

Five Recommendations for Teaching Common Core Grammar to Elementary Students



By Sean Ruday



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The Common Core State Standards emphasize grammar and language study, but what kind of grammar instruction keeps students engaged *and* makes them better writers?

Traditional grammar exercises, taught out of context from writing instruction, frequently reduce student interest levels (Woltjer, 1998) and have very little impact on student writing (Weaver, 1998). Because of this, it's especially important for teachers to provide students with grammar instruction that keeps their interest while helping them understand how specific grammatical concepts can improve their writing. I like to use the metaphor of a toolkit (Ruday, 2013) when asking students to think about why grammar is important to effective writing. Just as craftspeople use specific tools for certain purposes, writers use particular grammatical concepts to enhance their works in purposeful ways.

In this paper, we'll explore five key recommendations for teaching Common Core grammar to elementary students. These recommendations, which relate to the "grammar toolkit" metaphor, are

- 1) Show students examples of grammatical concepts used in literature.
- 2) Discuss how the authors of those literary works use grammatical concepts as "tools" to enhance their writing.
- 3) Discuss how the literary works would look if those grammatical concepts were not used.
- 4) Ask students to use specific grammatical concepts in their own writing.
- 5) Ask students to reflect on how those grammatical concepts enhance their works.

Now, let's look at each of those recommendations in more detail.

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1. Show students examples of grammatical concepts used in literature.

When I teach grammar to elementary school students, I always say I count on “a little help from my friends.” The funny thing is, most of these “friends” are people I’ve never met and probably never will—they’re published authors whose books I use to enhance my grammar instruction. Specifically, I use these authors’ works to show students examples of how Common Core-oriented grammatical concepts are used in literature.

In my book *The Common Core Grammar Toolkit*, I describe how I use literature to help my students understand grammatical concepts. For example, when talking with students about relative pronouns (which are addressed in Common Core Language Standard 4.1), I’ll show examples from children’s literature that contain examples of this grammatical concept, such as the following excerpt from Kate DiCamillo’s novel *Because of Winn-Dixie*: “And there weren’t that many kids at the Open Arms, just Dunlap and Stevie Dewberry. ... And Amanda Wilkinson, **whose** face was always pinched up like she was smelling something real bad; and Sweetie Pie Thomas, **who** was only five years old and still mostly a baby” (DiCamillo, 2000, p. 38). As I show the students this excerpt, I’ll point out examples of relative pronouns (in this case, the words “whose” and “who” in boldface).

I’ve found that showing examples of grammatical concepts in literature drastically increases the relevance of grammar instruction for my students. While basic grammar drills and textbook exercises may not strike many students as relevant, looking at how a student’s favorite author uses a particular grammatical concept certainly does. When we show our students examples of Common Core-oriented grammatical concepts in works of high-interest literature, we’re helping our students begin to see the usefulness of grammar.

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2. Discuss how the authors of those literary works use grammatical concepts as “tools” to enhance their writing.

Once we’ve shown our students examples of grammatical concepts used in literature, the next step is to talk with them about how those grammatical concepts are used to enhance the pieces in which they appear. This is a key part of the “toolkit” approach to teaching grammar, as it helps students understand that writers use grammar purposefully. Looking at grammatical concepts as “tools” relates to The National Council of Teachers of English’s recommendation that teachers and students understand “how writers read in a special way, with an eye toward not just what the text says but how it is put together” (NCTE, 2004). A key part of looking at how a text is put together is analyzing the grammatical choices authors make by thinking about what grammatical concepts they include and why they include them.

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To illustrate how published authors use grammatical concepts as tools to enhance their writing, let's return to the topic of relative pronouns by taking a look at a sentence from Matt Christopher's novel *Top Wing*: "The Cottoneer center had kicked the ball back to his halfback, **who** aimed a kick to his right wing" (Christopher, 1994, p. 23). When showing this sentence to elementary school students, I point out that Christopher uses the relative pronoun "who" to introduce important information (specifically, that this halfback "aimed a kick to his right wing"). I explain that "who aimed a kick to his right wing" is an example of a relative clause, and that the relative clause begins with the relative pronoun "who." We then discuss how this relative pronoun and corresponding relative clause enhance the piece of writing. I ask the students why they think Matt Christopher chose to use this relative pronoun and relative clause and why the information provided by each is important.

3. Discuss how the literary works would look if those grammatical concepts were not used.

To further help students understand why grammatical concepts are important to good writing, I recommend asking them to consider how specific works of literature would be different if certain grammatical concepts were not used. Let's take the sentence "The Cottoneer center had kicked the ball back to his halfback, who aimed a kick to his right wing" described in the previous recommendation. If author Matt Christopher did not use the relative pronoun "who" and the corresponding relative clause "who aimed a kick to his right wing," it would read quite differently; "The Cottoneer center had kicked the ball back to his halfback" doesn't contain the important information about the halfback's actions that the original text does.

Students who consider how sentences would look without certain grammatical concepts and why a writer may have chosen to use that concept are exercising their abilities to think metacognitively about a piece of writing. Metacognition, knowledge of cognitive phenomena (Flavell, 1979), is often thought of as thinking about thinking (Garner, 1987). In the context of grammar instruction, metacognition can mean understanding why a writer might use a certain grammatical concept and what effect the use of that concept might have on a piece of writing. Helping students achieve this understanding can allow them to see aspects of grammar as tools instead of simply as terms that need to be memorized and then forgotten.

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4. Ask students to use specific grammatical concepts in their own writing.

Once students have examined grammatical concepts in literature and discussed their importance to the text, I recommend asking them to attempt to use those concepts in their own writing. Students might add additional detail to their writing through the use of relative pronouns and relative clauses, or they might make their work more specific by using strong verbs. Asking students to use particular grammatical concepts such as these in their own works further develops their understanding of grammar as a set of tools that can improve a piece of writing.

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The application of these concepts to students' writing is an example of a gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). When applied to grammar instruction, this method asks teachers to: 1) initially model the use of a grammatical concept, 2) work on examples with the students, and 3) ask the students to apply it to their own writing when they are ready to do so. I've found that the combination of support and independence provided by this method is much more effective than simply telling students to use a certain grammatical concept in their writing. The gradual release of responsibility helps students understand why a particular element of grammar is important to good writing and shows them some specific ways to integrate it into their own works.

5. Ask students to reflect on how those grammatical concepts enhance their works.

After students have applied specific grammatical concepts to their writings, I recommend asking them to reflect on how those concepts enhance their works. This further improves the students' metacognitive awareness of the importance of grammatical concepts, as it requires them to consider how a particular element of grammar played an important role in the piece they wrote.

For example, after instructing my elementary school students to include prepositional phrases in their writing, I ask them to examine the pieces they created and think about how the prepositional phrases they added enhance the piece. To facilitate this process, I tell the students to identify some particular prepositional phrases in the writing they created, reflect on how the piece would be different without them, and share these observations with a partner. Finally, I ask the students to respond in writing to a question such as, "In your own words, how can prepositional phrases help writers improve their works?" Their responses to this question help me gauge their understandings of the uses of prepositional phrases and how this concept can improve their writing. As students reflect on the application of this and other grammatical concepts, they are enhancing the number of "tools" in their "grammar toolkit."

Final Thoughts

As you teach your elementary school students about the grammatical concepts addressed in the Common Core Language Standards, keep the "toolkit" metaphor at the forefront of your instruction by asking yourself: How are these grammatical concepts important "tools" for effective writing? How are they used by published authors? How can I help my students apply these tools to their own writing and reflect on their uses? Considering these questions can help you create lessons that keep your students engaged while emphasizing the importance of grammar to effective writing.

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