

CHAPTER 15: Rhetorical Grammar

A Different Way to Think About Grammar

Welcome to the dreaded chapter on grammar. It's no secret that the word "grammar" makes most people cringe—even those who love to write. Most people think of grammar as little more than nit-picky rules about proper spelling and how to use punctuation. Grammar tends to make what should be a creative and explorative process feel painfully tedious and anxiety-ridden. Grammar sucks. Period.

But what if we told you there was a better way to think about grammar—a way that didn't shut down your writing process, but enabled it? A way that made you feel more confident and in control of your writing? A way that made editing your sentences a creative and rewarding process, rather than a chore of correction?

Well, there is, but, first, it's important to stop thinking about grammar as an incomprehensible list of rules that you need to memorize. In fact, that's not what grammar is. **Grammar** is simply the structure of language. Grammar includes all the structural conventions that allow us to put words together in a coherent way so that we can communicate our ideas with others. Without grammar, we'd have nothing but a pile of useless words. Grammar helps us make meaning.

Furthermore, grammar isn't something we simply learn in school. In fact, linguistic researchers argue that we start internalizing grammar when we're in the womb and we hear the particular rhythms of the language our mother is speaking. So, even before you are born, you are already learning the grammar of your mother tongue. By the time you crack open your first grammar book in school, you are studying a system you already inherently know how to use. Even though the grammar conventions we use when we speak vary from those we use when we write, they share many basic principles in common. While we don't use semi-colons and exclamation points when we speak, we do modulate our voices to signify when we're asking a question, making a statement, or exclaiming a command or a warning. We also use varied lengths of pauses to do the same thing that commas, semi-colons, periods, and em dashes do in our written speech. Part of the beauty of written speech is that you can go back and revise your grammatical choices to make your statements clearer and more impactful.

We also don't use grammar the same way all the time. Our grammar changes depending on what genre we use, what community we're in, to whom we're speaking or writing, and according to what version of English we are using. For example, let's say you had to email your professor to let them know you were sick and couldn't make it to class. You would likely use a formal version of Standard English. However, if you were to text your friend to let them know the same thing, you would probably use emojis, slang and acronyms—ones that you wouldn't use to text, say, your grandmother, who might be unfamiliar with that style of writing. It isn't that your email in Standard English is any more correct than your emoji and LOL-riddled text message—it's simply that the two styles have their own sets of rules. The key is to use the grammatical structure that best suits your context.

So: if we all intuitively know how to use grammar, then why bother learning it in school? The hope is that in teaching people grammar, they won't just intuitively know how to use language, but they will consciously know *why* they use it the way they do and have better control over how they use it. In many ways, learning grammar is a method of improving metacognition. Unfortunately, our universal disdain for what we conventionally think of as grammar has a lot to do with how English grammar has traditionally been taught in schools. Most often, people are taught to think of grammar as a strict set of do's and don'ts. This approach is called **prescriptive grammar**, and it has a long history. Until the 18th century, Latin had been considered the written language of educated people in England. However, as the British Empire continued to spread and became even more

powerful, English—particularly the dialect spoken in London—became an important world language. In order to legitimize English and elevate it to the status of Latin, scholars began to use the rigorous grammatical conventions of Latin in order to standardize English, which meant they tried to “fix” the language by prescribing exactly what constituted “correct” usage, even though English was a very different language with a very different syntax. Still, any deviation from this form of Standard English was considered either an error or a corruption. Not only did this process help create a Standard English that could be used across communities that used their own dialects, but mastery over Standard English also became a marker of social class. As formal education became more accessible to wider groups of people throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, prescriptive grammar became the main method of teaching English and has remained such for more than two hundred years. One of the issues with only learning prescriptive grammar rules in school is that it fails to teach people how to think analytically about using language. When you are forced to memorize a set of definite rules without thinking about why those rules exist, it not only impedes your ability to think critically about *why* you are using language the way you do, but it also hinders your ability to be creative in terms of how you are using language.

However, prescriptivism is not the only approach to grammar. **Descriptive grammar** recognizes the flexibility and constantly changing nature of language and language use. In other words, prescriptive grammar simply describes how grammar works. For example, if someone was telling a story their friend and said, “I was talking to my mom and she was like, ‘Don’t do that,’ and I was like, ‘Whatever,’” a descriptive grammar approach would describe how *like* is used as a synonym for *said*. Descriptive grammar allows us to think about how grammar works, whereas prescriptive grammar dictates how grammar *should* work. The descriptive grammar “rules” are what native speakers intuitively know, which is to say, they are conventional ways of using language that can change depending on one’s rhetorical situation.

Let’s examine one last example—the famous phrase from *Star Trek*, “to boldly go where no man has gone before.” A prescriptive approach to grammar would say this statement is grammatically incorrect because it uses a split infinitive—“to boldly go.” Instead, it *should* say, “to go boldly where no man has gone before.” End of story. However, a descriptive approach would say that while this sentence might violate a commonly held rule of prescriptive English, there is no meaningful problem with this sentence. More importantly, a descriptive approach would try to understand *why* it is written as “to boldly go” rather than “to go boldly.” One argument would be that by embedding “boldly” in the verb “to go” and making it the second word of the sentence adds an important emphasis to the concept of boldness, which is crucial to the idea. It’s not just about going where no man has gone before. It’s about going there *boldly*. The style in which you go is as important, if not more, than the going itself. In this way, splitting the infinitive “to go” is a purposeful rhetorical choice that adds to the meaning of the statement.

A Rhetorical Approach to Grammar

In this chapter, we encourage you to utilize grammar for rhetorical effect, given the prescriptive and descriptive grammar rules that you know. Rather than thinking about grammar as a list of rules you must use to correct your writing, it’s more effective to think about grammar as a set of rhetorical choices. This approach to grammar is called **rhetorical grammar** and bears many similarities to descriptivist approaches. Not only does a rhetorical approach to grammar acknowledge the malleability of language, but it also demands that you take into account all the ways in which your grammatical choices affect your writing as a whole. That is: instead of worrying about whether a sentence is grammatically correct, consider what the rhetorical effects of your choices are.

By this point, you are well versed in the art of doing rhetorical analysis and of making conscious rhetorical choices when it comes to larger structural and writing issues, such as what

evidence and appeals you choose to use in order to sway your audience or how to construct a compelling argument. Now, it's time to apply what you know about the rhetorical situation to the sentence level structure of your writing. As you read in the previous chapter, people often refer to sentence level issues as lower order concerns (LOCs), while referring to big picture things like evidence and overall organization as higher order concerns (HOCs). Part of the reason for doing this is not to claim that sentence-level issues are less important than big picture issues. Rather, it's a way of making the revising process more manageable. The idea is that you don't have to fix everything at once. First: focus on big picture issues. Then, once you've tweaked your argument or resolved organizational issues, it's time to work on your paper at a line writing level. Issues that are included in LOCs are:

- **Diction** (word choice): make sure that you are using the most effective and precise terms to convey your meaning and being sure that your word choice is appropriate for the audience and genre in which you are working. Also vary your word choice to keep your writing dynamic.
- **Syntax** (the arrangement of words and phrases): make sure that your sentences are well structured and check for noun/verb agreement. Avoid run-ons and awkward, clunky phrasing and use sentence fragments purposefully. Be sure to vary the length of your sentences, too, so that your writing feels dynamic rather than monotonous. And use clear transitional language and techniques between each sentence so that they flow seamlessly from one to the next. Also make sure you aren't shifting verb tense, unless you are doing so purposefully.
- **Mechanics** (all the technical stuff, like punctuation, spelling and use of numerals): make sure that you are using punctuation, spelling, and numerals appropriate for your genre and audience. If you are writing in MLA, APA, AP, or some other systematized style of writing, be sure to check the style's guide book for its mechanical rules, which can often dictate different ways of using punctuation, spelling, and numbers.
- **Citations**: be sure you are citing your sources according to your chosen style and make sure that all the mechanics of your citation meet style guidelines.

As you read through your work in order to edit your LOCs, it is important to think about the rhetorical effects of your word choice, syntax, mechanics, and citations. The ways in which we write at the sentence level have a huge impact on how our work is received. For example, word choice and syntax hugely affect not only the clarity of our work, but also the tone of our writing. Let's say, for example, that you are writing a letter to a congresswoman in order to persuade her to vote "yes" to a corporate carbon tax. In researching the congresswoman, you realize that she seldom supports environmental protection bills that tax big business. In your first draft of the letter, you address this fact when you write, "You never vote for environmental issues, because you think supporting corporations is more important." Reading back over your draft, you realize that this sentence sounds harsh. It might make the congresswoman feel attacked and put her on the defensive, which will hurt your argument, rather than help it. Part of the problem is the sentence's use of the second person. Using the second person can be rhetorically effective in consensus building, but only when it's used to uplift your audience (e.g. "You are the change America needs!"), not to accuse them of wrongdoing ("You are the problem with America"). So you decide to edit the sentence to read, "In looking over your congressional voting record, I noticed that you tend to vote in support of big business. While protecting the economic health of our country is important, so is the protection of our environment." These editing changes shift the subject to "I" in the first sentence and remove

“you” in the second sentence. Both changes work to make this more polite because you chose to avoid the second person when pointing out a negative action.

When you edit with an eye towards the rhetorical impact of your writing, rather than an eye for error, you not only improve your writing at a grammatical level, but at the level of its effectiveness, as well. This is true when giving peer review feedback on LOCs, too—don’t simply look for errors in your peer’s writing, but look for where they could make different grammatical choices that would be more rhetorically impactful, whether that’s making ideas clearer, more specific, or addressing the audience in a more effective fashion.

Here are a couple more examples of how grammatical choices at the sentence level—even those that seem to break prescriptive grammar rules—can greatly impact readers:

Active Voice versus Passive Voice: The prescriptive grammar rule to always use the active voice is so pervasive that even Microsoft Word is programmed to highlight every instance of the passive voice as though it is always a mistake. The truth is that the active voice is often *preferred* as a conventional construction because it’s more direct and to the point. However, passive voice has its uses, and when it is used purposefully, it can be very powerful and contribute to one’s meaning making. Take the following sentences:

ACTIVE: Police officers were nine times more likely to kill young black men than other Americans in 2015.

PASSIVE: Young black men were nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by police officers in 2015.

While a prescriptive approach to grammar would insist that the first sentence is preferred over the second because it uses the active voice, it was the passive voiced sentence that began an article in *The Guardian* from December 15, 2015. But why? Why use the passive voice when the active voice is preferred? Part of the reason is the way that the passive voice puts emphasis on “young black men” as opposed to “police officers.” The article is interested in emphasizing the way that young black men are being disproportionately affected by police actions. By using the passive voice, the writer can do just that. The point is to use passive voice purposefully.

First Person versus Third Person: by the time many students enter college, they’ve had it scorched into their brains never to use the first person in an academic essay. But like using active and passive voice, this isn’t a hard and fast rule—it’s a convention and a tradition of some schools of academic writing, though many scholars, especially in the humanities and social sciences, use the first person in their work. So why did your high school teacher insist that you could only write in the third person? That’s largely because the third person is more objective, and **objectivity** is more highly valued than **subjectivity**, especially among the natural sciences. This isn’t to say that objectivity is any more “true” than subjectivity. It’s actually just a matter of grammar. Objectivity focuses on the object of study, while subjectivity is as concerned, if not more so, with the subject who is doing the studying. Let’s work with an example. Imagine you are writing an ethnographic essay about street children in India (the object of your study) and some of your research is based on observations you (the subject) made while traveling abroad. You can’t decide whether to include yourself in your writing or not, so you jot down the same sentence in first and third person in order to weigh the pros and cons of using each:

FIRST PERSON: I watched as the children begged for money in the streets.

THIRD PERSON: The children begged for money in the streets.

By making your presence as the observer known in the first sentence, you make it clear that the only way you could write about children begging in the streets was by being able to observe it yourself. To you, this is important, because you want your reader to be aware that you—a UW student with the means to travel abroad—offer just one perspective. These children might not see themselves the same way you saw them, nor might other people who were in the street that day. You also want to be able to reflect on how seeing this scene affected you in order to add both pathos and ethos to your paper. In that case, you might want to use the subjective first person voice. However, let's say that you didn't want your reader to be distracted by your presence and that you wanted to place all the emphasis on the object of your study. The street children are what matter, not your perspective, which you don't feel brings anything to bear on your essay. In that case, you'll want to use the third person.

Multimodal Grammar

Just as written language has its own sets of grammar conventions, so too do non-linguistic modes of language, such as visuals. Just as written grammar provides a structure by which we put words together in order to make meaning, visual grammar provides structures by which we assemble components such as lines, triangles, color, and texture into an order that makes meaning. In an age where we interact online with multimodal texts, non-linguistic grammar is just as important for constructing effective meaning. Some questions to ask when thinking about multimodal grammar:

1. How do the text and the chosen images interact? Do they contradict each other? Do they reference each other?
2. How is the space being used? Are the words too big or too small? Is the image overpowering the text or vice versa? Could things be better arranged?
3. How can you revise the relationship of visual elements in order to make them more effective?
4. Do the colors of the composition clash? Do they add to the meaning or are they merely decorative?
5. Is the font appropriate? Does it affect the meaning of the text or is it neutral?