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Rhetorical Grammar
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28 May 2019

Grammar Manifesto

Why on earth would you take a class on grammar is the typical response of anyone that I have spoken to about taking a Rhetorical Grammar course. The look of pain and disgust that washes over their faces along with such a response prompts two questions to me: who hurt them, and where did grammar education go so wrong? I'm acting like I don't have even the slightest cringe when I think about the tedious grammar worksheets and fill-in-the-blank tests that I had to complete nearly every year from fifth- to twelfth-grade, but in reality those assessments give me flashbacks almost as bad as those of the Fitness-Gram Pacer Test.

Style, on the other hand, is a less cringe-worthy matter. One in which my friends and classmates always say they wish they had more of and wish they knew more about. I, for one, can say I constantly find a book or poem that I envy the style of, wanting so badly to have the ease and ability that such professional writers seem to have. But aren't both grammar and style vital factors of effective writing? Do we not all have what it takes to master both? Why, then, does there seem to be such a dichotomy between how we feel about grammar and how we feel about style? The way we have been taught these might explain more than we think.

I see the two—grammar and style—to be complementary of each other, initially grammar being a stepping stone to learning style, but later on both of them acting off of and improving the functioning of one another. I therefore believe that we could create a better grasp, control, and overall learning of both style and grammar, if we simply improve the way grammar is taught from the start. Better understanding of grammar leads to better understanding of style; my entire reasoning of wanting to take a grammar course in college relied on this terminology: I need to know the rules to break the rules. I am definitely coming from a more creative-minded stance, as I see no immediate need to bend the rules of language in a lab write-up or academic quantitative study. Granted, style and grammar are needed either way, and while I would like to agree that learning grammar is unnecessary if students have proven to be just as successful of writers as those with grammar studies growing up, but I cannot help but advocate the need for grammar as a need for foundational order and sanity.

For as long as I have taken grammar studies through my student years, grammar has always felt separate from the act of writing. In high school we had a section of class devoted to learning grammar and then the rest of class to work on essays, complete projects, or discuss books. In all honesty, I forgot the grammar material after we left it behind with the rest of the starting twenty minutes of class time. In my perspective it would have been more effective and altogether more enjoyable if we learned grammar in the process of doing such later activities of writing essays, completing projects, and discussing books. Without incorporating our grammar studies into the physical act of writing—and writing well—and what language is, there is no real gain or improvement in who we are as writers by means of grammar.

Nouns, verbs, and adjectives stuck in our heads as children because those were common and we always used them in all of our own writings. There's no question as to why I cannot, for the life of me, remember what a correlative conjunction is. I can only identify them in a modeled exercise rather than my own writing that I do on a daily basis. I am not at all saying that we really need to know what correlative conjunction are or the name of every tool in grammar and part of a sentence, but identifying something in our own writing, and then confidently saying why or why it does not work, is the basic foundation of then developing a style of our own and deciding how to accomplish it.

I use certain tools every day in my own writing that I would not know how or why they worked without knowing proper grammar, thus being able to write more like how I want to sound and portray myself to readers. This, in essence, is the very reason we all write: we want to be read. I do say that grammar is one of the backbones to style, which is true, but if perfectly sound, structured, systematic grammar were all I relied on, I would have no voice. I would be a monotone robot portraying nothing but empty words. This need for voice is the need for style.

Style is personal. Style is the individuality of a writer's work that makes it different from the next. If all we counted on were strict guidelines of grammar practices and rules that can't be broken, style cannot exist. Where is the personality in identically manufactured writers? There is none. Above all things, in the creative world I live in, if we want style then we need freedom and experience. If we want originality then we need to foster growth through personal differences. Yes, grammar is allowed to be strict, even I will furrow my brows at the wrong use of "then" and "than," or even more infuriating is the misuse of "too," but with this in mind, we must then be

allowed to teach kids that they can stray from the rigidity of grammar as long as it enhances their writing and makes them proud of their work.

We all come from somewhere different: we know other languages, speak different dialects, and read various forms of literature; why does our writing struggle to reflect that? If I had been taught grammar in the context of my favorite writing format of poetry, I would reflect it more in how I write my own stanzas and lines. I might add more elliptical phrases or it-clefts for emphasis. Surely it would spice up any piece of writing just to know of such tools and how to use them in personal ways. Even better, like speaking and reading can break language rules, so can our own writing. Sometimes it's better to get a point across by breaking a rule. As long as we are aware of the risks we're taking and as long as it still effectively communicates what we are trying to say, then there needs to be allowed the flexibility, even from a young age, to express stylistic choices in both personal and academic writing.

Stylistic writers don't just appear out of nowhere; they, too, most likely have the same wincing reaction to grammar and how they were taught in school like the rest of us. The kicker is: we need to change how style and grammar are taught from a young age before memories of grammar worksheets (though it sounds impossible) become a positive concept.