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The Grammar of Context: Breakfast, Bumper Stickers, and Beyond

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In Grammar Alive (2003), Brock Hausseman and his co-authors cite three primary goals for the teaching of grammar. The first two refer to items we might consider to be "traditional" views of grammar—the ability of students to "communicate comfortably and effectively in both spoken and written English" and "analyze the grammatical structure of sentences within English texts" and to understand grammar terminology in the sentences and paragraphs (p. 4). But they also include a third goal for teaching grammar, focusing on language variation and varieties of grammar: "Every student will complete school with an understanding of, and appreciation for, the natural variation that in occurs in language across time, social situation, and social group" (p. 4).

We believe strongly in the first two, and a focus on teaching these integrated within the writing process, but, as rhetoricians and scholars and teachers of writing, it is this third concept—the grammar of context—that we see having the most positive influence on the writing of our students. We consider grammar to be more than a single set of rules declared appropriate by frustrated grammarians or by any number of handbooks and guides. We aren't the first teachers to make this assertion. Our colleague and friend Connie Weaver has been talking about grammar in context for years, most recently describing grammar as "the 'rules' that make a sentence not just a string of words, but a structure capable of communicating meaning" regardless of context. (Weaver & Bush, 2008, p. 12). These 'rules' for Weaver, and for us, vary widely, based on the needs of the audience and goals of the writer. The key idea we can take from this perspective is that grammar is dependent on the situation in which it is used—and that the things that make for "good" grammar is a much more complex idea than we might otherwise think. Instead of there being one set of grammar, there is a multiplicity of grammars, each defined by the context in which it is used.

The context creates the grammar. . . there is no single correct grammar—there are thousands of variations on grammar, each dependent upon the elements of context that affect it.

We see grammar everywhere—wherever communication is in use, we see a grammar that supports it. And, unlike some of our traditional grammarian colleagues, we consider it to be "correct" grammar if the text communicates effectively to its intended audience, The context creates the grammar—academic, popular, personal, and others—and that this context: the situation in which a text is written and read; the means by which it is enhanced and constrained; and the audience for which it is targeted—all influence the most appropriate grammar for that particular writing situation. Thus, from this stance, there is no single correct grammar—there are thousands of variations on grammar, each dependent upon the elements of context that affect it. And this provides us with a teaching tool to help our students learn the variety of language across all rhetorical situations.

Let's be clear before we get too far—this doesn't mean that we don't believe in APA or MLA grammar or that we simply throw out the primary concepts of grammar as talked about in our students' language handbooks; nor do we avoid addressing traditional grammar concepts in our students academic papers and professional writing—but, in addition to these typical writing activities in our day-to-day classroom, we believe that this grammatical stance provides us with an ability to consider grammar as a much more complex and nuanced concept and teach our students that every written situation has a unique grammar worthy of consideration. The grammar of parenting is different from the grammar of teaching. The grammar used in a Facebook post differs from that of a school research paper. The grammar of a text message is different for that of a professional memo. Even within academic contexts, the grammar used in a biology class differs from that in history or English or math. In doing so, we are able to help them see grammar as a rhetorical act and enhance our students' abilities to consider language use as rich, complex, and full of decisions—beyond that of simply trying to avoid error.

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And when we look at these many grammars, we aren't just looking for arbitrary errors or mistakes. We're considering audience needs, rhetorical tools, and grammatical choices. We look at genres, purposes, opportunities, and the language involved in the reader-writer transaction. We can talk not only about formal grammar— the grammar of the academic writer—but also the grammar of other texts—ones familiar to our students such as notes to roommates, status updates, and emails; public texts such as newspaper articles, handouts, advertisements, and flyers; and family texts such as to-do lists, notes, and others. The list is infinite: If communication is involved, and language is used, there is a grammar to it.

From this perspective, whenever we encounter a written genre, we, as writers, can ask questions such as:

- What makes a 'sentence' in this grammar?
- What are the major errors?
- What are some significant 'brushstrokes' (grammatical techniques used by experts)?
- What are the major grammar errors?

Let's consider one such grammar: the grammar of the shopping list. On the surface, this is a pretty simple genre: a writer thinks of items, writes them down, and gives them to a user to enact. You write—I follow. But even this genre contains an implicit and detailed grammar. A poorly written shopping list randomly writes down items as they are thought of: milk, then underwear, then apples, etc. These may leave the reader wandering through a circuitous and inefficient route. It might also keep the reader from accomplishing the required task—not finding items on the list. A good shopping list, however—one that uses "correct" shopping list grammar—is much more complex, both in its construction and focus.

If the list were for, say a clueless husband (a position Jonathan often fills) we might consider shopping list grammatical techniques such as putting all items in order as they might be found in a big-box store, such as Meijer. That is, the list follows a distinct pattern. The list would guide the reader carefully: the shopping trip starts in the fruit aisle, moves through snacks, past all the other dry goods aisles, and finishes up moving towards checkout past dairy and meat products. The list, following proper grammar for this context, would follow the same pattern, listing fruit, then snacks, and then others as they appear during the planned trip. This grammar does more than simply offer a means of accountability; it also lets the user know when he (Jonathan) has passed an item. If he encounters the next item on the list, he knows he needs to go back to find what he has missed—and the grammar construct tells him that it is nearby—between the last item successfully collected and the one prior to the missing item. Other grammatical possibilities include making cross-references to coupons, and even marking system to assist the user in knowing what brands to buy to ensure that he is able to get the greatest savings. Even with a commonplace genre such as this, we are able to break down the grammar and make a list of "do's and don't's", the grammatical basics of the grammar. In addition, a "sentence" in this genre, rather than comprising a subject/predicate structure, is probably more akin to a chunk of text—maybe a grouping of items from a particular section or a single bullet with related items. We might also consider the more complex grammatical options for expert writers in this genre—the "brushstrokes" of the genre.

Let's examine another example of a seemingly simple written genre: the bumper sticker. This genre must deliver information quickly and easily. It also has to be written in a way that creates an immediate and hard-to-forget impression on the audience. A 'sentence' in this genre is typically a single word, or, at most a short fragment. An analysis of the grammar in this genre might include discussions of color, and size of text, and font. It might also focus on amount of text, need for specificity, and focus. The list of grammatical do's and don't's and the focus on expert-level grammatical brushstrokes would consider the context and the need to write in a way that conveys messages quickly, appropriately, and safely within a complex writer/audience transaction.

Again, trying to write an actual English 'sentence' with a subject and a predicate would be considered a grammatical 'error.' Similar discussions can occur about other unique, but ubiquitous visual genres such as billboards (even the difference between static and rotating/electronic billboards causes discussion about grammar!), flyers commonly placed under windshield wipers, and others. In each case context drives the concepts of appropriateness in grammar.

We have often engaged our students in these sorts of conversations and helped them learn how context not only affects higher order concerns in writing and their decisions regarding lower-order language decisions. However, for students to really engage in an understanding of the complexities of grammar in all its varieties, we ask them to not only analyze a grammar, but to become practitioners of it as well. One activity we have done with great success focuses on the text and design of the cereal box. We often term this project "Grammar for Breakfast."

The genre of the cereal box is an interesting one; not only is this genre somewhat common and overlooked, but it is also highly dependent upon audience: a frosted cereal box is vastly different from one targeted to those of us more concerned about our fiber intake than the challenge of finding the lost Cuckoo Bird. We use this genre as an entryway to help our students understand just how interesting and complex analysis of grammar can be. It can lead to a deep focus on grammar as a complex rhetorical concept with varieties in all contexts.

The lesson begins as students sit in small groups and pick the back of a cereal box to examine. What is being "sold" on the back of the box? Who is the audience? What is the purpose? From Cheerios to Honey Bunches of Oats, to Kashi Go Lean Crunch, every cereal is designed with a specific consumer in mind, and the backs of the boxes typically will appeal to that audience. After a brief genre analysis, students are ready to examine the grammar in context.

Image 1: Kashi Image **2: Cheerios Image** **3: Mini-Wheats**

In the instance of these examples, there are three different cereals for three different audiences. The Kashi clearly speaks to an older, more health-conscious crowd. The Mini-Wheats and Cheerios combine good nutrition with childish fun. Our sense is that adult eyes would be "reading" the back of the Kashi box, kids would be concentrating on the Frosted Mini-Wheats, but a combination of parents and their offspring might enjoy a morning of Honey-Nut Cheerios and the box back seems to attempt to bridge both worlds. Good questions for students examining the backs of these boxes include, "What choices in punctuation are being made?" "Are there sentences or fragments? Why?" "How are the grammar choices supported with the graphics, colors, pictures, or by other textual elements?" "What is gained and lost through these choices?"

Typically, after a lively discussion, our students are eager to study a particular box we've been saving for full-group discussion: Fruit Loops. On this specific box-back (of which we've made several copies and distribute freely), the advertisers have promised exciting hand-held games, 6 total and "one free inside," for those willing to purchase and dig through their cereal box.

Image 4: Fruit Loops

The games have names like "Ninja House," "Reactor," and "Earn Your Stripes Snowboarding." These handheld game descriptions have a unique and interesting grammar of their own. Using, an almost haiku-like attention to economy of text and a distinct use of 2nd person voice, each description explains the essence of a game a reader might find in the bottom of his/her cereal box. Here are a few examples:

Reactor
Your Mission:
fight through defending alien ships
and destroy the enemy power source!

Ninja House
Perform remarkable ninja leaps
to climb the platforms and get treasure stars.
Careful not to fall!
5 levels of danger!

Snowboarding
Shred right and left and even Jump!
Watch out for the tree stumps!
With unique gravity feature and 4 levels of difficulty.

Students immediately begin to note some grammatical elements in the descriptions: the excessive use of exclamation marks and the repetitions of words and phrases and imagery verbs like "fight," "perform," watch out, " and destroy." They see and identify action verbs and onomatopoeias. They remark on the overuse of modifiers—both adjectives and adverbs. They sense the immediacy created by the short phrases and fragments – like shopping lists and bumper stickers a reader will find no complete sentences here. They'll even engage in word and character count. They laugh at the "excitement" associated with the obviously pedantic and low-tech games. They also note the grammatical tool at the end of each description focusing on "ever increasing levels of…!" In short, they begin to see the grammar of the genre. They become critics of the grammar. We then create the grammar as we go – the do's and don't's, the grammatical brushstrokes, and the other grammatical options that might come in specific situations.

Now comes the fun part: we engage them not only as analysts of grammar, but as practitioners of language, too: students craft their own narrative for an imaginary game their group creates—horse racing, soccer, and other action sports are always on the list, as are more challenging, and/or non-traditional topics such as fishing, or "Playground Scuffle," "Skipping School," and "Scooter Wars" (occasionally, our university students will delve into more risqué areas—writing pieces about parties and other aspects of college-life—"Bar Fight!," "Hangover!" or the ever-popular "Where am I?"—where the imaginary game asks the player to figure out where he/she has woken up after a night of revelry.)

Here are some examples of the many descriptions our students have created during this exercise. (We've left out those that don't meet at least a PG rating):

Bass Master
Cast your line! Fish are waiting to bite.
4 sizes of fish will take your bait
but watch out for the biggest bass.
Take the plunge into three levels of bass-tastic fun!

Merry-Go-Round Mania
Twirling, swirling fun! Jump on and give
it a go. Push, swing, but don't get hit!
Who will be the last one standing?
Dizzy fun for all! Four levels of increasing speed!

Study!
Scanning, skimming, quickly perusing!
Turn the textbook pages. Quickly! Guess the major test topics!
Look on Wikipedia. But don't get caught.
Eight levels of ever-increasing trauma!

In creating these short pieces, our students are doing more than simply mimicking a language. They are actively analyzing a grammar, creating a style-guide for writing within that grammar, and enacting it within a particular situation. They are completing the same cognitive tasks that expert and professional writers in all genres do. They are also engaging in the strategic use of grammatical elements: the vital verbs, the effective punctuation choices, and use of grammatical elements for effect. They practice with the grammar and see its effectiveness. In Mechanically Inclined Jeff Anderson reminds us that "Mechanics are a visual skill. Kids have to "see" mechanics in action to see the patterns and use them. Requisite rules and examples must be in front of students' faces when they need clarification and stylistic options in the midst of the writing process" (p. 51). With this in mind, we take a quick class vote on the game of choice, and equip students for the final step in this process. Their homework assignment is to go home and carefully examine the backs of their own cereal boxes. First they are to make chart of the names of their cereals, then note the audience, purpose and conventions of grammar each of their box-backs demonstrate. Finally, they should

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choose one box to examine closely and use as a model for their own writing. Asking themselves, "What grammar choices did those authors/advertisers make and why?" student follow-up by mirroring some of these same choices in their own example of advertising. You can imagine what fun it is to share our homework together the next day.

When Harry Noden, author of Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing, noted in a subsequent 2001 article in Voices from the Middle, that he "began to realize what many researchers were saying, that teaching traditional grammar in isolation had no carryover to writing," (p. 9) we nodded our heads and took note. Grammar for Breakfast is one attempt at illustrating for our students that the grammar of context is everywhere—on their Facebook pages, in their academic essays, within their song lyrics, and even on their breakfast tables. Grammar affects the choices writers make, and consequently, the ways writing is received by its intended audience. In effect, understanding the what, whys and hows of good grammar choices balance students' intentions for their writing in the ways that a beneficial breakfast balances nutrition and good taste.

In doing so, we are teaching them that grammar exists in all forms in all different sorts of writing. This affects their stance not only in relation to non-traditional and non-academic texts, but also for their academic work. They become more aware of their options and choices in language use. They also become more apt to see grammar not only as an attempt at avoiding error, but also as another rhetorical tool at their disposal as they attempt to successfully connect with their audiences. In short, it's Grreeaaat!

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