

6 Conventions

What research and best practice show about teaching grammar and spelling.

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The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing.

— Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, 1963, quoted in Hillocks, 1986, p. 133

Fifty years of research into grammar instruction confirms what many teachers have long suspected: when it comes to improving writing, traditional grammar instruction simply does not work. In fact, the most unequivocal conclusion reached by George Hillocks in his 1986 meta-analysis of twenty-five years of writing research was that traditional grammar instruction was *the most ineffective method of improving writing*.

Many teachers, though, worry that throwing out all instruction in grammar and conventions will produce a generation of students who are unable to write an intelligible sentence. So what's a teacher to do? Rather than eliminating instruction in conventions, the Features of Effective Writing model puts conventions in their proper place in the writing process — at the end, where they can be considered only after students have revised their writing for the other four features, as they prepare to publish their work.

What are conventions?

Conventions are the surface features of writing — **mechanics, usage, and sentence formation**. Conventions are a courtesy to the reader, making writing easier to read by putting it in a form that the reader expects and is comfortable with.

MECHANICS

Mechanics are the conventions of print that do not exist in oral language, including spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphs. Because they do not exist in oral language, students have to consciously learn how mechanics function in written language.

For example, while speakers do not have to be conscious of the spellings of words, writers not only have to use standard spelling for each word but may even have to use different spellings for words that sound the same but have different meanings. The same holds true for punctuation: speakers do not have to think consciously about intonation and pauses, but writers have to decide where to use a period instead of a comma and how to indicate that they are quoting someone's exact words.

USAGE

Usage refers to conventions of both written and spoken language that include word order, verb tense, and subject-verb agreement. Usage may be easier than mechanics to teach because children enter school with a basic knowledge of how to use language to communicate. As children are learning to use oral language, they experiment with usage and learn by practice what is expected and appropriate.

However, the oral language that many children use at home is often very different from formal “school” language. In addition, children who speak a language other than English at home may use different grammatical rules, word order, and verb conjugations. Although it may be easier to teach “correct” usage when a child's oral language at home is already very similar to school language, children from all oral language backgrounds benefit from learning about how language is used in different situations.

SENTENCE FORMATION

Sentence formation refers to the structure of sentences, the way that phrases and clauses are used to form simple and complex sentences. In oral language, words and sentences cannot be changed once they have been spoken. But the physical nature of writing allows writers to craft their sentences, combining and rearranging related ideas into a single, more compact sentence. As students become more adept at expressing their ideas in written language, their sentences become longer and more complex.

Conventions in the writing process: last, not first

Teaching conventions in isolation is ineffective at best, because students need opportunities to *apply* their knowledge of conventions to their writing. Even daily oral language activities are a waste of time for students without procedural knowledge of how and when to use conventions in writing. Consequently, the most effective way to teach conventions is to integrate instruction directly into the writing process.

Attention to conventions too early in the writing process, however, can interfere with both students' development of *automaticity*. Writers need the ability to automatically juggle the many physical and cognitive aspects of writing — letter formation, spelling, word order, grammar, vocabulary, and ideas — without consciously thinking about them. The only way to develop this automaticity in writing is to practice, practice, practice. For many students, however, most daily writing is limited to filling in the blanks on worksheets.

The first step to improving automaticity, then, is to provide daily opportunities to write for extended periods of time. Initially, this writing should be single-draft writing only, using phonic spelling, with no physical editing of their writing by either the teacher or the student. Only when students grow more automatic in their writing should teachers introduce conventions into the writing process.

Students' **motivation to write** also suffers when teachers focus on conventions first and ideas last. Many students have little self-confidence when they write because teachers and parents have been too quick to point out their errors instead of praising their ideas first. This problem can be solved by having students share first drafts in a positive, conversational atmosphere that focuses only on the content of their writing, with no correction of errors (Cunningham, Hall, and Cunningham, 2003).

The proper place for teaching conventions, then, is at the end of the writing process, during the editing phase, when students are preparing their writing for publication. When students know that their work will be published for a specific audience, they are more motivated to learn the conventions that will make their writing readable and to edit for those conventions.

Conventions in the primary grades (K-2)

Because primary students should be concentrating first on developing fluency in written language, their **first draft writing should not be corrected** for usage, spelling, or punctuation. Instead, primary students should begin to develop an ear for their writing by publishing their writing orally. Many teachers have a five-minute “sharing time” or “author’s chair” time every day at the end of their writing workshop time, when four to five students have a chance to read their drafts aloud to the rest of the class.

Once students have learned to produce fluent single draft writing, usually by the middle of second grade, they can begin to add very simple editing rules. Ask questions such as “Does each sentence start with a capital letter?” and “Does each sentence make sense?” (Cunningham, Hall, & Cunningham, 2003). Primary students can also learn strategies for proofreading their drafts, such as the “[Mumblin Together \(http://www.learnnc.org/lessons/writing3142003234\)](http://www.learnnc.org/lessons/writing3142003234)” DPI writing strategy lesson. Daily practice with oral language can also help.

MECHANICS

Because spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, are easier for young children to physically see and correct in their writing, those are the first conventions students should learn to edit in their writing.

Spelling. For beginning writers, correct spelling is less important than having opportunities to apply their emerging knowledge of the alphabetic principle to their own writing. **Phonic spelling** (also called *invented spelling*) allows beginning

writers to apply their developing knowledge of phonics to sound out the spelling of words as they write. However, because over fifty percent of the words students encounter are high-frequency sight words that are rarely spelled phonetically (such as “they”), beginning writers also need to learn strategies for spelling these words. *Word walls* provide students with a tool for learning the correct spellings of high-frequency words and applying them in their daily writing (Cunningham & Hall, 2000).

Punctuation and capitalization. Primary students can begin to learn the basic functions of punctuation marks and capitalization during shared reading and writing lessons. During the second or third read-aloud of a book, teachers can point out different punctuation marks and talk about why the author used them. Teachers can model the use of punctuation marks during shared writing activities, and then encourage students to use punctuation marks in their own writing. One of the first editing rules that students can learn is to end each sentence with a period.

USAGE AND SENTENCE FORMATION

While memorizing definitions of parts of speech in isolation is not effective, students do need to know how to talk about the words they encounter when they read and write. Teachers can talk about why an author uses particular adjectives or verbs in their writing. The “[Be the Sentence \(http://www.learnnc.org/lessons/writing3142003727\)](http://www.learnnc.org/lessons/writing3142003727)” lesson from DPI Writing Strategies helps students experience physically how parts of speech and punctuation marks fit together to make different kinds of simple sentences.

Conventions in the elementary grades (3-5)

As upper elementary students become more adept at juggling the various aspects of writing, they can begin to focus more of their attention on conventions. At the same time, upper elementary students are beginning to branch out into writing in different content-area subjects and need to learn how conventions vary for different writing genres.

Although conventions are an important feature of effective writing, many students never move beyond surface-level editing to actually revising the content of their writing. This is why it is especially important to emphasize to upper elementary students that editing should be reserved for the end of the writing process, only after they have revised their work for the other four features.

Upper elementary students can learn proofreading symbols and act as editors for their peers. Have students skip lines in their early drafts to provide room for revision comments and editing marks. Because these students are growing more conscious of the opinions of others, providing opportunities to write for audiences other than their teachers and classmates can also help them become aware of the importance of editing their writing before they publish.

MECHANICS

Spelling. As students begin to encounter more difficult words, usually around second grade, they can no longer rely exclusively on the “sound it out” strategy to spell unfamiliar words. This is the point at which many students are first diagnosed with reading or writing disabilities. Many of these students can be “cured” of their disabilities through an understanding of the nature of the English language and a repertoire of spelling strategies.

Unlike phonetically regular languages such as Spanish, English includes many words whose spellings are determined by *morphology*; that is, their spelling is driven by meaning rather than by pronunciation. (This morphological basis for spelling allows English speakers in North and South Carolina to spell “Beaufort” the same way, even though they pronounce it differently.) This means that **students can use words they know to figure out the spelling of unknown words**. For example, a student who can’t decide whether to spell the word “medicine” with a “c” or an “s” can think of related words, such as “medic” and “medical”, that use a “c”. Other examples are using “bombardment” to identify the silent “b” in “bomb.” Besides using familiar words, students can also use “Making Words” and word sorting activities to help them learn English spelling patterns. Students can also learn to use prefixes and suffixes from words they know to help them spell unfamiliar words (Cunningham, 2000).

Word walls are also an effective strategy for teaching upper elementary students to spell high-frequency words. For older students, homonyms, “spelling demons,” and other frequently misspelled words can be added to the word wall. Lists of words for

different units of study can also be posted on separate bulletin boards to help students correctly spell key vocabulary words. In addition, students who move to different classrooms during the day can use individual word wall folders with high frequency words (Cunningham & Hall, 2000).

Finally, upper elementary students can also use phonic spelling as a placeholder when they are unsure about correct spellings in their early drafts, with the understanding that they will identify misspelled words and correct them during the editing stage.

USAGE

Upper elementary students should start editing their writing using simple editing rules such as subject-verb agreement, verb tense consistency, and pronoun usage. As students increase the range of genres they write, they can also learn that different genres tend to use different verb tenses: past tense for narratives and recounts of science experiments; present tense for informational reports, instructions, recipes, and explanations; and future tense for plans and proposals.

SENTENCE FORMATION

For older students, problems with punctuation, sentence fragments, and run-on sentences are usually related to difficulties producing more complex sentences.

Problems with **sentence fragments** usually mean that students do not know how to combine simple sentences into more complex sentences that use subordinate clauses. Sentence combining lessons can show students alternative ways to combine simple sentences into more complex sentences, using the correct punctuation.

Run-on sentences also provide a good opportunity to teach students parts of speech, such as nouns, verbs, and coordinate conjunctions that can help them divide run-on sentences into self-sufficient complete sentences. In addition, many students have problems with run-on sentences because they want to show that two sentences are related; teaching students to use a semicolon to link two closely related sentences can solve this problem. Other punctuation marks can be introduced, as well, to show the relationships between clauses in complex sentences.

Conventions in middle and high school

By the time students enter middle school, they should have developed control of the basic conventions of written language, as well as the vocabulary to be able to talk about how those conventions are used in their writing. So what's left to learn about conventions in middle and high school?

Middle and high school students first need to consistently edit their own work for appropriate conventions. They are then ready to **explore how conventions are used in specific contexts and genres** to achieve a particular effect with an audience. Rather than editing conventions only at the word and sentence level, students can begin to **understand how conventions contribute to the reader's understanding of the text as a whole**. At the same time, they can study how professional writers defy these conventions to achieve certain effects.

MECHANICS

By **middle school**, students should have control of conventions such as spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing. Spelling should be more a matter of acquiring specialized content-area vocabulary than learning new spelling strategies. Students should have a repertoire of spelling strategies to help them identify potentially misspelled words in their writing. They also should know how to use tools such as dictionaries and spell-checkers to check for the correct spelling.

Students should now learn how to use conventions that are specific to different genres, such as conventions for friendly letters and business letters, capitalizing lines in poetry, headings and subheadings in informational reports, and conventions for bibliographic citations.

USAGE

By sixth grade, students should have mastered basic knowledge of usage, such as word order, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, and correct use of modifiers. In **middle school**, they can begin to use nominative, objective, and possessive pronouns appropriately and to check that pronouns match their antecedents. They can extend their knowledge of appropriate usage to different dialects, comparing usage in informal, ethnic, and regional dialects to standard English usage. Students can also compare usage in oral and written language by comparing quoted speech in literature to language used by the narrator or by translating written language into oral speech. Once students reach **high school**, they are ready to explore usage in different contexts and genres.

SENTENCE FORMATION

By **middle school**, students are ready experiment with using varying sentence lengths to achieve specific effects on an audience. They are also ready to use (and punctuate) dependent and independent clauses by combining simple sentences into more complex sentences.

High school students can further refine their writing by learning to structure their sentences and paragraphs to achieve specific effects in their writing. Students can use parallel structures within their sentences to make them easier to read. Students can also structure their sentences and paragraphs to emphasize the new information they provide about their topic. Passive voice, for example, can be used to emphasize the object of an action rather than the actor. (Had the preceding sentence been written as “Students can emphasize the object of an action by using passive voice,” the term *passive voice* would have been diminished in importance.)

High school students can also use sentence-combining activities to practice embedding information within subordinate clauses. In addition, they can use techniques specific to informational writing, such as *nominalization*, which converts actions into objects or processes in order to pack more information into a sentence. For example, the five-word sentence, “The group mobilized its forces” can be converted into a five-word phrase, “The mobilization of the group’s forces,” that can be used as the subject or object of a sentence.

Guiding questions for conventions in elementary grades

1. Are your sentences complete?
 - Do you have any sentence fragments that need to be completed?
 - Do you have run-on sentences?
2. Does your piece demonstrate standard usage?
 - Is there subject-verb agreement?
 - Is there consistency in verb tense?
 - Are pronouns used correctly?
 - Are all your words used correctly?
3. Are punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and paragraphs used correctly in your piece?
 - Does your punctuation make your piece hard to read?
 - Have you used capital letters for the first word in a sentence and proper nouns?
 - Have you spelled most common words correctly?
 - Do misspelled words in your piece make it hard to read?
 - Have you used paragraphs appropriately?

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