

GRAMMAR SHOULD BE TAUGHT SEPARATELY AS RULES TO LEARN

Muriel Harris

There's a long-held belief that grammar can be taught separately from writing by asking students to memorize rules and to complete exercises to practice those rules. But research has consistently shown—again and again (and again)—that most students do not transfer their memorization of grammar rules to the production of grammatically correct writing. Thus, all the time spent teaching grammar in isolation, and practicing it by completing exercises, has been largely wasted. Such work is neither practical nor successful. Extensive meta-studies indicate that teaching grammar rules in isolation is a waste of time; yet, teachers who seem well intentioned continue to teach grammar and test students for mastery.

If we wonder why explanations of grammar don't lead to error-free writing, many underlying causes have been nominated, such as students not reading enough (certainly a valid concern), not having enough writing assignments in school (also most likely valid), and not being taught grammar in class (definitely not valid as all those studies have shown). But a particularly troublesome cause that needs more attention—and could possibly lay to rest the notion that grammar should be taught separately in isolation—is the fact that definitions of grammar as offered in textbooks, resources on the web, and in class lessons are perfectly clear and adequate for people who already know what they explain. But such definitions are incomplete and totally inadequate for those trying to learn the grammar rules in question. Definitions understood by people who already know what is being defined, but not understood by people trying to learn what is being defined have been called COIK, an abbreviation for Clear Only If Known, a term first introduced by technical writers.

One way to explain the COIK phenomenon is to consider an example of a COIK definition. If I want to know what the field of physics is about, I'd find this definition: Physics is the scientific study of matter and energy and how they interact with each other. Since I am married to a physicist, I was assured by him that this is a standard definition of physics. He understands it and considers it clear. However, since I don't know what matter or energy are, it's not an adequate definition for me. I might start by asking what *matter* is, and if I looked that up, I'd learn that matter is any substance that has mass and occupies space. Fine, but what is *mass*? Mass is the quantity of inertia possessed by an object, or the proportion between force and acceleration referred to in Newton's Second Law of Motion. There is a lot more to learn here, but I haven't even begun to explore the definition of *energy*, another term in that initial definition of physics. This begins to seem like a game of infinite regress, but while that definition of physics is clear to those who know what physics is about, it does not, for those of us trying to learn, lead to any useful understanding of the field.

The obvious objection to this example is that physics is a particularly difficult concept to grasp. Applying COIK definitions to concepts of grammar might be a better way to understand the problem of a COIK definition to those trying to learn grammar concepts in isolation. One COIK definition is the deceptively simple one for a sentence: A sentence expresses a complete thought. Most people can state this definition, but that does not mean they know how to write clusters of words that form a complete sentence, because the definition depends on knowing what a complete thought is. When a colleague and I asked 179 college students (a mix from first-years to seniors) to read an essay and identify which word groups were sentences and which were fragments, the results were disheartening. Here are students' responses to two of the most problematic sentences in the essay:

A. "Then he goes on apologizing for days."

Identified as a complete sentence: 55% (98 students)

Identified as a fragment: 44% (79 students)

B. "Not to mention his mannerisms are good at all times."

Identified as a complete sentence: 42% (75 students)

Identified as a fragment: 54% (97 students)

In these two cases, the first example is a complete sentence, and the second example is not. In no case was there total agreement on any of the 30 sentences in the essay. The obvious conclusion—that we understand the concept of sentences as expressing complete thoughts—apparently didn't help these students correctly identify word groups that were complete thoughts. But the students who weren't able to identify which word groups were sentences no doubt had written vast numbers of sentences of their own. The COIK problem is that the students weren't able to apply the concept to the examples.

But perhaps what's needed is more detail to explain what a sentence is. If I were to expand the earlier definition, I'd say that a sentence has an independent clause with a subject and a verb. I'd probably define what an independent clause is by explaining that it has a subject and a verb and can stand alone. But identifying subjects and verbs is yet another matter, as we'd have to be sure that the person seeking the definition can identify a subject and a verb. There are numerous definitions of subjects and verbs, but we might offer this: The subject is the part of a sentence that performs the action; commonly indicates what the sentence is about; and can be a noun, pronoun, phrase, or clause. Once again, we are on a path regressing back through various terms that need to be understood by the person attempting to learn the rule or concept of *sentence*.

For anyone who already knows the terminology of those definitions, they are acceptable, even though they are COIK. The basic concept of a sentence is clearly a highly complex one. Similarly, trying to help students understand verb tense, pronoun case, punctuation rules, dependent and independent clauses, and other rules of grammar all depend on their understanding of the basic definition of a sentence and the various terms used in that definition. So teaching these rules is not likely to result in students knowing how to actually make use of them when writing. Students can memorize definitions, and can apparently even complete practice exercises, but they don't have the knowledge needed to figure out how to apply those rules when they write.

Instructors who choose not to teach rules of grammar have other approaches, such as identifying grammatical errors in students' own writing. But there are COIK problems here too. Some teachers, hoping to encourage students to learn how to find their own answers, are likely to indicate errors by naming them. Given that terminology, the student will go back to the textbook and back to the COIK problem, where, if the student doesn't have

a deep understanding of the concept to begin with, the student can't draw on the general concept to employ it in other instances of writing. So, if marking errors in students' writing isn't particularly productive, what can help students write more grammatically correct prose? In the writing center where I devoted years of my teaching time to meeting with students in one-to-one tutorials, I shied away from explaining rules. Instead, if grammar was one of the concerns that brought students to our writing center, I offered them strategic knowledge. That is, I introduced them to strategies that often—but don't always—work.

An example might include strategies for where to insert punctuation. For commas, I'd invite the student to read the sentence aloud to hear if there's a pause in their reading that might well indicate a comma is needed. This doesn't always work, but it can help, and it's easier to remember and use than to try explaining a comma rule. Focusing on strategic knowledge can work in one-to-one tutorials because the tutor and student are working with the student's writing, and in the discussion that follows, there can be back and forth conversation to see if the student knows how to use the strategy, and the tutor can explain that the strategy is not always going to work.

But there are only a limited number of strategies, and they don't encompass all grammatical rules. Nor do they always work. Some classroom teachers look for models from the pedagogy of teaching English to students whose first language is not English. Specialists in the field of foreign language teaching advocate immersion in the target language to be learned, rather than studying its rules. They immerse students in speaking, writing, listening, and reading the target language. Such approaches are only a sampling of various practices and methods for teaching students to be literate users of their language, and there doesn't seem to be a wide consensus as to which are more effective. None of the approaches are simple or guarantee success. But there is fairly consistent agreement that teaching grammar in isolation doesn't work. Studies have demonstrated this over and over. But for those who persist in thinking they can help students achieve grammatical correctness by explaining rules, they should be aware they are very likely to be offering COIK definitions that, finally, don't do much more than remind them of what they don't know.

Further Reading

To read about the ineffectiveness of teaching grammar in isolation, two informative essays are “Teaching Grammar” on the website of the National Capital Language Resource Center and George G. Hillocks, Jr. and Michael W. Smith’s “Grammar and Usage” in *The Handbook on Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*. For suggestions on teaching grammar in the classroom, Constance Weaver has two excellent books, *Grammar for Teachers* and *Teaching Grammar in Context*.

Keywords

COIK, grammar, grammatical correctness, language arts, literacy, rules of grammar, teaching grammar

Author Bio

Muriel Harris, professor emerita of English at Purdue University, initiated and directed the Purdue Writing Lab where she learned a great deal from students she met in hundreds of tutorials, including which strategies for grammatical rules might work and which needed to be tossed out. Working with graduate student tutors, she initiated a website with instructional handouts on writing, the Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab). Most of her professional writing has focused on writing centers and individualized instruction in writing. She has co-authored two textbooks on writing, and she edits *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*.