

Teaching Grammar: Our Viewpoint



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

Should we teach grammar?

The debate about whether or not we should teach grammar is actually a pretty absurd one. The *moment* you engage in conversation with learners about writing, being a writer and their specific compositions, you will be talking about and teaching grammar. We teach grammar without even realising.

This is because you are bound to talk about and give instruction in things like:

- **Phonology** - the interesting relationship between their spoken sounds and their written spellings.
- **Morphology** - words and their word choices.
- **Syntax** - the way they've chosen to arrange their words and phrases.
- **Semantics** - the meaning(s) they are trying to share with others.
- **Pragmatics** - the context and organisation of their writing.
- **Semiotics** - their use of signs and symbols.
- **Metafunctions** - the decisions they are taking and making.
- **Field** - the content of what they are sharing.
- **Tenor** - the relationship between them and their readers.
- **Mode** - the technologies they are using and the choices they are making over how to present their writing.
- **Genres** - the style, voice and conventions they've chosen to use or subvert.

Hopefully, this list shows you that grammar is more than the naming of parts or the adherence to conventions of punctuation. Grammar is a beautiful thing.

For us, this means you can teach about grammar as much as you like as long as your instruction is orientated towards helping learners craft more meaningful and successful texts (Young & Ferguson [2020](#), [2021a](#)). Grammar ultimately is about developing children's style and voice (Young & Ferguson [2021b](#)).

Should we use linguistics to help us teach writing?

Now, if we are in agreement that it's impossible to separate grammar from the teaching of writing, we can discuss whether it's necessary for children to receive lessons in linguistics. Linguistics is the study of language and its structures and includes the study of grammar. When we study language, we can discuss and learn about things like:

- **Sociolinguistics** - the social factors that might influence the writing we craft.
- **Dialectology** - the influence dialect and geography can have on our writing.
- **Psycholinguistics** - the relationship between ourselves and our writing.
- **Comparative linguistics** - the similarities and differences between languages.
- **Structural linguistics** - the structures and systems of language people use.

Again you can and should study language in a writing classroom. Part of good writing teaching is studying how other writers use language successfully and meaningfully (Young & Ferguson [2021a](#)). Children should be invited to study your writing as a writer-teacher, they can discuss each other's writing and they should study the manuscripts of recreational and professional writers.

Is the PAG test appropriate for assessing children's ability to be writers?

So, hopefully, we've agreed that the study of language can help in our efforts to develop children as writers. So now the question really becomes about whether young writers need to be able to name and identify parts of language in a PAG test; something that represents only a tiny fragment of what is involved in the study of language. The answer is quite obviously no. The National Curriculum has given primary schools the responsibility to develop children's writing and them as writers. While we've shown that the study of language can be helpful when teaching writing, linguistics actually has its own separate and very specialised fields of study. By all means assess children's writing and their development as writers, but drop the need to assess their ability to be in some way 'structural linguists' by the age of 11.

Concluding thoughts

As we have shown, children are naturally studying grammar in the writing classroom whenever they read, share, talk about and discuss their own writing and the writing of others. Grammar is the study of how a language makes sense, and we cannot help but learn about and teach it in writing lessons, unless of course we are content for children's writing to fail in its intention - to share meaning.

- Giving names to things, and having a shared language in which to talk about writing can be pretty useful. But we don't need to test children's abilities to remember those names in a writing classroom.
- Our view of grammar teaching is that it should combine the dimensions of structure and use. Structure is concerned with syntax (sentence construction) and this will be part of many writing discussions. In this context, we are not against the use of grammatical

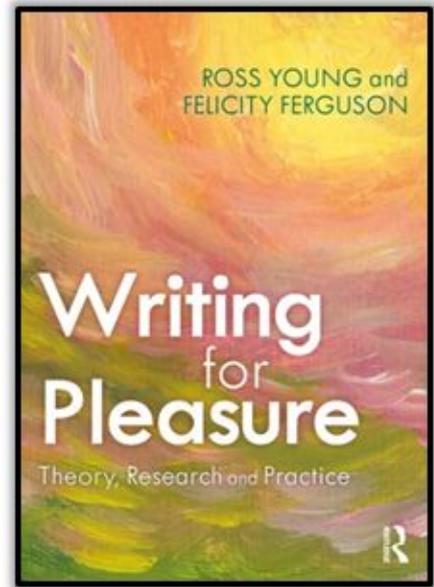
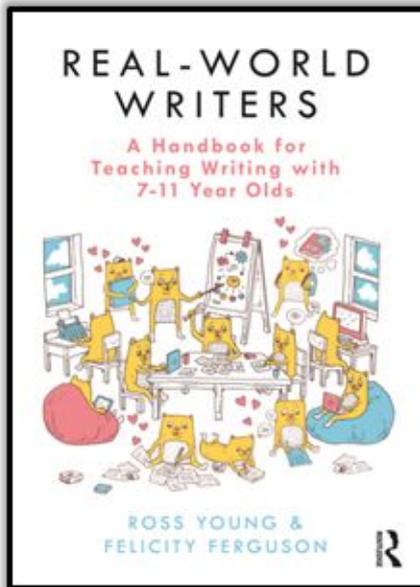
terminology, but we see it simply as a metalanguage which can assist in conversations about writing. 'Use' means considering what we want to mean (semantics), how we achieve clarity and how we achieve the effect we want to have (pragmatics). If we want children to write successful and meaningful texts, we should ensure that semantics and pragmatics are driving the writing, helped by an understanding of context and syntax.

- We see grammar as a set of choices we can make when we craft writing. The grammatical choices we decide on are conditioned by both semantics and pragmatics. For example, in the context of writing in a particular genre, we ask children to think about 'field' (the content of what they want to share), 'tenor' (the relationship between them and their readers), and 'mode' (how they wish to present their writing). These considerations help them focus on the choices they will make to achieve meaning, clarity and effect, and to be clear about the reasons for their choices.
- We recognise that grammar is ultimately teaching about style and voice. The cumulative effect of all the choices children can make when they write is to create style, whether it be (for example) a formal or conversational style, a personal or unique voice, a style associated with writing in a particular professional field (a historian or a scientist maybe), or a style related to a specific genre (poetic, narrative, expository).
- We believe that we should not impose particular choices, but make children aware that there are possibilities and invite them to use them. Tell them these are things that can be done with language rather than what must be done. We believe that the feeling of confidence that comes from making their own choices adds to children's sense of competence, independence and personal responsibility when writing.
- We believe that assessment should reflect the way we teach. In a *Writing for Pleasure* approach (Young & Ferguson [2021a](#)), therefore, we should be evaluating children as writers, and making grammar in its widest sense an essential part of such assessment. Our viewpoint on the grammar component of the current system of PAG testing is as follows: its conception of grammar is too narrow, with an unjustifiable and pointless emphasis on testing children's ability to identify and name parts; it is prescriptive, and does not admit the possibility of stylistic variation; it allows no freedom for children to show a sense of personal creativity, and it impacts negatively on the way writing is taught in the curriculum, in the form of 'teaching to the test.'
- Lastly, we want grammar study to be enjoyable, thought-provoking, purposeful, and to arouse curiosity and interest in all of us. We want it to be dynamic rather than static and for children to see its personal relevance to the ways in which they want to share their meaning with others.

References:

- Young, R., Ferguson, F. (2020) *Real-World Writers* London: Routledge
- Young, R., Ferguson, F. (2021a) *Writing For Pleasure: theory, research and practice* London: Routledge
- Young, R., Ferguson, F. (2021b) *The Writing For Pleasure Centre's Grammar Mini-Lessons* [Online:
<https://writing4pleasure.com/the-writing-for-pleasure-centres-grammar-mini-lessons/>]

Further Reading



And finally...

- If you're interested in developing your writing teaching further, we offer a wide-range of evidence-informed CPD including our popular school residency programme, teacher workshops and multi-day institutes. Find out more at www.writing4pleasure.com/training

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