

What if the Earth Is Flat? Working With, Not Against, Faculty Concerns about Grammar in Student Writing

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One of the biggest and most frustrating divides between writing studies faculty and professors from other disciplines concerns grammar instruction. Many if not all of us in writing across the curriculum (WAC) and/or writing studies have at least one story of encountering an outside colleague (or an upper administrator) and being harangued about the abominable state of student grammar knowledge. The aggrieved colleague might invoke a Golden Age (perhaps when he was an undergraduate) when student writing was not so alarmingly bad. The colleague might also credit her arriving at a successful academic career in part to the hard-nosed grammar mavenry of a past teacher. We try to respond; we offer things about non-expert prose, unfamiliar genres, and the complex interplay between grammar and rhetoric; in other words, we offer elevator-ride versions of Hartwell, Bartholomae, and Joseph Williams. We might even follow up by emailing the colleague a link to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) web page entitled “Questions and Answers about Grammar.”

But these largely causal explanations fail to resonate with the results-oriented colleague. When we escape to safety, we shake our heads. Of course, not all such conversations are unpleasant or even unwelcome, though they can be especially troubling if they carry some degree of subtext concerning the “inadequacies”—limitations, we would say—of first-year composition. Whatever the circumstances, we are always left wondering: how can we help our colleagues better understand and appreciate the myriad factors that contribute to grammar error in student writing? It’s like geology faculty routinely having to deal with colleagues who insist the earth is flat.

Or is it? What if we credit our colleagues’ perspectives on this issue a bit more? After all, a principle we try to uphold in my institution’s WAC program is not to go too far in presenting ourselves as gurus or missionaries of writing, but instead to encourage a free flow of ideas about writing instruction to and from every direction. The primary goal of this essay is to address head-on this grammar divide between writing faculty and cross-disciplinary colleagues. Rather than attempting to disabuse such faculty of their beliefs, it may be more fruitful to listen to their concerns and enlist their aid in developing approaches and resources that address grammar issues in ways that are both positive and pedagogically sound.

The rest of this essay will have four components. First, it will note ways the issue emerges in Toby Fulwiler's essays on running faculty development events. Next, it will relate a tale from the trenches from my own institution; more specifically, it will describe a grammar discussion that took place during and after our faculty writing retreat. Next, it will consider Patrick Hartwell's seminal essay "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar," whose arguments are the lynchpin of the predominant view that explicit grammar instruction is of prohibitively questionable value. I also examine the response to Hartwell and examine the somewhat marginalized and disjointed state of inquiry into college-level grammar instruction post-Hartwell. Finally, I describe a "Writing List" under development on our campus in response to a discussion that took place at a WAC retreat. Along with the list's genesis, I also explain its premises, potential, and acknowledge its limitations and pitfalls.

Uncovering the Flat Earth

Toby Fulwiler's foundational article "Showing, Not Telling, at a Writing Workshop" is perhaps the best starting point to contextualize how our retreat gave rise to this essay. The passage with particular relevance to the issues I'm undertaking here appear early in the essay under the heading "Workshop 1, Exploring," which opens like this: "Many teachers who attend writing workshops believe, initially at least, that they will learn how to banish forever bad spelling and comma splices from student papers. These teachers are usually disappointed because I teach them no such tricks" (56). In what follows, Fulwiler implies this disappointment does not linger. He describes asking his participants to list "writing problems they perceive as most common, serious, or troublesome." The resulting list, according to Fulwiler, may run up to as many as thirty items. The lists are then subdivided into "fewer, more general categories" such as "1. Motivation 2. Mechanics 3. Style 4. Reading 5. Critical thinking 6. Cognitive maturity 7. Assignments." This exercise is certainly valuable and, I'm sure, often persuasive in providing a more complete sense of the various factors that contribute to grammar error. A practical benefit worth noting is that the exercise would sort out some key definitions, since faculty often have differing senses of what is meant by the term *grammar*. I'd also observe parenthetically that such a list of faculty concerns comprises rich raw material for potential WAC resources.

Fulwiler continues by asserting that, "no participant who helped shape the preceding list can comfortably hold on to the notion that 'spelling or grammar drills' will cure all or most grammar problems." While this may be so, it might also be too dismissive. Consider for a moment that in the list quoted above, grammar is directly invoked in two of the first three items: "Mechanics" and "Style." This persisting emphasis on grammar raises the possibility that Fulwiler's audience might not have changed their mindsets as much as the description implies. Furthermore,

complicating or problematizing faculty notions about grammar error, especially if there is no subsequent move into praxis, risks leaving them unable to find ways to accommodate these problems in their pedagogical practices, and risks simply leaving them frustrated. (As will be seen in the next section of this essay, our own retreat participants, though they never advocated drill, certainly retained their concerns with grammar.)

It's worth dwelling for a moment on the fact that we can't always be sure what notions WAC event attendees hold onto once they leave. Deference, compliance, and even enthusiasm are not sure indicators of what they have absorbed, much less what they might put into practice.¹ Fulwiler makes this point himself in his 1984 essay, "How Well Does Writing Across the Curriculum Work?" According to Fulwiler, one place this problem of "translation" can easily emerge is in disciplines with scant tradition of writing in the classroom. In a vivid example, the essay offers an account of a mathematics professor "who seemed to understand theoretically most of what went on at the workshop, [yet] stated later that the only thing he could think to do, practically, was send all his 150 calculus students to tour the writing lab—under penalty of failing the course" (117). Another example involves a forestry professor who, "six months after she attended a workshop and told us how much it meant to her, said that the main things she looks for on papers are 'spelling, style, and neatness.'" Fulwiler adds, "While we don't dismiss these items, her answer dismays us" (118). (Again, I would note the persisting concern with "style," which again raises definition questions, but likely involves concerns with grammar.)

While I can certainly sympathize with Fulwiler's "dismay," I also believe that these faculty and others like them are reminders that we in WAC need to work towards meeting faculty where they are, whether the issue is disciplinary dissonance or skepticism about WAC premises and philosophy. Our charge in WAC is not simply to provide tips and strategies and leave it up to the instructors to adapt them, if they can, to their particular disciplinary contexts. We must also listen to outside faculty, and allow them to take the lead.

Listening to Cross-Disciplinary Faculty

With just under seven thousand undergraduates, our institution is a mid-sized, private university located in a suburb of a major northeastern city. Our WAC program is relatively young, about four years old. We had five faculty development workshops over the course of three semesters under our belt during the events described here, so the two-day faculty writing retreat was the most ambitious event we had yet put on. The retreat was held in our writing center, and we attracted thirteen participants representing a respectable variety of departments: geology, psychology, English, political science, fine arts, philosophy, theater and dance, geography, and a few others.

What made our group perhaps atypical was the number of senior faculty. One was a department chair, and two more became chairs the following academic year. Along with their teaching duties, others were in charge of key campus programs, including our honors college and a program that forms special-interest course clusters for first-year students.

Their varying backgrounds and connections to different student populations coupled with their shared concern for student writing made this group a very nice audience for us. Obviously, they were all experienced instructors; furthermore, their administrative work positioned them to have an interdisciplinary perspective, and, finally, it became very clear as the retreat progressed that they came to the event in an ideal spirit: as instructors with a proactive concern for improving student writing, an openness to reevaluating their pedagogical practices in order to do so, an eagerness to discuss these issues with colleagues, and ultimately a willingness to change their pedagogical practices as a result of the experience. These attributes underpinned a final value of this audience: their candor. Rather than nodding along and going with the flow, our audience did not hesitate to raise questions and challenge our premises. The resulting discussion was both collegial and fully driven by genuine intellectual curiosity and concerns. We did our best to accommodate or suggest correctives, but it became apparent that there were interesting gaps between the retreat participants and the writing studies facilitators in ways of thinking about student writing instruction.

This phenomenon was most acute, and most relevant for the purposes of this essay, in the session devoted to commenting on student work. As it happened, I co-facilitated this segment along with a colleague who is also our department chair. We wanted to convey a few simple ideas that could be summed up as follows: balance positive and negative feedback, and be sure to engage each student individually and intellectually. We had a brief PowerPoint, but the core of the workshop was a student essay for participants to grade on their own and then discuss as a group. We asked participants to consider the various roles they assume in their comments, which might range from critic, to editor, to coach, to that of a co-investigator who takes students' ideas as seriously as she would those of a colleague. We emphasized the latter role especially, which of course led us to deemphasize responding to grammar and sentence-level concerns.

As discussion progressed, attendees increasingly raised the question of grammar errors and how to respond to the student essay on the sentence level. Things reached a point where we as facilitators had to depart significantly from our plan. While the sample student essay definitely had some issues with grammar and style—I had flagged some of them myself—we found ourselves trying to persuade the group that these errors were not the optimum focal point for comments directed to the student.

We attempted to introduce the categories of “global” and “local” concerns. We tried to demonstrate that many of the local issues were related to the student’s grappling with a complex topic (hydraulic fracturing, or fracking). I also pointed out that the student’s tendency toward agent-less syntax was to some degree standard in the field he was training for (he belonged to a composition section devoted to first-year engineering majors). In another phase of the discussion, we invoked Nancy Sommers’s point that we put students at cross-purposes with themselves if we ask them to adjust a sentence on the one hand, while also asking them to rethink or even remove the paragraph it is located in. From a writing studies perspective, we gave the “right” orthodox answers, but many in our audience didn’t buy it.

Something of a paradox came into play. They often said either implicitly or explicitly, “You’re the experts; you tell us.” For our part, we were in fact speaking from our expertise; we even offered bibliography for just about everything we were saying (in addition, a copy of John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas* was given to each attendee at the outset of the retreat). Still, what we were saying was just too much at odds with how the attendees themselves conceptualized and practiced writing instruction and development. It seemed they simply could not get their minds around experts in writing pedagogy telling them to deemphasize grammar. Perhaps they felt as though they were encountering geologists who were insisting the earth is flat.

Joking aside, attendees are certainly justified in asking for rock-solid praxis they could immediately use on the ground. We thought we were giving them that, of course, but clearly we were off target with their most pressing concerns. Obviously, this troubled my co-facilitator and me. We wondered if we should have been more prepared to confront this issue; maybe we blew an opportunity. We also were a bit surprised because both of us had facilitated faculty development events on feedback before without this issue coming so urgently to the fore. It soon became clear, however, that little we could have said or done in those immediate circumstances would have been likely to change their mindsets.

Soon after the retreat, we asked them via email to reply and describe their experience, including any takeaways they valued, along with constructive input they may have to guide us as we plan future events. Nearly all of them replied with well-thought-out responses to both facets of the question. Their answers did in fact balance positive and negative feedback, so we may have been successful there. More importantly, the replies were candid and incredibly eye-opening in suggesting how deep the gap between writing and non-writing faculty may be, especially in terms of sentence-level pedagogies.

An art history professor wrote, “I finished the workshop feeling I am at odds with many of the writing pedagogies that are currently popular” in writing studies. For her, this feeling was most pronounced on the issue of grammar, and our discipline’s

general commitment to process theory which endeavors to improve student writing by encouraging several stages of revision that move from “global” or “higher order” issues “down” to low-order issues. This professor strongly disagreed with this concept, and argued that students should instead be trained to write from the sentence level up:

We spent very little (if any) time talking about specific ways to improve student sentences. I am of the opinion that without sound sentences, all the revisions in the world won't lead to better writing. Without strong sentences, there can be no clarity in writing, and without clarity in writing, there's no clarity in thinking (something mentioned during one of the presentations). Unfortunately, for reasons I do not understand, students no longer arrive in college able to write strong sentences. Nothing I learned in the workshop made me change my mind that strong writing begins with the foundation of strong sentences, and I wish there had been more talk about this problem.

She also suggested a different approach to the sample student paper: “I would like to have heard [the facilitators] talk us through the paper—first an overview than a line-by-line study followed by an example of a good first revision, and then a final draft.”

More attendees echoed this model-oriented proposal. A philosophy professor said, “It would be great to watch the writing studies faculty mark up a paper they're seeing for the first time—just to see how you approach it and what you say. Then we talk [. . .] in detail about why you made this or that comment.” Attendees would then try commenting on a paper themselves in light of the discussion. The participant added: “I had imagined that's what we would be doing. I do understand (really I do) that, compared to what you guys are thinking about, that's not terribly interesting. Still.”

Another professor expressed a similar desire simply to see “the feedback given by an experienced writing instructor to the student on each of [several sequential] drafts.” Though one might say this attendee, and the one quoted above, might assume too much homogeneity among writing studies faculty, it is important to look past this problem and see that these participants are rightly eager to find something to hang their hat on. This desire comes across vividly, along with an implied primary concern with sentence-level issues, in this commentary from a psychology professor: “I have an implicit sense of what clear prose requires, but I have no formal training in teaching the craft of writing. It's likely that I spend far too much time correcting student papers because I do not know how to spot errors quickly and how to respond effectively and with greater efficiency.”

Yet another participant came to our presentation with a very open mind, but found little of practical use:

I admit to hoping I would be told that the way I write comments and corrections on papers is all wrong because it is ineffective. I wanted you to tell me that because I have a sense that it is ineffective but I'm not certain. When I look back over the two days, I can't say with any certainty that I've got new tools for that aspect of my writing instruction practice. [. . .] Of course, I realize that there is more to writing instruction than correcting papers. But to be honest, correcting papers is where I end up spending the vast majority of my time. While I will take advantage of some of the tips given to help my students get off to a better start when it comes to completing my writing assignments, it doesn't feel like the way I grade them will change much, if at all.

This of course is the opposite of what we were hoping for.

This attendee's words raise the fraught question Fulwiler grapples with: how can we know the extent to which our faculty development events are resulting in changed practices on the part of instructors, and furthermore, improved writing on the part of students? Moreover, how can we ensure that what emerges from workshops are pedagogical models that can be adapted and implemented—recall Fulwiler's calculus and forestry professors—in a variety of classroom contexts (“How Well” 118).

Something very heartening, however, about all of the attendee feedback was that they demonstrated a willingness to take on a substantial measure of responsibility for grammar instruction. Throughout the retreat, attendees found many occasions to voice the need for a “common language” about writing that faculty across disciplines could share with students, and thereby mutually reinforce writing instruction. Again, we thought that's what we were providing, or at least moving toward, but it somehow didn't gain purchase.

The notion of “common language” emerged again and again in the post-retreat written feedback. One attendee bridged the idea with oft-suggested “line-by-line” workshop:

I didn't get a good sense of a “common” [Writing Studies] or WAC vocabulary. [. . .] I think it would be helpful to provide participants with much more specific, concrete examples, work through examples of editing and giving comments on student papers using that vocabulary, and to perhaps develop an outline that identifies frequent mistakes or issues and that helps faculty develop and work with a common vocabulary for talking with students about their papers. Most students will go to their specific instructors

about a paper, so if a goal of WAC is to develop such a common vocabulary, then it would be good to have a concrete, specific guide as to what that is.

Another participant put it this way:

I would have liked to spend some time on a review of common writing errors, and how to deal with these errors when we see them in student writing. It would be helpful to see a list of features of student writing that we can point out to students in an encouraging way to reinforce good writing practices.

In a similar vein, another remarked:

I think learning a little bit of grammar (around 15 general “rules,” spelled out with 2 or 3 examples) leads almost every student to write better sentences. (Writing better paragraphs, organizing those paragraphs, and developing a thesis are another matter, and I found [Bean’s *Engaging Ideas*], as well as some of the workshop tips, offered several good pointers on this front.) [. . .]

I think for WAC to work, the program needs to come up with an agreed-upon basic vocabulary. Students should move from class to class knowing basic editing marks, understanding a sentence requires a subject and a predicate, etc. (my pet peeves)—along with whatever you think is necessary.

The recurrence of the grammar list idea was one reason it was hard to dismiss.

A more important reason was that the idea held promise. We became convinced such a resource could provide a valuable, campus-wide reference point for talking about grammar and writing. A geology professor who advocated this idea pulled it all into focus in this way:

I think that the best thing that could come out of a WAC program would be a set of common teaching strategies, vocabularies for writing skills, expectations for what constitutes acceptable writing, and tools made available to students. If every instructor insists on grammatically correct sentences in student writing, makes that expectation upfront and explicit, and sends students to the same resources for help (e.g., OWL, Writing Center) and if we all give them the same handout at the beginning of the semester on the need for essays to have a thesis statement, supporting evidence, and a properly formatted bibliography, eventually they will catch on. I’m talking about very

minimal stuff—the baseline. Developing this sort of common writing toolkit would be a good task for a future multidisciplinary workshop.

A toolkit, a grammar list, and a writing list—such things would not be a panacea, and they would certainly have their drawbacks, but they would have some positive advantages.

First, retreat participant commentary suggested to us that more faculty members might be likely to buy into WAC if there were simple resources like this. A ten to fifteen item list would quickly give faculty who lacked one a grammar vocabulary. Moreover, sentence-level commenting could be done with greater efficiency, a prospect that would no doubt be attractive to many faculty members. Furthermore, recall the grammar conversation scenario that opened this essay; as writing faculty in those situations, we could simply refer interlocutors to the list, and offer our open door through email for comments and questions. For students, the list could be an accessible starting point, more digestible, perhaps, than a grammar textbook or an extensive grammar website.

But devising such a list is not as simple as it may seem. The fact that our list would be developed in response to explicit requests from faculty across the university helped us avoid the pitfall of its being suspiciously regarded by faculty across campus as a unilateral document or a Trojan horse of some kind. Even so, there remains the problem that the list might all too readily lend itself to heavy-handed prescriptivism, a sort of Ten Commandments of Writing, which is an impression we would want to avoid. In other words, we would not want the list to function or come to be adopted as a rigid set of standards, but rather as tool or guide, a simple, common reference point for talking about writing in terms of grammar. But how does one reach that goal? How long should the list be? How long should entries be? Which issues should be included? What kind of examples and explanations would work best? Besides these practical concerns, there is also the need to make the list theoretically and pedagogically sound. How might the list accurately reflect the place of grammar on the landscape of writing and writing instruction? The following section will engage these theoretical and pedagogical concerns. The subsequent section will explore the practical issues.

Hartwell in Context and in Content

Since this essay advocates greater attention to grammar in our WAC programs, classrooms and scholarly discussions, it is important to more closely examine the arguments that underpin skepticism in our field about grammar instruction. The touchstone text for this position remains Patrick Hartwell's "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" which argues that writing students will be blocked

or impeded if we preoccupy them with the mechanical workings of grammar as they write. A key point for Hartwell is that the term *grammar* tends to be used too loosely. In a frequently referenced schema, he enumerates five senses of the word ranging from intuitive grammar knowledge held by native speakers (Grammar 1), through linguistics (Grammar 2) to the grammar of standard etiquette (Grammar 3), textbook grammar (Grammar 4), and finally style (Grammar 5). The essence of Hartwell's argument is that explicit instruction of Grammar 3, 4, or 5, especially in the form of drill, disrupts the operations of Grammar 1, which stem from our deeply ingrained language instinct and are thus paramount. At best, writes Hartwell, such grammar instruction is "COIK," Clear Only If Known—in other words, textbook grammar explanations tend to be laden with grammar jargon, thereby falsely assuming an audience that already has some expertise, a phenomenon likely to frustrate student and novice writers.

This foundational essay is approaching its fourth decade of being central to the grammar question; furthermore, the empirical data on grammar drill that plays a key role in Hartwell's argument is now fifty years old. These facts alone might suggest the essay may be due for reconsideration, not necessarily to discredit it, but rather to see what it can tell us today. Though the essay still plays a central role in our thinking, it is also important to situate it in its initial context. In a significant sense, it participates in a particular moment in the debate over formal grammar instruction that seems especially fraught, so heated in fact that Hartwell notes how it has been characterized by name-calling, and he also suggests with evident frustration that further empirical work would not settle anything but instead be cancelled out by confirmation biases (107).

While the essay is generally regarded as settling, to some extent, the question of whether grammar should be taught at the university-level—and that is indeed the larger question Hartwell engages at the opening of his essay—it also seems to suggest that question is at an impasse, and ultimately situates its argument in response to a much narrower question. Consider how he describes the model of instruction he is critiquing, (one that, incidentally fits the "sentence-up" approach advocated by one of our retreat attendees), and his role in that debate:

I want to focus on the notion of [instructional] sequence that makes the grammar issue so important: first grammar, then usage, then some absolute model of organization, all controlled by the teacher at the center of the learning process, with other matters [. . .] pushed off to the future. It is not surprising that we call each other names: those of us who question the value of teaching grammar are in fact shaking the whole elaborate edifice of traditional composition instruction. (109)

Some may reasonably see the image of the controlling teacher as crucial here; the counterpoint to that image may be Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*. This zero-sum formulation might be positively resolved by Paulo Freire's "problem-posing" educator in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Another key part of this passage is the critical role that the question of "sequence" holds in Hartwell's argument. Indeed, approaching the essay with this awareness reveals that Hartwell's argument actually addresses itself less to whether grammar instruction should be practiced in the writing classroom, and more to the narrower point that grammar should not be the starting point of writing instruction.

My point here is that we must reread Hartwell's argument while bearing in mind his stated aim of dislodging a pedagogy that uses sentence-level grammar as its starting point. Given that Hartwell frames his argument this way, citing his essay in today's pedagogical context as an authoritative justification for ignoring or de-emphasizing grammar instruction is to repurpose the article, and possibly ask it to carry more weight than it can bear.

Becky L. Caouette has also argued that it is time to take another look at Hartwell's essay. She notes that "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" is "the most widely reprinted article in Composition," especially in anthologies aimed at "Composition instructors [either] new or experienced" (57). Despite this ubiquity, writes Caouette, "no real critical attention" has been paid to Hartwell's article since a brief response that appeared in *College English* in 1986 (57). Caouette observes, "the critical invisibility of the text seems at odds with its pervasiveness in anthologies" (57). This discrepancy, argues Caouette, poses a problem with serious ramifications for the field of Composition:

This complete absence of critical reflection intrigues me, particularly considering the fact that we are repeatedly asking newcomers to the field—teachers and scholars—to examine this text in the anthologies we provide. Yet as a field we have not returned to it ourselves in any substantial way. Thus we run the risk of repeating old mistakes, of misrepresenting our current stances or the debates that frame our work, or of sending incomplete, or even erroneous messages to the next generation. We simply insert "Grammar" in our anthologies in an effort to avoid revising that chapter of our history—one that might look very different through our current theoretical, historical, and pedagogical lenses. (58)

I would add that the problems Caouette identifies have especially acute consequences for those of us in WAC who must address this issue with colleagues outside the field. The state of the grammar question post-Hartwell leaves us in an awkward, difficult to explain position partially because Hartwell's argument defies easy summary for an

outsider audience. In other words, to revisit this essay's opening scenario, we're left trying to sell a difficult proposition—we seem to be saying the earth is flat—rather than offering a positive response. The missed opportunity here lies in the fact that the true grammar discrepancy between writing faculty and professors in the disciplines is more one of proportion. We see grammar as a comparatively narrow slice of the writing pie; they see a larger slice—some, of course, think it's the whole pie.

I should pause for a moment, however, and point out that Caouette is too absolutist in her picture of our field's relationship to grammar. There have been many worthy attempts to advance discourse on grammar instruction at the college level in a post-Hartwell world. In 1991, Rei Noguchi published a book that both critiqued the bedrock studies Hartwell cited and offered a way forward for college grammar instruction. Four years later, Susan Hunter and Ray Wallace edited an anthology of essays that pursued these same goals.² In 1996, *College English*, the journal where "Grammars" appeared the decade before, ran a special issue on grammar instruction. Unfortunately, these very fine efforts failed to ignite further discussion. The next signpost did not appear until a 2002 article by Bonnie Devet, which offered three approaches to reconcile grammar instruction with process pedagogies. This essay was followed in 2004 by Laura Micciche's "Making the Case for Rhetorical Grammar." Like Caouette, Micciche notes an "absence of sustained contemporary conversation about grammar instruction at the college level" which is at odds, she argues, with the need to teach students "to communicate effectively" (717). Although Micciche lists "Grammars" in her works cited, she does not engage Hartwell directly. Instead, her argument engages political objections to grammar instruction (which this essay will also briefly take up below). This article is regarded in the field as a landmark statement on productive grammar instruction, especially in the strain of composition concerned with civic engagement and socio-cultural critique.

A decade on from Micciche's essay, Caouette's interrogative conclusion offers a provocative statement of the field's current relationship to grammar:

Do we [anthologize Hartwell] so that we can avoid talking about grammar issues with others, and thereby preemptively dismiss criticism about the absence of traditional grammar instruction in Composition classrooms? Is it an unwillingness to engage in continued inquiry in the field, even if, as [Chris] Anson (2008) argued, that inquiry is necessary—that new questions are emerging? Is it possible that the message Hartwell conveyed—that traditional grammar instruction as we knew it has no place in the modern classroom—is a dated argument that we nevertheless continue to promulgate [. . .]? Such questions that have not been answered elsewhere, point, I argue, to Composition's unease with this topic on the college level and with

our desire to present one article, one perspective, as the definitive one in the field. (61)

Though I understand why Caouette asks these questions, I would probably answer no to them, albeit not emphatically. Though I agree that the field has ground to make up in this regard, I would not say that this state of affairs amounts to a willful avoidance of grammar issues. Certain signs point to possibly different state of affairs when it comes to actual classroom practice. A significant number of writing instructors apparently do in fact find a place for grammar in their curriculum. They flag comma splices; they assign grammar texts; they refer students to the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) (which seems to be thriving); they likely do many other things in class and in consultations. Clearly, grammar instruction has not been abandoned. It simply seems circumscribed within the classroom.

To take a step out of that circle, I would propose we begin by examining the immediate responses to Hartwell's essay by Martha Kolln and others. A close revisiting of certain particulars of that discussion and how the debate played out combined to produce the strange result Caouette addresses: a canonical scholarly article that left scant discussion in its wake. In what follows, I will attempt to show that this lack of critical engagement may be owing in part to the multi-faceted nature of Hartwell's argument, but also, and more importantly, to the initial intensity of the debate, which had the unfortunate result of distorting general impressions of its outcome, and obscuring an apparent consensus that grammar taught rhetorically or in context was—and continues to be—a promising way forward.

The immediate responses to Hartwell's article were rigorous, impassioned, and, as we know, ultimately ineffectual in undermining the essay. The first wave appeared with four reactions to Hartwell in the "Comment and Response" section of *College English's* October 1985 issue. In the following December issue of the journal, yet another comment appeared by Hartwell's most prominent nemesis, Martha Kolln. One striking element of the exchange is a level of strong and emotionally charged language relatively unusual in a published academic debate. Edward Vavra opens his commentary rather aggressively: "COIK? 'Worship'? 'Incantations'? Patrick Hartwell should make up his mind. Either he has written a rational argument against the teaching of grammar or he is playing on our emotions" (647). Richard D. Cureton accuses Hartwell of deploying "sloppy examples," and calls his sample grammatical analyses "disturbingly naïve" (646, 645). Kolln insists, "You're wrong about me, Professor Hartwell. I am quite willing to put to rest the issue of 'formal grammar'" (875). Hartwell retorts that, "Professor Kolln is flat out wrong" on several points (878). Indeed, he opens his reply to Kolln somewhat dismissively: "There's little to be accomplished by talking across paradigms, so I'll try to be brief about this" (877). Hartwell also sees something suspicious in the shifting referents in Kolln's use

of the pronoun “we,” which range between members of the field generally and those who agree or disagree with her. Hartwell remarks accusingly, “We can see what’s going on here” (878).

It should not be ignored, however, that Hartwell’s critics raised legitimate concerns. In fact, one reason there had been no subsequent re-evaluation of Hartwell is that, for the most part, one could only elaborate on these initial critiques. Kolln and others pointed to soft spots, inconsistencies, and unclear definitions in key studies that served as a lynchpin for Hartwell. Carol Moses expresses concern about the implications of Hartwell’s argument for basic writers; further, she suggests that Hartwell misrepresents Mina Shaugnessy as being opposed to teaching grammar, and notes Hartwell’s “selective” examples (which were rooted in particularly intuitive aspects of grammar, such as article use and the order of cumulative adjectives) (645–46). Vavra also remarks on Hartwell’s skewed examples, and argues that Hartwell makes a misleading appeal to Noam Chomsky. In addition, Vavra and Cureton both find Hartwell’s linguistic theoretical grounding incomplete. As we know, these objections did not suffice, and Hartwell’s article remains the most influential treatment of the issue.³

This outcome is probably not surprising. Advocates of grammar instruction faced an all but insurmountable obstacle in the empirical studies arrayed against them. One can raise questions about method, definitions, and semantics, but generally speaking, such arguments rarely seem to gain traction; it seems simpler for those who are undecided simply to trust the science. On the whole, it seems that studies can only be persuasively refuted by other studies. Another problem for the pro-grammar side was (and is) comprised in the principle that getting people to take action is generally more difficult than getting people to take no action; it may be more precise to say it is quite difficult to persuade people to act against their inclinations. While many in our field do incorporate grammar instruction, many do not. It is no doubt seductive or convenient to have an authoritative license to ignore or deemphasize grammar in favor of focusing more on literary or content analysis. As decades elapse with inconsistent and unstable grammar instruction, few will be inclined to fill gaps in their knowledge of grammatical terminology and analysis. Still, this trend may yet be reversed.

The bitter tone of the debate surrounding Hartwell’s article belies an apparent and considerable common ground. Cureton writes, “I have no problem with Hartwell’s thesis” (643). Moses objects to “grammar as taught by most textbooks” (645). Vavra asserts that “much of the grammar that is currently taught is not only a waste of time but also harmful in that it bores and frustrates students” (647). Even Kolln writes, “I agree with [Hartwell . . .] that formal method is certainly not the way to teach grammar” (875). Despite his assertion that he was “talking across paradigms,” Hartwell

avers, “if Kolln and I were to agree to examine carefully what passes for writing instruction in American classrooms—from kindergarten through college—we’d find it dripping with a kind of grammar instruction we’d both deplore” (877, 878). Hartwell also concedes, “I would agree with all the respondents that a knowledge of the English language and a vocabulary for discussing style are useful attainments for literate adults” (649).

With all of this consensus, why was the dispute so heated? One could speculate about answers to that question, but unfortunately, this situation seems to be an example of a debate creating more heat than light. Adding to this misfortune, the vehemence on both sides seems to have created a lasting impression that the two positions were further apart and more antithetical than they really were. In other words, a simplistic narrative appears to have emerged: there was an intense debate over grammar instruction, and the anti-grammar side won. Such an impression might have been confirmed for any professor (from any discipline) who merely glanced at the headline for a 2003 article by Dennis Baron in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: “Teaching Grammar Doesn’t Lead to Better Writing.” While that statement seemed to be the takeaway when the dust settled, the real question at the heart of the matter was not whether grammar should be taught, but how it should be taught.

That issue was foregrounded by one of Hartwell’s respondents whom I have not yet mentioned. Joseph Williams offers a response which stands out from the others because he does not offer any critique whatsoever of Hartwell’s argument. Instead, Williams focuses on how to proceed given that formal grammar instruction had apparently been discredited. Leaving aside the issue of grammar instruction in primary and secondary schools, Williams postulates, “Mature writers—past age 20, say—profit from powerful generalizations about style.” Williams further argues that grammar instruction should “synthesize information from all grammars available, plus whatever information other theories of language might provide.” This approach to grammar would produce “a vocabulary crucial to talking about style, not just to teach our students to write clearly, but so that they can talk to others about the writing of those others” (642, emphasis in original). Williams was also alone in receiving an entirely positive reaction from Hartwell, who observes that Williams’s insights are “suggestive about how we might articulate what we know about writing to our students” (649).

For the significant number of people who continued (and continue) to teach grammar on the college level after these debates, Williams’s guidebook, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, in its tenth edition as of this writing, has been a useful resource. Likewise, Martha Kolln’s *Rhetorical Grammar* offers an approach to grammar instruction that both easily integrates with student writing, and equips students to read more effectively with attention to the rhetorical effects of grammatical choices.

I'd like to focus on Williams for a moment because his philosophy underpins the writing list that we're devising in our WAC program in conjunction with our writing center in response to retreat attendees' request for such an artifact.

The Writing List's Premises and Rationale

A list of common grammar or stylistic issues might seem simple to compile, but in fact there are a number of practical pedagogical considerations to balance. Since Williams's assertion that college writing students are capable of absorbing and applying general principles provides the pedagogical foundation to the writing list we devised, Williams's own lists on the inside covers of *Style* became one key starting point. Thus, our own list was conceived as an enumeration of both useful principles related to style, but given our retreat faculty's concerns, I also wanted to accommodate common student grammatical errors. Tabulations of grammar errors in college-student writing have at least a 100-year history. In 1988, Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford noted that devising lists of common student writing errors had been practiced toward various ends since at least 1910 (397). Connors and Lunsford generated their own list of the "top twenty" errors in student writing; that effort was replicated twenty years later by Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford (403; 795). Another touchstone deserving mention is Maxine Hairston's 1981 charting of reactions to particular writing errors as registered by a large cross section of professionals for whom students might conceivably write beyond college.

Though it is based on unscientific observation of student writing, our list turns out to align more or less favorably with Connors and Lunsford's list. Our list covers three of their top five, as well as five of the top ten items listed in order of English teachers' concerns, that is, the "rank of # of errors marked by teacher" (403). Similarly, our list includes two of the top three errors judged by professionals in Hairston's classification (as charted by Noguchi) to be "very serious," and two of the top four listed as "serious" (Noguchi 25). Our list also compares reasonably well to Lunsford and Lunsford's revised list from 2008. There is an overlap comprising two of the top four, and overall, we share eight of twenty items.

I would like to have meshed a bit more closely, but I would account for this twelve-point gap in three ways. To begin, four of those errors—involving diction, spelling, capitalization, and missing words—I judged inappropriate for our list because they were either too essay-specific (in the case of diction) or more likely to result from inattention (in the case of our student population at least) than ignorance of the grammatical or stylistic principles involved. Second, Lunsford and Lunsford encountered three additional errors that stemmed from documentation and quotation integration. I deemed such issues to be too discipline-specific to be generalized on our list. For a time, we included a statement that read in effect, "Check with your

professor to ensure proper quotation integration and documentation of sources.” I removed this statement for being too vague, and more importantly because I believe that the onus should be on professors to make such issues clear to students rather than professors waiting for students to raise them, or figure them out on their own. Finally, Lunsford and Lunsford’s list focuses on errors in strictly formal grammar, and I wanted our list to also include stylistic concerns such as smooth sentence-level transitions, effective use of passive voice, and similar issues.

The general aim for this document is to provide a clear and contained list of principles to help students and faculty alike build grammar and stylistic awareness based upon a common vocabulary. I envision the list emerging through grass-roots (it’s emanation from a cross-faculty retreat is a crucial element, it should be stressed) and working primarily as a reference point that could be incorporated into feedback on student work. When professors encounter grammar issues in a student’s paper—a run-on sentence, for example—they could simply refer students to the list: “See list #4” or words to that effect; a professor who grades electronically could provide a link if the list is on-line. I see this resource as especially useful for instructors who value and have an intuitive sense of appropriate grammar application, but perhaps lack a means or vocabulary to convey these issues to students. Such persons might acquaint themselves with the list over a cup of coffee, and grow increasingly familiar with it with use over time. A student might do the same, of course. Ideally, the number of professors using the list would snowball, and a typical student might then encounter and use the list in multiple classes, increasing the student’s likelihood of internalizing it. In other words, the list might aim at the same goals the many institutions hope to achieve with common grammar textbooks, but with the advantage of a more digestible, approachable format.

To increase the likelihood the scenarios described above might be realized, it was crucial that the list’s explanations effectively balance concision and completeness. This premise also underlies Noguchi’s approach to grammar instruction, which emphasizes both succinctness, and working with grammar knowledge students may already intuitively hold (34). Another concern taken into account is Hartwell’s COIK observation, the idea that textbook grammar explanations tend to be clear only if known, that is, jargon-laden and thus unclear to novices or the uninitiated. This concern also necessitated limiting, but not eliminating, grammar terminology. The trick then is to provide an explanation of a grammatical or stylistic issue that would be adequate for someone approaching it with little or no prior knowledge to gain understanding. The link to the Purdue OWL—which tends to have thorough explanations—would be there to cover any shortfalls. A final guiding principle in designing the list was to eschew bland examples in favor of examples that resemble what

students may actually write for class; this of course was another area to avoid the COIK phenomenon.

As an example of handling the concerns listed above, consider the following entry for dangling modifiers:

Fix Dangling and Disruptive Modifiers

Make sure modifiers match up to the appropriate term. Here's a dangling modifier:

—Claiming dozens of victims every day, doctors worked to contain the epidemic.

(This syntax suggests the doctors are claiming victims.)

To fix the problem, simply rephrase to reflect the logical connections:

—Claiming dozens of victims a day, the epidemic posed a serious challenge for the doctors.

OR

—The doctors worked to contain the epidemic, which claimed dozens of victims a day.

Here's a misplaced, or disruptive modifier:

—Historians have debated whether Queen Elizabeth the First was a virgin for centuries.

To correct, simply straighten out the logic:

—Historians have debated for centuries whether Queen Elizabeth the First was a virgin.

Read more about modifier issues here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/1/36/>

The emphasis on using simple logic to correct the sentences is meant to harness students' intuitive sense of sentence clarity or grammatical correctness. This is also true of the reference to "disruptive" modifiers, which are indicated as being synonymous to the more standard term, misplaced modifier.

Using student intuition about writing as an entry point toward a grammar vocabulary also underpins the following entry:

Ensure that Sentences are Neither Choppy, Nor Rambling

Conjunctions can remedy both choppy writing (by combining sentences), and rambling sentences (by clarifying the relationships between ideas.)

Subordinating conjunctions (unless, until, as, as if, though, although, even though, when, that, than, before, after, while, since, because, so that) create subordinate clauses that both set up and give emphasis to the main clause.

—Although her argument was strong, I was not persuaded.

(Here, the idea of not being persuaded in the main part of the sentence is emphasized more than the idea in the subordinate clause of the argument being strong. Reversing the arrangement would reverse the effect.)

Coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) give equal emphasis to two ideas, both of which could stand alone as a sentence:

—I agreed with her thesis, but I thought her evidence was weak.

(Here, the ideas of agreeing with the thesis and the weakness of the evidence are given equal emphasis by the co-ordinate conjunction "but.")

Note: In general, try not to have more than two or three clauses in a single sentence.

Read more about coordination and subordination here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/1/37/>

Though “rambling” and “choppy” may be imprecise terms, they are accessible for novice writers, who may then be guided to an appropriate grammatical terminology about those problems. Rambling sentences? Well, the problem is likely to be ineffective coordination. Choppy sentences? Which of those ideas could be subordinated to others?

Readers may quibble or object as to the degree to which these entries conform to the ideals laid out above (balancing completeness with concision; limiting, but not eliminating, grammar terminology, etc.), but I would welcome that. In presenting the list to my colleagues, I emphasized that everything was fully fungible. I’d say the same to readers of this essay, who surely could produce entries as good or better than these.

I hope I have persuasively demonstrated that the list approach holds pedagogical value and potential, but one thing I cannot promise at this point is that this list approach will be successful. The potential paradox here is that increased grammar knowledge might clarify thinking and talking about writing, but it is by no means certain that this practice would lead to drastic improvements in student writing itself. Perhaps the studies of half a century ago that discredited grammar drill could be replicated or built upon, but it seems likely that it will again prove difficult or impossible to establish a clearly linear causal relationship between grammar instruction and writing improvement. This exchange from Plato’s *Gorgias* offers an insight on the slippery nature of grammar instruction:

Socrates: Well, and is not he who has learned carpentering a carpenter?

Gorgias: Yes.

Socrates: And he who has learned music a musician?

Gorgias: Yes.

Socrates: And he who has learned medicine is a physician, in like manner? He who has learned anything whatever is that which his knowledge makes him.

Gorgias: Certainly.

Socrates: And in the same way, he who has learned what is just is just?

Gorgias: To be sure.

We perhaps fall into the same trap Gorgias stumbled into if we try to isolate any direct impact of grammar instruction on student writing, (or of WAC workshops on faculty teaching, for that matter). Our attendees may be in this trap as well since they seem to assume that one who has learned grammar is a good writer. We laborers in WAC must still work to bring to our colleagues our field's findings on grammar error.

This, of course, is not to circle back to the position that grammar instruction is necessarily fruitless, but rather to recognize and keep sight of the oblique relationship between teaching and learning. What if we try to place writing somewhere in the continuum suggested by Socrates's series of examples? Like justice, writing has elements that are intangible and abstract that might be best discerned in examples and models. But writing is also like carpentry and music in that there are certainly technical aspects that are helpful if not necessary to apprehend; basic principles are carried into practice, and progress toward mastery comes through practical immersion and experience. We could probably add many more examples to carpentry, music, and medicine, but we would be hard-put to find many more areas of teaching and learning besides composition that did not give a prominent place to each portion of its technical elements. Surely it is time to find a more conspicuous and productive place for grammar instruction in our writing pedagogy.

Grammar and Politics

Before closing this essay, I want to acknowledge the political dimension of grammar. Many in our field are justifiably concerned that grammar instruction might explicitly or implicitly promote the notion that one version of English among many might be established as "proper" or "standard," thereby marginalizing a great majority of both native and non-native speakers of English. This consideration underpins the NCTE's Statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language. Mike Rose's book *Lives on the Boundary* is perhaps our most eloquent elaboration on how a rigid approach to grammar can devalue, demoralize, and discourage students. In response to the notion of grammar as a potential tool of oppression, Laura Micciche has sought to "challenge those associations" between grammar and the reinforcement of social hierarchies. Micciche argues that a rhetorical approach to grammar instruction can actually empower students, an aim in line with "composition's goals to equip students to be active citizens of the world they inhabit" (733).

Though the factors she refers to may be more than "associations," that does not preclude the empowering conception of grammar instruction that she envisions. The language rights terrain has shifted since the mid-1980's. Around that time, writers such as N'Gugi Wa Thiong' O endeavored to de-colonize their minds by renouncing European languages and embracing those of their cultures, but this attitude has evolved. Today, the literary landscape is much more diverse; we can now hear

arguments, ideas, and stories from writers with roots in a broad array of cultures—many of which continue to be impacted by oppression—precisely because these writers are willing to employ standardized grammar to some degree, even as they re-shape the language in other respects. The same can be true for our students; they too should be able to include the meta-language of grammar in their box of rhetorical and analytical tools, enabling them to both understand and be understood.

The idea that grammar knowledge provides access to the public square is not new, of course. Amid a vigorous defense of the value of grammar instruction in the face of an existential threat, John of Salisbury argued in 1159 that grammar is a shared, inclusive public resource that both empowers and protects all who avail themselves of it: “The art [of grammar] is, as it were, a public highway, on which all have the right to journey, walk, and act, immune from criticism and molestation” (54). Viewed in this way, grammar is not inevitably a means of oppression; it is, on the contrary a useful public trust that facilitates a free exchange of ideas and expression. Why should students be denied the use of this resource?

Conclusion

This essay has been something of a winding road, and I will try to consolidate everything here. My largest goal has been to move toward bridging the considerable gap that exists on many campuses between writing faculty and our colleagues in other disciplines when it comes to grammar in student writing. I have argued that it is high time for our field to bring its discussions of grammar pedagogy out of the margins, and reconsider how grammar instruction might be optimally reintegrated into our classrooms.

I think this shift is especially important for those of us in WAC who thus far have generally been less comfortable and less successful than we might care to admit (even to ourselves) in discussing grammar with outside colleagues. Though a common belief among many professors holds that writing instruction is primarily the responsibility of the English or writing department, this attitude may shift if we provide simple, self-contained ways that professors in the disciplines can reinforce and corroborate concepts taught in composition classrooms. Not only that, but we must also listen carefully to cross-disciplinary colleagues rather than viewing them as naïfs who must be disabused of their misconceptions. On our campus, this approach enabled us to produce at least two artifacts that I hope will prove useful: the writing list and this essay. Listening can no doubt lead to useful artifacts on other campuses as well. I look forward to hearing and reading about them.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. See Swilky for further discussion of “faculty resistance to writing reform,” and the opportunities such reactions present. Many studies have looked at WAC program influences on faculty instructional practices. For an overview, see Bazerman 50–53.

2. This volume includes a qualitative study by Donald Bushman and Elizabeth Ervin on instructor responses to grammar in writing in the disciplines (WID) courses. They include among their findings that many of these faculty members were uncertain about responding to grammar issues, and desired resources to that end. See especially pp. 147–50, and 154.

3. *College English* published a final “Comment” in response to “Grammars” in April 1986. Thomas Huckin objected that a grammar exercise he devised was misused and misrepresented in the essay.

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Appendix

Things _____ University Students Should Know About Writing

1. *Use Commas Correctly*

A. Place a comma before coordinating conjunctions like "and," "but," "yet," "for," or "so" when these conjunctions separate two *full* sentences.

The problem was significant, and many sought to solve it.

We thought our hypothesis was correct, but the data showed otherwise.

B. Set off introductory words, phrases (groups of words), and subordinate clauses with commas.

Before Copernicus, the earth was thought to be the center of the universe.

Today, we know the earth revolves around the sun.

C. Set off an appositive (a re-statement of a noun that follows it directly) with commas *unless* it is necessary to define the noun that precedes it.

Jane Austen, *the nineteenth-century novelist*, is still popular with readers.

The nineteenth-century novelist *Jane Austen* is still popular with readers.

For more, follow this link: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/607/>

2. *For Clear Sentences, Identify Actors and Their Actions*

As much as possible, make the verbs in your sentences actions, and actors the subject. Following this principle makes the (+) sentences below more clear.

(-) The Wolf's words were, "Huffing and puffing will take place on my part, and your house will be blown in by me."

(+) The Wolf said, "I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in."

(-) A study was undertaken in which the McGurk Effect at work in the human brain was examined.

(+) Scientists studied the McGurk Effect at work in the human brain.

3. *Semi-Colons Join Closely Related Sentences*

Use a semi-colon between two *full* sentences to show that the sentences are related in some way.

The Federalists wrote in favor of the Constitution; the Anti-Federalists opposed them.

Some doctors are concerned about the rising diagnosis rate of autism; they believe the condition should be redefined.

Read more on semi-colons here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/04/>

4. Use Colons To Add Emphasis and Introduce Lists That Are Appositives

A. Use a colon between two *full* sentences to emphasize the second sentence.

–The Federalists had one goal: they wanted to persuade Americans to adopt the Constitution.

B. Colons also set up appositives:

–The Federalists had one goal: to persuade Americans to adopt the Constitution.

C. Only use a colon before a list if the word immediately before the list is equivalent to the list itself.

–We used the following materials: wooden dowels, eyehooks, rubber bands, and particleboard.

Read more about colons here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/1/44/>

5. Identify and Fix Run-On Sentences

Run-on sentences are two or more full sentences that are not properly joined.

Fused sentences are joined with no punctuation at all.

–We adjusted our design the car traveled the required distance.

Comma splices join independent clauses with only a comma.

–We adjusted our design, the car traveled the required distance.

A few common ways to fix run-on sentences:

Use a comma AND a coordinating conjunction.

–We adjusted our design, and the car traveled the required distance.

Use a subordinating conjunction.

–Because we adjusted our design, the car traveled the required distance.

Use a semi-colon to show a relationship between the sentences.

We adjusted our design; the car traveled the required distance.

Read more on run-ons here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/598/02/>

6. *Identify and fix fragments*

Fragments are word groups that either lack a subject or verb, or they have an extra word that prevents them from standing as a sentence. Correct them by adding what's missing, or by joining them to another sentence. Examples below.

(-) = fragments, (+) = corrected versions.

(-) The Supreme Court rulings known as “The Marshall Trilogy.”

(+) The Supreme Court rulings known as “The Marshall Trilogy” played a key role in Indian dispossession.

(-) Since the data was inaccurate.

(+) Since the data was inaccurate, the conclusion is probably flawed.

(-) Suggesting that the conclusion may be flawed.

(+) They realized their data was imprecisely recorded, suggesting that their conclusions may be flawed.

Read more about fragments here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/620/1/>

7. *Prefer active voice, but use passive voice when it is appropriate, or standard practice*

Passive voice constructions always have a form of “to be” followed by a past participle verb:

PASSIVE: Conflicting policies were implemented.

ACTIVE: The Internal Revenue Service implemented conflicting policies.

(The active sentence here clarifies exactly who is implementing the policies.)

Writing in science and engineering sometimes uses passive voice when describing procedures. As a matter of style, passive voice is most often used to ensure a smooth flow or sequence of ideas. Passive voice is also appropriate when you wish to deemphasize the actor in favor of emphasizing the receiver or result of an action.

Read more on active and passive voice here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/01/>

8. *Fix Dangling and Disruptive Modifiers*

Make sure modifiers match up to the appropriate term. Here's a dangling modifier:

–Claiming dozens of victims every day, doctors worked to contain the epidemic.

(This syntax suggests the doctors are claiming victims.)

To fix the problem, simply rephrase to reflect the logical connections:

–Claiming dozens of victims a day, the epidemic posed a serious challenge for the doctors.

OR

–The doctors worked to contain the epidemic, which claimed dozens of victims a day.

Here’s a misplaced, or disruptive modifier:

–Historians have debated whether Queen Elizabeth the First was a virgin for centuries.

To correct, simply straighten out the logic:

–Historians have debated for centuries whether Queen Elizabeth the First was a virgin.

Read more here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/1/36/>

9. *Ensure Clear Pronoun References/Antecedents*

Make sure pronouns (like he, she, it, we, they, this, that, those) refer clearly to their antecedents.

UNCLEAR: The two nations ignored their clean–air treaty, leading to many years of aggression, miscommunication, and environmental damage. This proved disastrous. (Exactly which part proved disastrous?)

CLEARER: The two nations ignored their clean–air treaty, leading to many years of aggression, miscommunication, and environmental damage. *This refusal to comply with the provisions of the treaty* proved disastrous.

Read more here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/595/>

10. *Craft Sentences that are Neither Choppy, Nor Rambling*

Conjunctions can remedy both choppy writing (by combining sentences), and rambling sentences (by clarifying the relationships between ideas.)

Subordinating conjunctions (unless, until, as, as if, though, although, even though, when, that, than, before, after, while, since, because, so that) create subordinate clauses that both set up and give emphasis to the main clause.

–Although her argument was strong, I was not persuaded.

(Here, the idea of not being persuaded in the main part of the sentence is emphasized more than the idea in the subordinate clause of the argument being strong. Reversing the arrangement would reverse the effect.)

Coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) give equal emphasis to two ideas, both of which could stand alone as a sentence:

–I agreed with her thesis, but I thought her evidence was weak.

(Here, the ideas of agreeing with the thesis and the weakness of the evidence are given equal emphasis by the co-ordinate conjunction “but.”)

Note: In general, try not to have more than two or three clauses in a single sentence.

Read more here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/1/37/>

II. Follow a “Known–New” sequence in both syntax and paragraph development

To ensure a smooth prose style, make the opening words of each sentence tie into or refer back to the previous sentence, providing new information afterwards:

The Large Hadron Collider is an enormous machine that scientists use to study the universe. One important discovery the LHC brought about is the Higgs boson particle, which will help scientists understand why some particles have mass. The LHC may also help answer questions about the origins of the universe.

Here, the opening words in the second and third sentence link the sentence’s idea to the first sentence. New information comes toward the end of each sentence.