



GRAMMAR DOES(N'T) MATTER

Rachel Larrowe

Grammar is hard. Even highly educated people and professional writers who feel that correct grammar comes easily to them don't often realize how frequently they violate "official" grammatical and stylistic rules. Not only are the rules of English grammar so labyrinthine that it's nearly impossible to master them all, they've also become antiquated. A sentence might sound elegant or straightforward when written incorrectly because it is closer to everyday speech, but it becomes clunky and awkward when rephrased correctly. It's a lose-lose situation for the writer, created by our overwrought rules of grammar.

Some languages have centralized authorities governing their lexicons and grammar. France, for instance, has the Académie Française, or French Academy, which compiles an official French dictionary and makes decisions regarding grammar and usage. Though these decisions are not law, they guide the standards of formal French speech and writing. English has no such authority, but we do have a variety of different institutions and associations that publish their own rulebooks, called style guides. Style guides regulate punctuation, capitalization, word choice, preferred sentence structure, citation, and other elements of writing. These organizations, such as the Modern Language Association (MLA) and American Psychological Association (APA), each have their own established, individual style. This means that there is more than one way to be correct, depending on whose rules you're playing by.

But word order, word form, punctuation, spelling, syntax, or other sentence-level elements can make a significant difference in meaning. When you read, "A grizzly bear flies a tiny airplane," you probably make sense of these words by visualizing a big furry mammal sitting in the pilot's seat of a small winged aircraft. If you had read, "An airplane the, grizzly bear: tiny flying," you might not have known what to think. Grammar is a common system to make meaning from words in particular arrangements—this is the extent to which grammar matters.

Beyond that, correct grammar's importance, and definition, are questionable. What we call "correct grammar" is only one way of using English. Specifically, it's the usage associated with a particular group of people—affluent, highly-educated, mostly white people. To make employment, academic opportunity, or simple respect conditional on correct grammar insidiously perpetuates existing oppressive power structures.

Sometimes grammar drives us up walls. Sometimes our relationship to grammar makes us feel inferior or superior to others. People stop writing because red marks all over their papers chip away at their confidence and create anxiety, shame, or disinterest. Perfectly intelligent people with interesting things to say stop writing because they think that incorrect grammar automatically means bad writing.

Readers who fixate on grammar might be neglecting new ideas and ignoring intriguing questions. Readers who judge writers by their grammar might be dismissing clever, experienced, fascinating people. If you have ever felt stupid because of grammar, I want you to know you're not stupid. If you have ever felt silenced because of grammar, I want you to know that you weren't wrong, you were wronged. Grammar should help us communicate; it shouldn't be used as a tool to silence.

At the Writing Center, we often focus on inclusivity, freedom, and independent thinking. Making room for writers' thoughts, perspectives, and voices in academic discourse sometimes means making grammar and style norms a lower priority than the exploration of complex ideas and new ways of thinking. So as a tutor, I won't mention grammar if the writer doesn't bring it up, unless the piece is something that might be described as "high-stakes."

Cover letters, graduate school applications, scholarship essays, the Academic Statement: these are some examples of high-stakes writing. But could the definition of high-stakes conceivably include other types of writing? What if a poem, a seminar paper, or a personal letter makes your heart beat fast or rise up into your throat? Who's to say these aren't forms of high-stakes writing? And who's to say which kinds of writing demand correct grammar and which kinds don't?

Some writing goes outside of Evergreen, into the big, harsh world, where not everyone thinks about grammar the way

I do. It's possible that the people who read your cover letter, application, Academic Statement, or article will make assumptions and judgments about your intelligence, ability, or character based on grammar. To me this seems petty and unwise, but people who don't see it that way can have real power over our lives and futures. It often seems easier to cater to those people than to try to change the world by putting my own future on the line.

But I shouldn't get to make that choice for anyone but myself. As a tutor, I will still bring up grammar in high-stakes writing, because I want the writer to know that their writing might be labeled "incorrect." That said, I won't pull out a red pen and start automatically correcting. Likewise, if a writer brings in some other kind of writing and they want to talk about grammar and mechanics, I'm not going to say, "This isn't high-stakes, so let's not bother." Maybe it is high-stakes for them, but rather than financially or professionally so, the piece is emotionally, artistically, politically, or otherwise risky. Or maybe the grammar question isn't, "Is it correct?" as much as, "Is it very clear and difficult to misunderstand?" or even, "Are the choices I'm making with grammar and mechanics affecting the reader how I want them to?" Maybe none of those are the question. Maybe a writer just wants to gain fluency in our convoluted grammatical system. Or maybe there are so many different writers and kinds of writing that there's no way to imagine them all.

What I mean to say by all of this is: don't let grammar get you down! As far as I'm concerned, once you have enough of a grasp on English grammar to communicate what you need to communicate, you can quit thinking about grammar entirely.

Or, if you prefer, you can focus on mastering the rules of grammar, for fun and/or profit. Some career paths require more fluency with grammar than others, or the ability to adapt to different sets of stylistic rules. Scientists, for instance, need to be able to adapt to the different writing styles required by different academic journals. Creative writers often benefit from learning more about grammar in order to break rules as an artistic tool. Lawyers need to understand how grammar and syntax can create shifts in meaning. Public speakers might study grammar and syntax to more effectively deliver their messages and drive home their points.

But overall, perfect grammar should not feel compulsory for anyone, and it shouldn't be a prerequisite for the respect of others or for a writer's self-confidence. Your writing is just that: yours. While the consequences of grammar prescriptivism are perhaps unavoidable, you don't need to inflict that judgment on yourself. You also don't need to perpetuate that judgment in your responses to the writing of others, or allow it to suppress your creativity, curiosity, or critical thinking. It's possible to see grammar culture, with all its perfectionist, elitist, obsessive cultural baggage, and just say, "No." ♦