

Northern's Composition Theory

(Last revised summer 2007)

Grammar should be taught in conjunction with writing.

For almost a hundred years research studies have proven that teaching grammar (including labeling parts of speech, diagramming, etc.) has no positive effect on a student's ability to write well, and studying grammar can have a negative effect when it takes time away from writing practice. While students do need a vocabulary to discuss their writing, many students have studied this vocabulary since third grade, and as with most educational concepts, students will learn the vocabulary best if it's applied. Therefore, composition classes should teach spelling, punctuation, and grammar guidelines within the context of writing assignments.

Possible Applications:

- Students may be introduced to usage rules as they arise in writing assignments—e.g. If many students have trouble using semicolons in their essays, essays may be returned with those errors marked so that the class can discuss the rules as they apply to the errors committed. Sentences (anonymous or volunteered) might be used to illustrate the error with options of correcting papers after discussing the concept.
- Phrases and clauses might be discussed in conjunction with sentence-combining exercises. Rather than addressing syntactical structures such as gerunds and infinitives through labeling sentences on a handout, students might expand sentences with their own phrases or manipulate sentences by combining them in different ways.
- Reading models may be used to expose students to a variety of writing styles and discuss not only the content of these readings but syntactic strategies as well.
- Limited grammatical concepts should be discussed with any one assignment. As Mina Shaughnessy's benchmark work Errors and Expectations proves, students are often confused and overwhelmed by the markings on their papers. Instructors do their job best when they help students understand why they made an error, not simply when they leave no error unmarked.

Students need practice writing assignments varying in length, projected audience, and style.

Nonfiction can be and should be creative. Since research supports that students perform better in writing about topics with which they feel involved, students should be encouraged to develop their ethos--their credibility and experience with the topic. Students are better prepared to write in later college courses and in

situations beyond college if they have had to vary their style for different purposes and audiences. While the instructor is a primary reader, students must learn to support arguments well and control tone for audiences representing a broad spectrum of views. A paper can not be considered effective merely because it reinforces a primary reader's political/social views nor ineffective if it contradicts that reader's views.

Possible Applications:

- First person writing may be used for a range of assignments from narrative essays to research assignments with audience and ethos in mind.
- Third person writing may be used exclusively when greater objectivity is required (e.g. summaries, technical reports).
- All research assignments should emphasize ethical behavior by requiring an examination of multiple viewpoints and full documentation of sources. Shorter documented essays may be useful as preparation for longer research assignments.
- Students may be given assignments with varying audiences—e.g. a letter to the editor, a response to classmates, a community proposal—and opportunities to see their writing in print.

Students need to read frequently, read increasingly complex texts, and be exposed to a variety of writing styles.

ACT benchmark studies suggest that most students receive no formal instruction in reading past the 8th grade, and both ACT and NCTE studies reinforce that being able to read well is linked to being able to write well. Composition classes should build on this connection by assigning readings that challenge students to consider multiple perspectives on important social issues and introduce varied means of support and diverse syntactical strategies.

Possible Applications:

- Students may build on comprehension levels by discussing not only the subject of their reading assignments but also the writer's use of inferences, supporting details, figurative language, structure, and style.
- Vocabulary words can be drawn from the reading assignments.
- Sentence structures from the reading assignments may be used as models to discuss generative rhetoric.