

Grammar Teaching That Sets Learners Free

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I. Lexis to Form (Cullen, Grammar as a Liberating Force)

The naturalist “Focus on meaning” vs. the traditionalist “focus on forms” debate ignores place of grammar in supporting subtle and interesting expression and style. The “focus on form” approach starts with words or pictures, builds to text, looks closely at text, then helps students fill gaps they discover in trying to express themselves.

Some Examples

- Elaborating on a simple text, aka Grammaticization or Grammaring (e.g. write the story based on a newspaper headline, compare paragraphs, story from pictures)
- Guided summary of a single text.
- Working with simple and complex versions of text, comparing, elaborating, and summarizing - www.newsela.com, Shakespeare in easy English, etc. Can do similar work with text at different registers, different translations of same text, first and later drafts of text.
- Exercises with discourse markers (missing markers, missing preceding sentence, missing following sentence. Text level exercises with missing beginnings, middles, and ends.
- Dictogloss – Teacher reads text, students take quick notes, ask questions, hear text two more times, write best version of text in groups, compare to each other and to original.
- Sentence Combining, sentence composing, sentence deconstructing.

III. Some Other Non-Oppressive Ways to Draw Attention to Form

- Memorized Dialogues, Poems, Songs, Plays – Recitals, Poetry Readings, Performances
- Using poems, songs, and authentic texts to teach formulaic expressions and rule-based competence
- Role Play that explores different registers
- Juicy sentences, Mentor sentences
- Translation
- Word Wall of Words in Phrases

Some Resources

Anderson, Jeff, (2005). *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer's Workshop*. Stenhouse, Portland, ME.

Batstone, R. & Ellis R. (2009). Principled grammar teaching. *System 37*, pp. 194-204.

Cullen, R. (2008) Teaching grammar as a liberating force. *ELT Journal*, 62, pp. 221-230.

Folse, K. S. (2009). *Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Language Learners: Michigan Teacher Training*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI.

Gartland, L. B. & Smolkin, L.B. (2016). The histories and mysteries of grammar instruction: Supporting elementary teachers in the time of the Common Core. *The Reading Teacher 69(4)*, pp. 391-399.

Hochman, J. C. & Wexler, N. (2017). One sentence at a time: The need for explicit instruction in teaching students to write well. *American Educator. Summer 2017*, pp. 30-43.

Richards, J. C. & Reppen, R. (2014). Towards a pedagogy of grammar instruction. *RELC Journal*, 45(1), pp. 5-25.

Saddler, B. (2012). *Teacher's guide to effective sentence writing*. Guilford, NY.

Swan, M. (2005). *Practical English Usage (3rd edition)*. Oxford University Press, NY.

Ur, P. (2009). *Grammar Practice Activities: A Practical Guide for Teachers (2nd edition)*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Lily Wong Fillmore, ell.stanford.edu, Lessons that teach content and academic language at the same time.

Killgallon & Killgallon, <http://sentencecomposing.com>, a range of sentence composing activities.

<http://greatsentences.blogspot.com> – Noteworthy sentences, mostly literary

Discourse Connectors in Content Areas (Hochman & Wexler)

a. Fractions are like decimals because _____

b. Fractions are like decimals so _____

c. Fractions are like decimals but _____

Sentence Combining (Saddler)

Every point on Earth has a specific location.
That location is determined by an imaginary grid of lines.
The lines denote latitude.
The lines denote longitude.
Parallels of latitude measure distance north and south of a line.
The line is called the Equator.
Meridians of longitude measure distances east and west of a line.
The line is called the Prime Meridian.

Sentence Expansion (Hochman & Wexler)

Athens and Sparta fought.

When? _____

Why? _____

Expanded Sentence: _____

Guided Summary

At over 4000 miles long, the Nile is the world's longest river. In ancient times, each spring water would run off the mountains and the Nile would flood. As the flood waters receded black rich soil was left behind, which the ancient Egyptians called the "gift of the Nile."

The Nile, which is _____, is over 4000 miles long. In ancient times the Nile _____ as water would run off the mountains. The black, rich soil that _____
_____ was called the "gift of the Nile" by ancient Egyptians.

The Absolute Zoom Lens

Definition:

The absolute is a free modifier that is grammatically independent of the sentence and is set off by a comma(s). In the simplest terms, an absolute is a noun + and *ing* verb. An absolute adds a close-up camera shot to your sentence. The comma acts as a zoom lens, focusing the reader's visualization on something small in the larger wide-angle shot of the sentence.

Other constructions:

- noun + an *-ing*, *-ed*, or *-en* verb (*lip quivering, fist knotted, heart broken*)
- Noun + an adverb (*head down, hat off*)
- Noun + an adjective (*head sweaty, shirt white and crisp*)
- Noun + a preposition (*pen in hand*)
- Preposition (usually *with* or *like*) + noun + any of the above variations (*with hair standing up on the back of her neck*)

Possessive pronoun + noun + any of the above variations (*his knees drawn to his chest*)

In each construction, the comma that must set off the absolute acts like a camera's zoom lens, focusing on some small detail that enriches the image the writer is attempting to produce in the reader's mind.

Example

Leg going up and down, pencil tapping against the metal, Garrett waits for silent sustained reading to be over.

Mentor Texts:

Birds still sang, flowers still bloomed, cows still slept in the meadow, and I ate soup—now cold—as if my mama hadn't ever gone. (p. 13)

—Patricia MacLachlan, *Journey*

"And on my honor," Bear said, his voice booming, his arms spread wide. (p. 172)

—Avi, *Crispin*

Jeff's Lesson:

I start the teaching of the absolute with images: pictures of family or from magazines. I start with a picture of my favorite hobby. For me, bike riding is the only thing that ever stills my mind.

As the students look at the image, I say, "If I were going to make a simple sentence out of this, I would write *The bicyclist raced*. Maybe I'd even add *down the road* at the end of the sentence: *The bicyclist raced down the road*."

I go on with my think-aloud. "That's an okay sentence, but I have learned that the more concrete, spe-

cific nouns I have in my writing, the more likely I am to communicate the picture I have in my head and create pictures in my readers' heads." I explain that in my reading I have noticed something writers seem to always do, but there is nothing in our English book to tell me about it. "What writers do is find a smaller noun that's in the wide-angle shot of the sentence, and then they add an *-ing* verb to that noun."

We look at the picture again and see that there are lots of "little" nouns in our wide-angle shot. We list them on the board: *legs, pedals, wheels, street, sweat, face, hands*. I leave a space next to each item on the board. "Now, let's add an *-ing* verb to each noun," I say, and we come up with: *legs pumping, pedals spinning, wheels turning, street making a ribbon into the horizon, sweat dripping, face grimacing, hands gripping the handlebars*. Students naturally start adding little phrases.

We evaluate the noun and *-ing* pairs and pick two to attach to a sentence. We try them in the opener and closer positions:

Legs pumping, sweat dripping, the bicyclist raced down the road.

The bicyclist raced down the road, ***legs pumping, sweat dripping***

Then I hand out pictures I have laminated. First, kids write the wide-angle shot simple sentence. After that, they go back and find the "Little" nouns that are part of the big picture—literally—and make a list. Next, students add *-ing* verbs or phrases to their "little" nouns, and then they pick their favorite combinations and connect one or two to a sentence. We start with the opener or closer positions, and add interrupting positions when it seems appropriate, connecting back to the sentence pattern charts.

I require that students try an absolute in their next writing assignment and that they highlight it when submitting it for assessment. But, for the most part, they would do it without the requirement because they love how sophisticated their writing sounds with that little grammatical addition, which they see as a close-up camera shot.

Nouns We See	<i>-ing</i> Verbs Related to These Nouns
Pedals	spinning, pumping, turning
Hands	gripping, gripping handlebars
Wheels (spokes)	spinning, splashing, turning, skidding
Face	grunting, dripping with sweat
Legs	pumping, standing, grinding
Sweat	dripping, staining, soaking his shirt
Mud	splattering, flying, covering his legs

Adapted from *Mechanically Inclined* by Jeff Anderson

Using the Absolute Sentence Construction in Your Writing

From Jeff Anderson in *Everyday Editing*

1. Choose a picture or photo
2. Write a simple sentence about it (like a wide-angle camera shot).
3. Make a list of the “smaller” nouns (what you notice with a close-up shot).
4. Next to each of these nouns, write an *-ing* verb (plus a phrase if you want).
5. Pick a favorite or combine two.
6. Read the original sentence and add the absolute. Try it in the opener, closer, and interrupter positions.
7. Pick your favorite and write the whole sentence using correct punctuation.

Example:



Simple sentence: Janna wins the race.

Smaller nouns: hair, scarf, fingers, arms, legs, feet.

Adding *-ing* verb:

hair flying, scarf blowing, fingers clenching, arms extending, legs stretching, feet pounding.

Possible sentences:

Hair flying, feet pounding the grass, Janna wins the race.

Janna, hair flying, feet pounding the grass, wins the race.

Heart pounding, head scarf blowing behind, Janna wins the race.

Legs stretching, fingers clenching, Janna wins the race.

Janna, arms extending, legs stretching, wins the race.