

What about Grammar?

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It's a question often asked—at conventions, during writing seminars, in emails—by teachers, parents, and even students. It likely stems from a universal insecurity about English grammar, which by purely objective observation, is at best confusing, inconsistent, and imprecise. Consequently, questions abound:

How much grammar does a student need to know?

Does grammar study improve writing?

Which grammar program is best?

How do I teach it if I don't know it?

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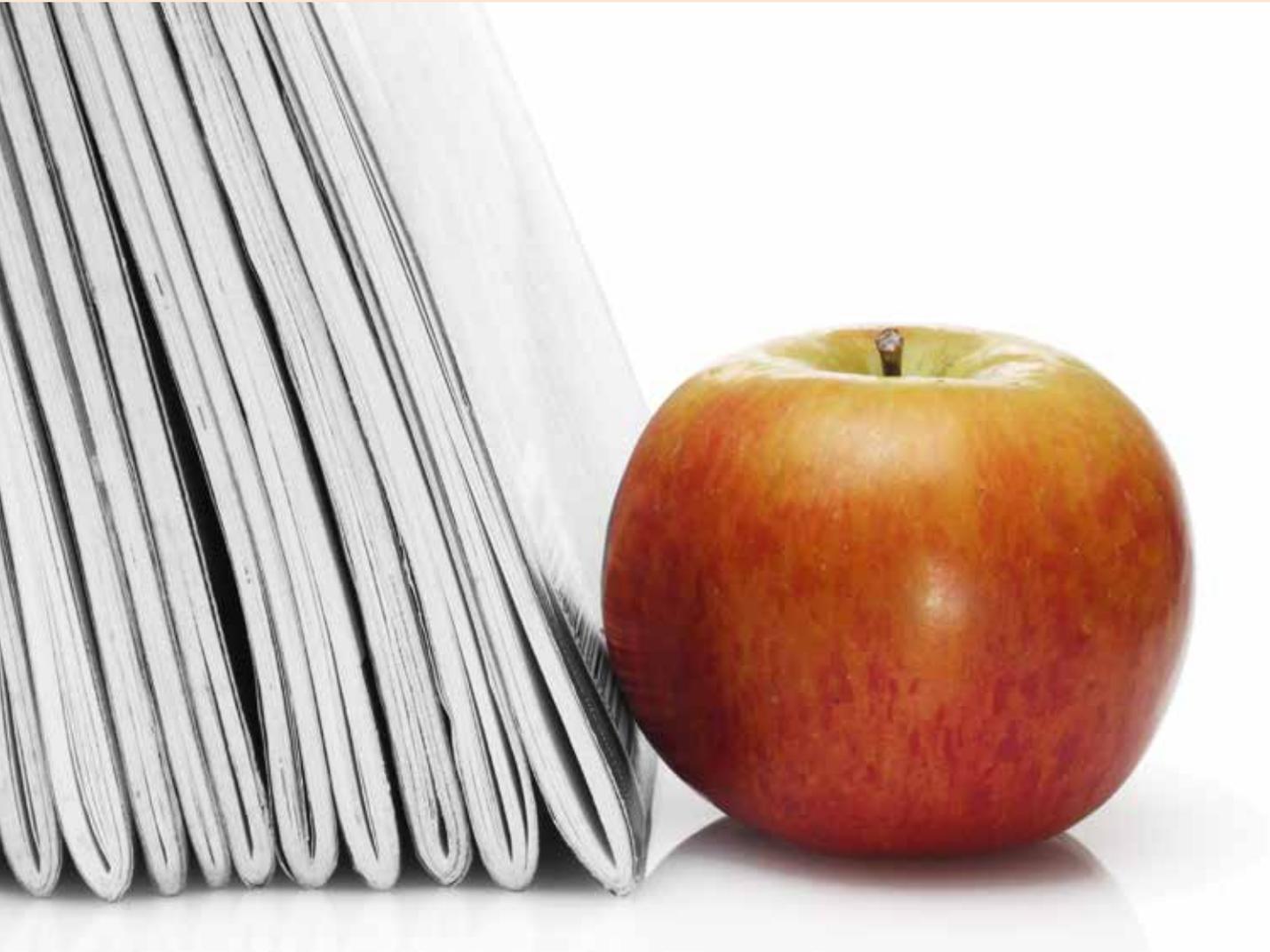
In discussing the matter of English grammar, there are several considerations, but before even beginning to address the subject, it must be defined and clarified. Usually, the term “grammar” includes at least three different areas, which in many ways require three distinctly different skills:

- The most popular understanding of the word “grammar” would indicate a knowledge of “what are those things called and what are the rules that govern their behavior,” i.e., parts of speech, their definitions, functions, various “rules” of English usage, etc. This could be accurately termed “analytical” grammar.
- Secondly, the study of grammar would include the area of usage, requiring knowledge of which words work best in which circumstances, which variations of the word are correct, and which endings most appropriate.
- Lastly, grammar study would include punctuation and editing skills—in other words, mechanics—the ability to recognize and correct spelling, syntax, capitalization and punctuation errors.

How Not to Learn Grammar

Undoubtedly, competence and understanding in all three areas is important, but there are widely differing opinions of how such ability should be nurtured.

One popular approach is to use grammar “workbooks,” of which there are many flavors. These types of books provide page after page of “exercises” which may include things such as underline the verbs, circle the adjectives, strike out the prepositional phrases, etc. They offer marvelously helpful definitions, such as “adjectives modify a noun” (which isn’t really true—but that’s another discussion) and gradually over the years become more sophisticated, addressing such topics as adjectival clauses, future perfect tense, the difference between participles and gerunds, subjunctive case, etc.



The funny thing is, you can meet eighth grade students who've done four years of grammar workbooks and are still not be able to find the verb in their own sentences. Why is this? Well, there are a few reasons. One is that for most kids, a "workbook" is an oxymoron; it doesn't work. A workbook cannot respond to a child. It cannot teach anything. It just goes on at its own merry pace, regardless of the child, who may be completely lost or bored to tears. It cannot adjust itself, because it cannot know anything about the child. Therefore, a "workbook" is only as good as the teacher using it. Unfortunately, the publishers of workbooks do not generally have as their mission helping teachers become better teachers. In fact, their real goal is to try to replace the teacher, or at least create materials that would allow any simpleton to feed consumable exercise papers to kids. A hundred years ago there were no "workbooks," and everyone was better off for it.

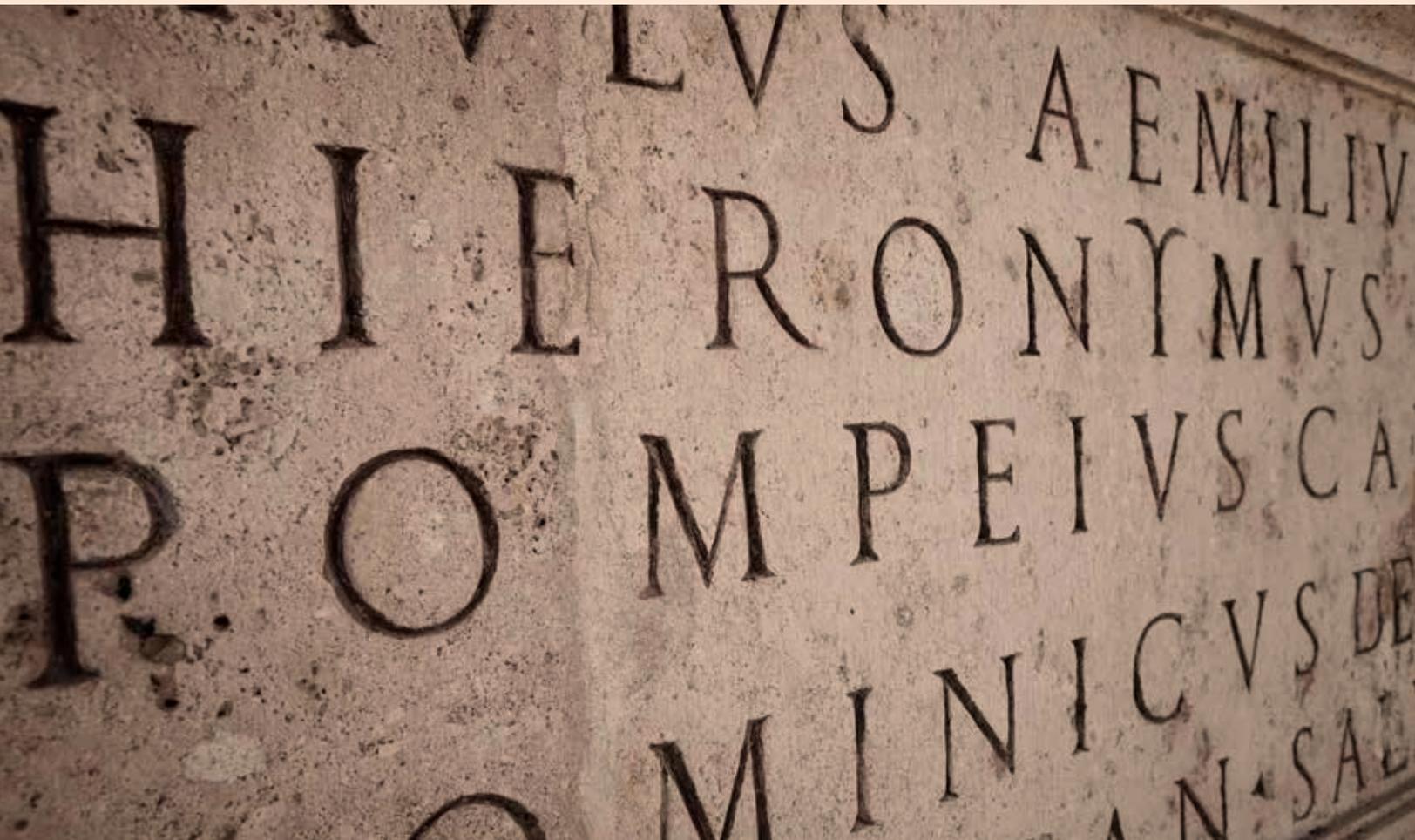
Another big problem with the way grammar is often taught has to do with the problem of relevance. Children don't easily learn things that have no relevance, no purpose in their life. We can try to artificially create relevance ("Learn this, or die!"), but in general, it fails. When we start teaching analytical grammar to young children, it becomes for many of them the most irrelevant thing we can try to teach. It's like saying to them, "Sit down, I want to give you a little lecture on how you ride a bicycle." Their response is, naturally, "I know how to ride a bicycle." And we come back with, "Yes, but you don't know how you do it!" They, of course, think, "Who cares? Can I just go and ride my bike now?" There's no point to it. The fact is, they've been speaking English, pretty much perfectly, since the age of six or seven, so to try to explain to them how they do what they already do effortlessly has no real value in their world.

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How People Do Learn Grammar

If you meet teenagers who know some real analytical grammar (what an “infinitive” is, for example), and you ask them, “Where did you learn that?” They’ll never, ever say, “Oh, from my _____ English Program.” They always have the same answer, nine times out of ten: “From Latin” or “From French.” And the one time in ten they don’t say that, they say, “From my mom.” You’ll frequently meet adults who testify, “I never really understood English grammar until I took German in college.”

The reason, of course, is that it is when you are trying to learn a foreign language you don’t already know that the names of things and the rules that govern their behavior become important—because you don’t already know them! Then, while learning the foreign language, you have to translate it into English, and the grammar carries right over.



Besides, “English Grammar” doesn’t really exist; it’s a conglomeration and permutation of several linguistic systems which are often fighting for control. Rules that work with German-derived words don’t necessarily work with rules that govern French verbiage. Ironically, this makes English one of the hardest languages for learning grammar. What’s best? Latin, of course. It oozes grammar. It supercharges vocabulary. It’s a concentrated language study because there’s no need for Latin “conversation.” If you study Latin, it will be raining grammar on you and your students—there’s no need to turn on the sprinklers with an English grammar workbook.

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What about the books?

Don’t misunderstand; grammar books are not bad (we even sell a few), but they should be used by the teacher, not thrown at a student. Relevancy occurs when information is interesting or needed, with priority on the latter. How do you create a need for grammar information? Write. Write a lot. And teach grammar “stuff” at the point of need. When an error or question arises out of a composition, that’s the time to get out the grammar reference and find the answer. The book is for you, not the child! And, if he sees you using the book to help him solve problems or find an answer you don’t know, he’ll want to use it later when he is a scholar or an adult.

Lastly, consider the need for editing skills, or “self-correcting”—you may have noticed that children are much happier to find someone else’s errors than their own. Editing practice can and should occur, but it can be a game. Concoct a short, but humorous (even violent, for the boys) story with many embedded errors—mistakes they should be able to notice—and let them edit that. Tell them how many errors are there, and see if they can find them all; give a prize if they find every one of your errors. They might even find more than you intentionally put in! Sometimes the line between a chore and a game is a very fine one.

Conclusion: Create relevancy three ways.

To recapitulate: Grammar study must somehow become relevant if it is to stick. Repetition is important, but the need for it increases in direct proportion to the meaninglessness of the information. You can create relevancy three ways, and you should do all three of these things with your students:

- 1) Study Latin (or another language, but Latin is best).
- 2) Do a lot of writing, and use a grammar reference to teach what is needed when it is needed.
- 3) Practice editing skills regularly, preferably on something other than one's own writing, and make it into a game.

It's pretty clear that knowledge of analytical grammar does not make one a good writer (although ignorance can be a handicap), but the amount needed to be "grammar-literate" is fairly minimal. If, however, you can do a good job of creating relevancy when a student is young, he'll learn easily whatever else is needed when he's older.