



By [Paul Moses](#)

The third-graders at PS 277 in Brooklyn twisted upward in their seats, hands fluttering on outstretched arms like flags atop a pole.

As teacher Janet Kennedy recognized them, they marched in turn to the blackboard, drawing a collection of lines and connecting dots that would be foreign to almost anyone who graduated from college in the past 20 years or so.

This was no arts-in-the-schools project, or even some beginning geometry lesson. The enthused 8-year-olds were learning to diagram sentences.

In teaching her students this long-lost skill, Kennedy was reviving the educational equivalent of a woolly mammoth. The educational establishment - the National Council of Teachers of English, along with many researchers and curriculum developers - long ago declared that any systematic teaching of grammar belonged to the Ice Age. In the past few decades, sentence diagrams - word maps that once helped teach parts of speech and other rules of syntax - have been shunned as if they were a cut of steak at a vegetarian banquet.

Studies from as far back as 1963 have told teachers that it is useless and even "harmful" to teach diagramming, or for that matter any formal lessons on grammar.

Students, according to the studies, retained little from old-fashioned grammar lessons, which stole time better spent on reading and writing. What's more, they suggested that focusing on grammatical errors would inhibit the students' creativity. As a result, grammar textbooks were long ago trashed and teachers were instructed to deal with usage problems one on one, when there was time. College education programs gave short shrift to grammar - and so, some veteran teachers say, many teachers don't know it well themselves.

But grammar, once the meat and potatoes of any child's education, is back on the

table. University administrators, fed up with the poor writing of incoming students, have pressed the College Board, a Manhattan-based, national nonprofit group, to include a section on writing and grammar on the SAT college admission test. The national movement to set "standards" in education by testing students' basic language and math skills at various levels has put more pressure on schools to teach students to write without errors in usage. And even the 75,000-member National Council of Teachers of English, which opposes formal instruction in grammar, has at least revived the issue by devoting the January issue of its monthly magazine to the topic of "revitalizing grammar."

"About 15 to 20 years ago, it became verboten to teach grammar at the high school level. At some schools they were absolutely forbidden to do so," said Judith Richman, who has taught English for 33 years in Smithtown high schools. "Now," she said, "people are talking about it again."

To Richman, that's good news. It never made much sense to her that teachers were supposed to discuss writing with students who were not taught the terms needed to identify their errors.

One sign of a shift is that Richman, dubbed the "grammar queen" by colleagues, has been teaching a course on grammar to fellow Smithtown educators. She doesn't blame them for not knowing grammar: "They didn't know it because they were never taught it."

Michael Southwell, retired chairman of the English department at York College in Queens, is on the same page. He says he believes one of the biggest obstacles to effective grammar instruction is that the teachers themselves have not been taught grammar adequately in education schools. "I think a few years down the road, we are going to discover this has been a catastrophe because no one's been paying attention to how to teach the teachers," said Southwell, co-author of the college textbook "Mastering Written English" (Prentice-Hall).

"I don't know of any research that looks at good grammar instruction," said Southwell, who started his career as a literary scholar but soon found a more pressing need - to teach writing to disadvantaged students accepted into the City University of New York under an open admissions policy.

"They had a kind of vitality and liveliness, but they had incredible problems getting their ideas on the page," he said.

Ed Vavra, a Pennsylvania College of Technology professor, has tried to sound an alarm. "The public has to be more informed about this," said Vavra, who started a newsletter on syntax and set up a conference that spawned a national organization for teachers of grammar. "They are hurting the children. ... The children cannot recognize subjects and verbs. They can't recognize clauses."

But these views about the importance of teaching grammar are far from universal in the academic world. Richman, for example, heard recently about a teaching applicant in another school district who mentioned using grammar books and was told to stay away from that subject or "she would never get a job there."

Experts say that view still holds the upper hand in the "grammar wars," even if there are signs of change. The battle, fought largely in obscure journals, at academic conferences and on college professors' Web sites, continues to shape how children are taught to write.

The problem, according to many influential voices, is that too many students arriving at even the best colleges write poorly. And one reason is that they haven't been taught to recognize their mistakes.

The College Board reported last year that its survey of students taking the SAT found that the proportion of them getting instruction in composition and writing had plunged in the past decade, even as more students were taking advanced math classes. That's why SAT verbal scores stagnated and math scores shot up, the board said.

Trying to change course, the board weighed in with a plan to send a message that writing and grammar matter. Two years from now, it will add a new 800-point section to the SAT test in which students spend 25 minutes writing an essay and equal time answering multiple-choice questions on grammar, including such matters as subject-verb agreement and sentence construction. The test will have three 800-point sections: math, verbal and writing/grammar.

"The hope is that there will be a renewed focus on writing," said Kristin Carnahan, a College Board spokeswoman. "Educators are saying it, business leaders are saying it: Students and new employees are coming in without basic, necessary writing ability." Proper grammar, she added, is an element of good writing.

If that sounds like a cannonball shot at the way writing and grammar are taught, it was taken that way. Leila Christenbury, past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, which has opposed formal instruction in grammar, disagrees with the College Board's finding that students are getting less instruction in writing, saying it conflicted with her experience. "I do not see that in the high schools in my area," she said.

Christenbury, a professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, criticized in particular the multiple-choice grammar questions, which she said would be an inadequate indication of how well students can actually write. "Some students can score well on that and not be able to write well," she said. "To me there is a huge difference between a multiple-choice usage test and good writing."

College Board officials said the questions will show how good a student is at self-editing, an important part of the writing process. "We've been hearing from a lot of our members that kids have been coming unprepared for writing," said Amy Schmidt, director of higher education research at the College Board, when asked why a grammar section will be added to the SAT. She added: "You have to have the tools to do the job. You can't be a good writer unless you understand the rules."

At one time, rules reigned. But linguists say many cherished rules of grammar were created simply for the sake of having rules.

"There are a lot of rules made up," said Robert Leonard, director of the linguistics program at Hofstra University. He blamed Robert Lowth, a London bishop who prescribed some of the rules that bedeviled generations of students in his 1762 book, "A Short Introduction to English Grammar."

"He just made up rules - for example, that you shouldn't end a sentence with a preposition," Leonard said.

Even those who advocate increased attention to grammar say the rules drilled into students in the past often were arbitrary.

"The way it has been taught in the past is really disgraceful," said Geoffrey Pullum, co-

author of the 1,860-page "Cambridge Grammar of the English Language" (Cambridge, 2002).

But Pullum also assailed the way writing is taught nowadays. The instruction concentrates "on expression of personal opinions and of creative writing at any cost," with the occasional century-old grammar maxim thrown in, he said.

Starting in 1963, major studies sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English found that grammar instruction was more an obstacle than an aid to students. In a 1974 position paper displayed on its Web site, the English teachers council said teachers should not fret over grammar mistakes when evaluating papers. The position paper's title declared a new direction rooted in progressive politics: "Students' Right to Their Own Language."

Since then, grammar instruction has waned in schools across the country. The picky grammarians of yore were replaced by "language arts" teachers who had been taught that correcting errors would discourage students' creativity. In 1985, the influential teachers' council passed a resolution declaring that "the use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing." Teachers were told that grammar should be taught only when a problem emerged in the students' work.

But to some teachers, it never made sense to freeze out grammar.

"My view of grammar is that it got a bad name over the years because people tried to be too dogmatic and rigid with it," said Tom Casey, who taught English for 34 years at Copiague High School before retiring three years ago. "Basically, English grammar is not rocket science. There are a few basic principles people need to know."

Casey, who offers a grammar course to Suffolk teachers, said he continued to teach grammar after it fell out of fashion, and even after a department chairperson years ago discouraged it. "I felt there was no way I could help kids to improve their own writing without giving them the basic terminology," he said.

But grammar "just gradually disappeared," said Diane Ravitch, an educational historian at NYU and author of the upcoming book "The Language Police" (Knopf).

Ravitch said that despite the back-to-basics movement in education, teachers continue to be "very influenced by child-centered approaches" and "accepting of almost anything the child produces. There's a strong incentive in the English profession not to correct papers."

She agreed that grammar instruction should never have been a matter of simply memorizing rules. But, she added, "As with most educational issues, there's usually some sensible approach which gets tossed out with the more rigid and extreme approach."

Rebecca Chowske, who teaches English at Lynbrook High School, said she sees a shift to a more proactive approach to teaching grammar because of state standards for writing.

"I think the pendulum is beginning to swing back to the expectation that there should be a more formalized approach to it," she said. "Certainly, it's less catch-as-catch-can." For her part, Ravitch favors the sentence diagramming she was taught as a child. She asked her son's teacher to instruct him on it. "He thought it was like playing a little game. ... Within about three weeks everybody in the class was diagramming sentences," she said.

Still, it's rare to find the intersecting lines of a sentence diagram on a blackboard in a public school these days. Pioneered by two Brooklyn professors in the 19th century, diagramming is treated by many educators as if it were some dangerous disease that public health advances eliminated. But like Ravitch, some recall it fondly.

Marianne Ferrara, principal of PS 277 in southern Brooklyn's blue-collar Gerritsen Beach section, said she returned to it last year. "I was looking at the quality of the children's work," said Ferrara, whose school is one of the 200-plus the city considered effective enough to be exempted from a standardized curriculum. "They had wonderful ideas but they didn't know how to develop a sentence." She tried to figure out what had changed in writing instruction, and recalled the diagramming she had learned at a Catholic grammar school.

Now, second- and third- graders at PS 277 can map a sentence as easily as they can

turn on a VCR, identifying verbs, subjects, adjectives, adverbs and articles.

"Chopping it up this way makes them see it right before their eyes," said Susan Stone, who teaches second grade. "It works."

Ferrara is hoping that sentence diagramming will give students one more tool to help them with the statewide fourth- grade language-arts test, a three-day exam in which students write compositions and a story. Students are expected to use correct grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Ferrara said she wasn't worried that students will be discouraged when their mistakes are corrected. "If you do it respectfully, their self-esteem is never damaged by it," she said.

In her class last month, 25 third-graders were hooked as Janet Kennedy taught them a new twist - to diagram sentences with compound subjects and verbs. For 40 minutes, the students marched eagerly to the blackboard to plug conjunctions, subjects, verbs and modifying words into the right slots. Kennedy threw out compliments like candy bars, but also insisted on correct capitalization, spelling and punctuation as she checked the students' notebooks. The students kept coming back for more, as if it were a game in the schoolyard.

Afterward, Kennedy said she had seen improvement in the students' writing. "The biggest thing that I've noticed is that they're becoming their own editors, which is what we want," she said.

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