the conversations I’ve had with other journalism professors. It’s clear from the chatter on the Magazine Division listserv that many of us are searching for answers to the same questions: Any good grammar tests out there? Should we write our own or buy one off the shelf? I’ll show you my syllabus if you show me yours. What textbook do you like?

I followed Florida A&M’s lead and switched to Working With Words: A Handbook for Media Writers and Editors from When Words Collide: A Media Writer’s Guide to Grammar and Style, which we’ve used for years. I did a lot of searching among grammar textbooks, and although there are lots of good ones out there, not many are appropriate for journalism students. I checked out ESL books, grammar books for business writers—I even haunted the high school textbook aisle at the K-12 teacher store.

Our grammar class focuses on the most common errors we see our students make, including sentence errors (run-ons, sentence fragments, etc.); subject-verb disagreement;
pronoun case; punctuation. One of our biggest challenges is getting students past the arcane language of grammar (preposition, gerund, clause) to using the rules correctly.

*Working With Words* balances these two goals of the class. It, like *When Words Collide*, is for journalists, which means there’s no clash with the *AP Stylebook*. But *Working With Words*’ pedagogy is more to the point, its visual organization of information is better, and there’s less personality to the writing, which is all to the good. We don’t need to add to students’ grammar confusion by introducing a layer of wry humor to the instruction.

I also like that the book lingers on topics such as verb tense. Many college students need help conjugating verbs, much less telling the difference between a verb and a gerund, so more instruction here is better than less. The downside to this depth, however, is that the grammar terminology gets pretty thick. Teachers are challenged to translate terms into plain English. *Working With Words* is thin on explaining the parts of speech, another area of grammar that baffles our students. However, teachers can find scads of supplementary material elsewhere.

Here are the runners-up to *Working With Words*:

*When Words Collide* is an excellent textbook, especially in the chapters devoted to writing clarity and style. When it comes to grammar, the book does a great job of identifying and exploring the most common errors, and keeping the grammar jargon to a minimum. The chapter flow—crucial for a grammar book, where, if a student doesn’t master sentence parts, he’ll never get subject-verb agreement—is good, but not always intuitive.

The reason we switched from it, in short, is that the book assumes the reader has better basic grammar skills coming in than our students do. For our purposes, *WWC* needs more of the charts, plain language, and tone of a high school textbook than of, say, pop grammar books (*Grammar Girl, Woe Is I, The Only Grammar Book You’ll Ever Need*), which are more for brushing up than teaching. Heck, one of the best supplementary texts I’ve used is a high school English textbook I swiped from the University of Chicago Lab School. I recommend a straightforward grammar textbook; let the teacher provide the sass if it’s merited.

In the overly sassy but very useful category of grammar books is *English Grammar for Dummies*. But oh, that name. Use it and its workbook as a cheat sheet for teachers. Sometimes you need an alternate explanation of a tricky grammar problem before you can stand up in front of 15 freshmen and explain it. *Grammar for Dummies* is perfect for that, and you can skim it for free on Google Books!

The strongest contender I found to *When Words Collide* and *Working With Words* is the no-nonsense *Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation*. Its companion website, grammarbook.com, is an excellent resource, also. The book is too streamlined for the
purposes of our class, but would be a first-rate text for undergraduate students in other writing-intensive majors or for graduate students in journalism.

I’m excited about our revised approach to teaching grammar, particularly for our least prepared students. We, like other journalism departments, will keep experimenting and collaborating until we—and our students—get it right.

**Resources and References**


A note about online resources: Our course doesn’t have a formal online component. We feel there’s no substitute for an experienced teacher who’s able to make the dry rules of a textbook come alive in the classroom. However, we use some excellent practice sites: grammarbook.com, chompchomp.com, and grammaruntied.com