...Scholarly Overview Handout for Style and Grammar...

WHAT ABOUT **GRAMMAR**?

*Patrick Hartwell, “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar”*

Echoes what Lloyd-Jones, Braddock, and Schoer said in 1963:

*In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing.*

Hartwell reveals 5 types of grammar, but what is it besides a convoluted argument? The first type is defined by Martha Kolln as, “the internalized system of rules that speakers of a language share,” or, the “grammar in our heads.” The second, Grammar 2, is the science of linguistics, or a more scientific model of Grammar 1. Next is a gray area (Grammar 3), followed by Grammar 4, consisting of common school grammar errors. The fifth grammar is stylistic, which really convinces Hartwell that grammar is a bother, as he is a “romantic theorist.”

PHILOSOPHY in One Sentence—The teaching of grammar (a COMPLICATED term!!!) is the exercising of power and little else; we should turn to more important matters.

*Joseph M. Williams, “The Phenomenology of Error”*

*...no two people have quite the same conception of what error is and that people detect error only when they are explicitly looking for and expecting to find it. [...] If no one really knows what error is and if everyone sees error only when actively looking for it, then perhaps a certain prejudice informs our encounters with student writing—a prejudice that has no coherent intellectual basis.*

An infinite number of questions of usage breeds an infinite number of errors, making this a tiring realm of study. Since certain errors stir up frenzy while others do not, it seems that the judgment of error is totally personal, and therefore diagnosing rights and wrongs is a politically-significant, mysterious practice. When we agonize over the assessment of error, we forfeit the importance of the meaning of the piece of writing. It is suddenly more a matter of letters and words than of thoughts.

PHILOSOPHY in One Sentence—Treating an error not as a weird fluke but as a “flawed verbal transaction between a writer and a reader” may provide a better and more feasible sense of purpose (less technical, more communication-based) in this part of the field.
*Connors and Lunsford, “The Frequency of Formal Errors*

Is the marking of student errors pure tedium, or valuable science? Perhaps we admit that the concepts and essence of a paper are far more important, but it “hurts” to ignore blatant mechanical and rhetorical error. Connors and Lunsford’s four big observations after their analysis of a random sampling of marked papers:

1. “Teachers’ ideas about what constitutes a serious, markable error vary widely.”
2. “Teachers do not seem to mark as many errors as we often think they do.”
3. “The reasons teachers mark any given error seem to result from a complex formula that takes into account at least two factors: how serious or annoying the error is perceived to be at a given time for both teacher and student, and how difficult it is to mark or explain.”
4. “Error patterns in student writing are shifting in certain ways, at least partially as a result of changing media trends within the culture.”

PHILOSOPHY in One Sentence—We practitioners can be happy...the frequency of formal error has gone DOWN since the 70's!

**WHAT ABOUT STYLE?**

**Erwin Steinberg, “Imaginative Literature in Composition Classrooms?”**

There is a steadfast, historic contention that literature trespasses in what should be purely practical learning. Classrooms that incorporate literature into composition work tend to cater to “superior” students and are geographically oriented in Eastern states. However, literary exposure might be the key to fostering a sense of style in young writers:

*Genius, talent, natural gifts, unconscious cerebration, imagination—these are aspects of the traditional romantic view of composing. Such a view is much more likely to be held by one who professes literature than by one who professes rhetoric. If one holds such a view, one might well feel that reading imaginative literature is the best way to invoke the muse.*

PHILOSOPHY in One Sentence—Literature as a style trainer is a distraction, appropriate only for “a particularly capable set of students.”

**Jane Walpole, “Style as Option”**

*Style in the composition class is the difference between a B paper and an A. It is the je ne sais quoi that a teacher recognizes and responds to, but can’t define. It is the will-o’-the-wisp of rhetoric, obvious but elusive. Yet if we feel it, it must exist.*
What I want to know is—how exactly can we say effectively to a student, “Your handle of the material is great, but your writing lacks a special dazzle, je ne sais quoi...”? That may not make any bulbs light above heads.

...students ought to be encouraged to experiment with a host of styles—the high, the plain, and the middle, the purple, the pedestrian, and the polemic, the comic and the casual, the newest and the period-piece. That way, they will eventually develop a repertoire of comfortable and appropriate styles, something they may never achieve if they are jacketed into force-grown styles at the age of eighteen.

But how can we instill stylistic prowess? Some would say that a concretely methodological approach to evaluation (of sentence lengths, frequencies of syntactic structures, classes of words, etc.) is mandatory, though it seems anti-humanistic. Otherwise, deliberate imitation of other authors is the route (and here we can synthesize with what Steinberg has to say against literature in the classroom). Pre-writing may help to interpret a student’s handle on style as well.

PHILOSOPHY in One Sentence—Whatever the measures we take, and however grueling they may be, the point is to make students aware of their writing and how they might adopt a style.

**Winston Weathers, “Teaching Style: A Possible Anatomy”**

A teacher may take any one of multiple approaches to teaching style as long as three elements are present: 1. The teaching is significant and relevant to students, 2. Style is revealed as a measurable and viable subject matter, and, 3. It is made believable and real as a result of our own stylistic practices. Style and its usage should be presented as a way to “better communicate” with a reader, to make prose less “black and white.” It can also be promoted as “a gesture of personal freedom against inflexible states of mind.”

Now if this [approach], a la propaganda, can be successfully made, we can move on to the task of revealing style as a viable subject matter. [...] If we find style unteachable because students see no relevance, we can also find style unteachable because students never get their fingers on it, never see it in measurable, quantitative terms.

Style may very well be built-in. But students must realize how they can first excavate their personal style and then incorporate it into all types of writing. Providing example is the best way to go.

PHILOSOPHY in One Sentence—Masterful use of style comes from masterful recognition of style through exercise and imitation (as suggested by Walpole).

**Witte & Faigley, “Coherence, Cohesion, and Writing Quality”**

There seems to be a fixation on sentence-bound features of writing as evaluative elements. To get to a concept of text in order to judge writing in a more valuable way, Halliday and Hasan developed a “system for analyzing and classifying cohesive ties” headlined by 5 major classes—reference substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical reiteration and collocation. However, the
importance of exophoric factors (outside the writing) contribute greatly to the success of writing, so these cohesion elements are not all-powerful.

PHILOSOPHY in One Sentence—Cohesion is paramount but hard to teach: sentence-building exercises might help to inch students closer.

*Min-Zhan Lu, “Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone”

English studies famously claims to actively promote multiculturalism, but Lu thinks little is done to “combat the ghettoization of two of its own cultures, namely composition teaching and student writing.” There is a divide between the theory of style and the actual teaching of it. The outsourcing of usage issues (“To the writing center with you!” or, “Let’s just have a look at your concepts...”) alienates further a crucial aspect of young writing. The multicultural classroom presents further tension in our reconciling between style and grammar—there is a struggle between expressing a distinctive voice and adhering to the laws of writing.

PHILOSOPHY in Two Sentences—Modern students are writing in an era characterized by post-colonial modes of thought, and there is no clearer stage for this than their writing. We should, therefore, allow room for the dynamism of the “contact zone” even when working with mechanics.