

**Instructors' Manual for**

**One Day in the Life of  
the English Language**

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*A Microcosmic Usage Handbook*

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## AN OPENING WORD . . .

Unlike most usage handbooks, *One Day in the Life of the English Language* should be read, like its literary eponym—*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn—from cover to cover. I am aware that most handbooks are not. Used for reference, dipped into on occasion, consulted by students who are told to correct (maybe) their comma splices or some other “error,” usage books have some pages worn feltlike—and others with nary an eye-track. This haphazard, nonsequential engagement technique works against the user or reader, however. For example, were a student required to look up “comma splice,” he or she might find something about “independent clauses.” Well, what are *clauses*, and what’s the difference between *dependent* and *independent* clauses? The notion of *semicolon* usage might come into play. *Subordination* would perhaps be another issue that remained in the periphery. And then there are what many people see as “acceptable comma splices”: the “tag question,” and also the joining together with a comma of two very short independent clauses. How does that gibe with an injunction against the comma splice? The initial grammar question about comma splices ramifies, or maybe metastasizes, as students try to figure out how to correct their problem.

I contend that it’s counterproductive to use grammar handbooks only to dip into for a given issue. Instead, students should be exposed to the whole range of the grammar of the English language—or, an outline of it, anyway—as this full exposure allows them to mentally construct what a sentence is like, determine how its multiple parts operate, and learn how to generate correct, elegant, forceful sentences of their own.

Thus, this *Instructors’ Manual* is intended to be used by instructors who plan to assign the entirety of *One Day in the Life of the English Language*. The *Manual* is divided into fifteen class sessions, which, over the course of a semester, would be one per week. (Or, if you are offering a two-day-a-week class, it would take about half the semester.)

To some extent this guide offers basic pedagogical suggestions, ones not directly connected to the book it intends to be glossing, suggestions applicable and relevant to any class, regardless of the text or texts, regardless of the discipline. I

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include these because I think they complement the book's spirit, as they inspire the use of an open, student-centered classroom in which ideas can be debated and multiple opinions shared and valued. Grammar and usage—politicized, ever-mutating, at once amorphous and codified—should provoke discussion and debate, and while our language is certainly “rule-governed,” those rules have a bit of flex to them, and have evolved over even the four decades I have been teaching English classes. They will doubtless continue to evolve into an unforeseeable future. The key, though, is this: we want to help shape that evolution into one that will improve our ability to communicate with others. We want to have a say in the future of language.

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N.B.: In the following pages, I will offer lesson plans and then provide discursive descriptions of what the instructor might do on a given class day. These plans are designed for a two-hour long class period. If you have only an hour and a half, or only 50 minutes, you will have to modify them somewhat. If you have 50-minute sessions, I would recommend that you split the lesson plan in two. If you have sessions that are less than two hours, you might simply choose the exercises or sections of each outlined class that seem most appropriate for your classes. What I do in shorter-than-two-hour sessions is try to work in the ideas from the lesson plan's “activities” via a commentary on the students' read-aloud “streamwrites”—an activity I discuss more fully in the next section.

As you modify the lesson plans or create your own, you might assess how long each genre of classroom practice takes. For example, lectures can be of any length (I especially like the one-minute lecture). Reading aloud is also flexible, unless you want every student's voice heard. Discussion can be broken off, but often you'll be in a discussion that you don't want to break off. And streamwriting, especially if all students read their prose, is the most time-intensive of all the practices I employ in this class—but at the same time perhaps the most useful, since it gets students to reflect on language issues as they use the language to transmit their ideas.

## On Streamwriting as a Classroom Practice

In 1973, Peter Elbow published *Writing without Teachers*, a book that proved to be nothing short of pathbreaking. In this book he introduced the notion of “freewriting,” a practice likely familiar to many readers. It was based, to a degree, on “automatic writing,” which was popular over a hundred years ago. Freewriting involves simply writing continuously, not pausing to reflect, not going back to revise, and stopping after a certain period of time.

Here I am using the term “streamwriting” to describe more or less the same activity. Streams have a continuousness, another useful element of the college classroom. They don’t have the entropic hit or miss-ness of “free.” They’re not “free”; in fact, they require quite a lot of work to generate, to manage, to make productive. Most people will have heard of “stream of consciousness,” too, and like the various other metaphors that “stream” is connected to, such as “Heraclitean stream,” “streaming online video,” “the mainstream” (sorry to mix registers so wildly) it complements as it complicates the activity of streamwriting. While I rather like the openness of “free” in freewriting, I think many people find just that open-ended vastness intimidating: with no banks or borders or endpoints, without even a slippery or squishy place you can stand, it’s kind of a shifting terrain. Streamwriting is an intense use of class time; it involves the teacher or facilitator in ways that the typical lecture or discussion rarely does; it requires very careful time management; and it taxes the creative powers of even the most inventive instructor.

Writing prompts, which I label “rainmakers,” actually have to provide or provoke something. So the facilitator has to keep in mind that something along the lines of “Well, what did you think of today’s reading?” isn’t really sufficient: that’s not giving enough to the people doing the streamwriting, not enough direction, not enough by way of a productive question. It won’t make for rain. And finally, the problem of students just using their streamwrites as talking points (rather than reading verbatim what they have written) will diminish as students get used to doing them: students are not free to do whatever they want, to summarize, to paraphrase, to skip over long passages and fake their way through the rest. No. They are being called on to present what they have produced, the stream of words that is their own and that they are now

being asked to share. We as an audience want that whole stream, too, not just a few fresh- or salt-water whiffs and traces.

## Kinds of Streamwriting

I suggest that prior to doing any sort of text- or topic-based writing, students write what I call a “secret spring,” namely, anything they want to get off their chests, with the only proviso that it be something *not* meant for reading aloud. It should be a “spring”—there needs to be some production—but it has to be kept secret: that lends it a certain allure, a mystery, a specialness. And since it’s secret, it can contain anything one wants—it can be a genuine and full TMI-rich verbal onslaught, if one wants. (Interestingly, in many classes and workshops I have observed, this phase is nonexistent: the facilitators start with a “prompt” that deals with the subject matter at hand, and participants are expected to engage that from the very onset. Maybe using “secret spring” as the terminology will enable and encourage teachers to include this crucial stage.)

I propose adding a stage here, one antecedent to the “secret spring.” I call this new stage a “streamwrite of consciousness.” In it the writer tries to capture the nearly inchoate, rapidly shifting, often confused and nonlinear flow of thought in his or her mind. It’s a transcription, in short, of a stream of consciousness. One element of this then might be used as the basis for a secret spring that follows. Here is an example of a streamwrite of consciousness, one that I wrote in a workshop during the summer of 2013:

Sounds, stickiness, urgency. Worries dissipated since K arrived. I sweat and actually smell kinda bad. Many odd outside noises. I feel sweat slip down my abdomen. I’m still flabby, horribly so, though I’m getting better. Voices in the hallway. Circle of Hanna’s water bottle. She lifts it. I wipe sweat from my brow. More sluices down my abs. Ick. Noise of people waiting. A ticking also sometimes, maybe the wall clock. Had never heard that prior to today. Motors sound on road 9G. I feel sweat on my head. Face itches. I touch it. I can see pens move out of the corner of my eye.

There's not a lot going on here, I know, but the exercise itself was interesting—and challenging. The next writing might be a secret spring that emerges from the ideas of the streamwrite of consciousness. For example, What worries are now dissipated? What does all this liquescent imagery suggest?

The second stage of streamwriting is usually done to a “prompt” from the facilitator (again, I call this a “rainmaker”). I'd suggest that we tell the group, after their “secret spring,” that we now want a streamwrite, but we're providing a rainmaker. We will seed the cloud, perhaps. We are giving them something, in short, of great value—namely, the start or source of a writing idea, one we hope will turn into something of what I call a wellspring. Part of the value of streamwriting—although this is rarely emphasized—stems from its modeling (by the teacher or group leader) of interesting questions that get writers going. The prompt itself provides, precipitates, an idea, starts a veritable wellspring. Or at least we hope it will.

## Gathering

But let's look at the concept of a rainmaker. One problem that students often have, as they struggle to come up with spontaneous responses, emerges from the immediacy with which they are compelled to invent. This kind of writing, especially since it is often publicly shared, puts writers under pressure of the moment. You will notice that many students do not like to “think through their pens.” They claim, often quite justly, that it's necessary to ponder issues; they require time to process ideas before committing anything to paper.

There is definitely something to this. Hence, I suggest that the facilitator, leader, or teacher build in to every post-secret spring streamwriting activity a bit of time for no writing at all—for “collecting” or “gathering.” To sustain my water imagery, one need only think of how water, before forming into streams, first has to build up somewhere, has to exceed the absorptive capacity of whatever it falls on. This takes a bit of time. It has to collect. After an interval, though, if water is still falling (in the form of rain) or forming from ice melt, it starts moving in the direction that gravity takes it, that is, downhill: it forms streams.

Back to writing. I suggest that, after you provide a rainmaker, there should be a one-minute long period of no writing at all. People need time to collect their thoughts, even for a five-minute writing task, to let those thoughts build and accrue, to an extent, before putting pen to page. During this time of “collecting” or “gathering,” the group could be enjoined to close their eyes, or even go into a quasi-meditative state. Perhaps a few seconds into the “gathering,” with everyone’s eyes still closed, the facilitator could repeat the rainmaker, being careful to retain the same wording (this works best if the facilitator has written down the rainmaker).

“Collecting” or “gathering” has several benefits. Aside from allowing that time to collect one’s thoughts, it also reinforces the value of forethought in composing and inventing. During this time period, participants might consider various alternatives, might come to some better understanding of the rainmaker, and might even experience an “aha!” moment. They can dive in at ten, fifteen, thirty seconds. Sometimes such moments end up being drowned in the rush or outpouring of a streamwriting that’s following a perhaps doomed or not very promising pathway. My own experience of streamwriting is that I often have several “false starts” after a prompt. Or, worse, I will start in one direction and then realize too late that the direction was actually wrong or dead-end headed. It would have been nice to have had just a short time to think through what I was going to write.

In addition, this “gathering” time offers a good ratio: for a five-minute streamwriting activity, a one-minute contemplative gathering of one’s thoughts can be extrapolated into a one-hour gathering/collecting for what might be a five-hour long task. During the gathering phase, some people might want to jot down notes. I leave this to the discretion of the facilitator. Certainly in the gathering phase of a five-hour writing project, notes would be needful. But for an on-the-spot, five-minute streamwrite, perhaps it would be best to ask people not to touch their pens, instead internally nurturing and pooling that imminent stream.

Often students will preface their reading of their work with a disclaimer, “This is really bad,” or “I just didn’t know what to write,” or some such. Disclaimers, preceding reading aloud of streamwrites, can be met with “these are only wellsprings, at this point—[*wellspring*, to repeat, is the term I use for the first focused streamwrite in a series]; so don’t worry—they are only the start of something larger.” And besides, if everyone says this we undermine our purpose. I mean, why read these if everyone

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thinks they're terrible? You had only five minutes, I tell students; "Did you expect to write the Great American Novel"?

Keep in mind that throughout, the facilitator should write and share, too. She or he cannot simply stand on dry land, while everyone else is in the water. The facilitator or teacher isn't a lifeguard, isn't a spectator. He or she is also a creator. By inhabiting, by becoming "natives of that element," teachers give those in the group a model for confronting experience, a model for creation of ideas, of prose, of performance. Stein's famous speech midway through *Lord Jim* gets at the same general feeling, I think:

"Yes! Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns- nicht wahr?... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up."

A facilitator confronts an onrush of energy and danger and must somehow bend it to purposes of value, all the while working under considerable limitations and constraints him or herself. But it's those constraints—rather than simple freedom—that make for genuine beauty: as Wendell Berry writes, "The impeded stream is the one that sings" (97). In fact, unlike freewrites, which tend often to disperse their energy over large expanses into a still desert air, streams have banks and meanders and dams; like language, with its conventions, rules, and limitations, these are the things that keep the stream at once contained and productive—of power, of beauty, of song.

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## Day One

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### Preface

### The Starting Idea: You and Your Audience

### Preview of the Following Pages

#### Day One Lesson Plan

1. Introduce yourself and the course (put name and class number on board). Attendance sign-in. Ask if everyone has syllabus/texts. Ask if there are any problems with this.
2. Mention the requirements, the attendance policy, and the in-class writing. At this point, present the “agreement,” which you will co-sign. (If you wish, after these are signed, you can Xerox these and give students copies.)
3. Class introduces itself via pairing up (3 minutes max: TIME IT) and introducing one’s partner. Ask for memorable details, things that will help us remember the person’s name.
4. Streamwriting. Secret spring (freeform writing not to be read aloud) (5 minutes). Then this rainmaker: “Do you have a grammar horror story that made you reimagine how you saw grammar?” (5 minutes)
5. Students need to read this aloud. Verbatim. Teacher also reads a streamwrite.
6. Discussion: ethics and “correct” English: What is ethics? Is Standard Written English (SWE) “ethical”? Is it all relative? (Cite example of foreigner not speaking well—unethical?)
7. Stigma and communicativeness. The crux of the book, really: good usage does not immediately stigmatize; it also has more communicative effectiveness. This could just be a “mini-lecture” by the instructor.
- 8 “Absurd universe” idea (xii). Have a student read this aloud, or have him/her read the communication and stigma section (2–3), or the section on how language changes the user (6). Probably at least one of these will generate discussion.
9. 2008—the basis for this text’s examples. Do students remember anything from this year? Discuss.
10. Last writing, this to be turned in as a “diagnostic”: Passage on page 5 about how errors in surgery or drilling or piloting are a lot more important than grammatical errors: do you agree or disagree, and why?

Your first class. It's a writing class, or maybe a practical grammar class—one that has a wide mix of students of varying interests and abilities. Some seem to be real enthusiasts—"grammar geeks," they call themselves, or "grammar Nazis," an appellation I actively work to discourage. (Obviously this generation has little knowledge of what the Nazis were really like. I try to point out that perhaps students should do some research on this topic.) But these let's-call-them geeks are on your side and will help you teach the course, partly because what they see as apodictic is often incorrect, and convincing them of this will be valuable for the whole class. They are enthusiasts (in the eighteenth-century and the modern senses), and that's useful. Some students, though, are in the course for a very different reason than what motivates the geeks. They often struggle putting together even the most basic of sentences. They will have regular problems with subject-verb agreement, with sentence boundary issues (comma splices and fused sentences), pronoun reference/agreement, and malapropisms. (I will mention this list of problems at least once or twice more.)

But the largest group of students inhabits the middle territory. They have some English competence, write fundamentally communicative prose. Their prose tends to be marred by numerous "mistakes" (i.e., deviations from Standard Written English, or SWE), but they don't really see these being very important, after all. They might be in your course to fulfill some obscure requirement, as "one upper level humanities course," so there is a certain air of resignation to their attitude. Part of your job will be to convince them that what they write and how they put words together actually matter. And with this group, if you can somehow compel them to care, your work is largely done, and their work will markedly improve. In them it's less an intellectual breakthrough than an attitudinal shift you're trying to cultivate.

Therefore the first few pages of *One Day in the Life of the English Language* will have a varying impact on your students. Some will welcome it with a sigh of minor relief. Many, though, will be wary and nervous, not sure what the course will entail and cover, worried that they will make it through. Some will drop.

To state the obvious, your job the first day is to lay out that course: its goals, its requirements, its policies. I use a syllabus, which I post online prior to the start of classes on our college's intranet site. Some teachers and students prefer a hard copy

syllabus placed in each student's hands from Day One onward. It's probably best to both post the syllabus and provide a hard copy. (I don't use a hard copy, though, since my syllabi tend to be long and my classes large: let's save some trees, eh?) On this syllabus, I lay out the usual information, such as contact numbers, emails, texts required, office hours, course description, schedule, writing/speaking requirements, due dates, weightings. Recently I have taken to including an "agreement" regarding latenesses/absences/cell-phone use, which I have students sign and return. This legalistic-looking document emphasizes how important I find issues of so-called deportment. But it should be bilateral. I include things that I agree to do (e.g., come to class prepared, return their papers or exams the next class period after they are turned in, not embarrass students—you might come up with your own list).

In many first-year classes, in fact, I find myself teaching my students simply how to be college students, at the same time that I'm teaching a subject matter.

But what of that subject matter? How to begin? I have students pair up and introduce each other, noting significant details of their partner's life, interests, and aspirations. This activity helps create a community. After the introduction of students, I introduce the course. I want students to be invested in—or to believe that they could be invested in—the subject matter. So I start by asking why it makes a difference, really, to "know" grammar. What in their own lives suggests that such knowledge matters at all? Do you have a grammar "horror story" that you'd like to share? This is the subject of the first in-class writing (which as I have mentioned I call "streamwriting"). At this point, you should probably explain streamwriting to your class.

The question I pose can also be explored via discussion, but I prefer writing because I'm trying to get students to control and generate their own (accurate) language, to use it rather than to simply expatiate extempore on issues or to complete multiple choice exams, which many or most of their classes require. Discursive writing gets them to employ an actual grammar, one that uses punctuation and the like, as they explain that very grammar and maybe more self-consciously put it to use. Here is an example of what a woman wrote in my class the first day of the semester in September of 2016:

A teammate of mine from my swim team started to text me. Just based off of the basics of the conversation, “hey”, “what’s up?”, etc. I couldn’t tell he was illiterate. However, as the conversation progressed, his grammar got worse. He was using verbs that weren’t in the right tense and trying to say something, probably, completely different. Afterwards, he started misusing “there, their, they’re” and “to, too (and yes, even “two”)”. I would cringe while reading his texts and eventually stopped texting him, because it was hurting my head to read his messages and I felt like I was losing brain cells. Even his punctuation was off for words like “were and we’re” and I’m not sure if he even knew the difference. I think what makes this story so scary for me is that he’s the same age as me and this was recent. (Asimina H)

If your students have read the preface and the opening pages of the introduction to *One Day* (I assign reading for the opening day, via the intranet site), they should have a good idea of the book’s general themes and slant. Since many will not have read or even bought the text, though, you probably should just present a few ideas from the preface. My opening gambit is that language use, specifically correct language use, has an ethical dimension. You might ask, Is this true? Either via streamwriting or discussion, you might touch the following issues:

- Is correct, Standard Written English ethical?
- What is ethical? What do we mean by this term?
- Can one ever take an absolute stance on ethics, or is it all relative?

I note that the last question will often open up discussion about prescriptivist (absolutist) as opposed to descriptivist (relativist) grammar, a distinction you’ll have to return to surprisingly often.

To personalize the discussion and get it going, I usually ask if, when living in Poland and speaking only very basic (and flawed) pidgin Polish, I was being unethical by doing so. Most students admit I was not; I was just learning a foreign language. But when does a nonnative speaker’s language reach the level that, if it has significant problems, it somehow represents unethical behavior?

The preface moves on to issues of why grammar is important in the everyday world. Specifically, problems in grammar diminish communicativeness and also tend

to stigmatize speakers or writers. I usually present this as a kind of mini-lecture—five minutes at most. It's useful to vary the "responsibility" of a classroom, I think: students should be asked to do some speaking, some writing—but also some listening, both to one another and to you.

Most students accept the importance of correctness in terms of abetting communicativeness, but are unsure of the stigma notion. I ask them the following series of questions:

- What is a stigma?
- Can language stigmatize a person?
- What is the effect of this stigma?

Again, these can be streamwritten to and shared in the class as a basis for discussion. Be sure that, as an instructor, you too engage in the writing activity, sharing your writing neither first nor last—neither as the ideal example after which everyone else's is a poor substitute, nor as the capstone outpouring of a professional. You want, in some sense, to just be one of the crowd here.

One oft-recurring and important theme of the book is the idea of the "absurd universe." This will take some explanation on your part. You might draw out of students other examples of "absurd-universe" sentences or those of the "garden-path" variety, which are perhaps less dangerous (because more obviously intended to confuse) than are the absurd-universe ones. Garden-path sentences are correct but misleading ("The old man the boat"). In general, I emphasize, correct or not, a sentence should not intentionally mislead readers. In fact, it would be better to be incorrect than misleading, though I'd argue that incorrect sentences almost inevitably point in multiple directions, provide for a reader or listener a message and at once inadvertently undermine that message. This could be a topic for discussion.

I asked students to write an exam answer about the "absurd universe," and here is what one, Alexandra Badescu, came up with.

Ultimately, absurd universe sentences create a barrier between readers and writers. They fool people into interpreting them one way, then cause audiences to question that meaning when its irrationality emerges. Sometimes this is exactly what writers, or public speakers, want; however, generally the absurd universe is best avoided.

This seems to me apt and also applicable to “garden-path” sentences. It seems to me no accident, though, that the above paragraph was written just about seven weeks prior to the hotly-contested 2016 presidential election.

I usually have students read aloud what I think of as especially important sections of the text. These will vary from teacher to teacher, to be sure, but let me offer some sections you might consider reading aloud:

- absurd-universe paragraph (xii)
- communication and stigma section (2-3)
- section on how language changes one (6)
- transparent prose idea (6-7)

Not incidentally, the “reading aloud” gambit is a good pedagogical strategy to employ on a regular basis. Students can learn pronunciation and presentational skills, just as they learn the “trick” to reading aloud: that is, reading to oneself silently a half line or so ahead of where one’s voice is. In addition, reading aloud puts the ideas in the mouths and voices of students, perhaps helping them to internalize those ideas, to “become inward” with them.

To return to the text, the examples used are all from a single day—December 29, 2008. I usually ask students if they have any knowledge or memory of 2008. Some recall that it was a difficult year (the financial meltdown happened in the fall of that year). Some might have seen the film *The Big Short*. Some will point to Barack Obama’s election. But despite the monumental nature of that year’s events, many students still will view it as remote from their lives, which I suppose it probably is. I also ask if the dates I mention on page 8 (December 7, 1941, and other historically significant moments) have any resonance for them. Did language change on any of those days, do you think? (I notice that students do recognize September 11, 2001, but they have trouble with September 1, 1939; August 6, 1945; and November 23, 1963. How quickly shared memory fades!) Just discussing these historical dates, though, has a certain inherent interest. Many students like to be reminded of a “real world” and its important dates. If I prepare a second edition of the text, I will add an important date from 2008, namely September 15, when the supposedly “too big to fail” firm of Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy.

Ending the first day, I talk about the passage on page 5 in which I discuss how errors in surgery, in piloting airplanes, in drilling for offshore oil, among many others, are usually seen as having more importance than grammatical errors. Happily, some students disagree, saying that if a surgeon or airline pilot or oil company executive can't communicate clearly—or is not listened to—then disaster will likely ensue.

The general idea of the book—and of the courses I teach based on it—is this: you need to get students involved in the discussion of grammar issues. You want to talk about “flashpoints,” areas of controversy and change. You want to talk about varying registers of English and their appropriateness for given situations. And you simply want to present grammar and usage as living, changing, breathing entities (in a manner of speaking)—things that can be debated about and that have an inherent interest. And you have to get students writing about these things, actually, actively involved in expressing ideas about them and sharing those ideas. If you can get students thus involved, suddenly they will become far more self-conscious about the language and the way they use it. And this will in turn generate much more sophisticated, interesting, and even correct prose.

## Day Two

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### Introduction

**December 29, 2008, as History**

**Two Disclaimers**

**On Using Sentences from the Real World**

#### Day Two Lesson Plan

1. Return streamwrites and identify four most common sentence level problems: CS/FS (and use of the semicolon); Frags; S-V Agr; pronoun reference (maybe put these on the board). You also might find passages later in the text that discuss these issues.
2. Note that 90-95% of the material in this handbook is stuff that students have heard before.
5. Streamwrite: If the earlier discussion seemed to be promising, then this: Describe in detail the process of working on something and finding that what you have done is less important than what your work revealed “beneath it.” Alternatively, what about the Gladwell concept of “thin-slicing”? Another possibility, “If it bleeds, it leads.” My favorite, though, focuses on usage: “Why do you think so many people make these common errors? What is so tough about them to master? Should SWE change?”
6. Read these aloud.
7. Paradigm formation/breaking: presentation. If this seems interesting to you, it ties in nicely with some of the ideas of the text, so I’d go for it. But many will prefer to leave this for another course or another class.
8. “None are boring.” Discussion. Mary Norris response. Pass around *TLS* review of *One Day in the Life*. What is Norris’s point about “none is/are”? Do you buy it?
9. Baraka’s “Black Art.” Have students read it aloud. Couple of voices. Streamwrite: Do we want poems that kill? Is “kill” being used only metaphorically? Has a poem or a piece of writing ever grabbed you by the throat?

In *How to Write a Sentence* (2011), Stanley Fish discusses the utility of making language “transparent”:

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Aristotle initiates a tradition in which the desire to make language so transparent a medium that it disappears and interposes no obstacle or screen between the reader and the things it points to. (40)

I am getting at much the same idea on pages 6–7, on which I suggest that the more one labors over the verbal expression of an idea, the more its language becomes transparent, so much so that that language more clearly reveals the idea beneath. This idea might form the basis of a good exercise. Take a sentence of your own (or you might ask students for one) in which you try to capture some essence, some insight, into humanity, our culture, the world, the universe. This might be called an “aphorism.” (This might be accessed best via a “secret spring” and then a review of previous “secret springs,” before using a rainmaker or prompt such as “What insight have you had, recently, about the ‘human condition?’”) Then, when everyone has shared his or hers, you can ask students to locate just one sentence, or perhaps two—or possibly craft some new one on the spot—and start working on these, revising, polishing, and smoothing:

It’s sort of like a craft project that requires you to smooth out some uneven, raw, and unpromising surface. You might struggle with it for hours, clearing away encrusted dirt and cobwebs, taking out a smudge or imperfection here, a blemish or stain there. Sometimes, though, if you’re lucky and after you’ve been laboring over the thing for hours or days, it reveals its true nature: it’s in fact a pane of glass or of crystalline rock, and now that you’ve got it Windex-squeaky smooth, you realize that the real discovery isn’t the surface-perfect thing itself, but what has suddenly emerged as visible, beneath or behind the thing you’ve been laboring over—namely, what you can see through it, and what others can also see. Maybe the best writing has this self-immolative quality. It metamorphoses into nothingness, as the things and ideas the writing refers to take on a shape and vitality independent of the words that summoned them up. (6–7)

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After students have worked for a few minutes, you can ask them to share their aphorisms. A quick “reflecting pool” might follow, in which students reflect (in writing) on the distance traveled over the course of their revisions.

Before starting this sequence, and this might be optional or might involve your own writing, your own epigrammatic tendencies rather than mine, you might offer a couple of paragraphs, such as I have on pp. 19–20, in which you strive for some insight into *la condition humaine*. How might this be tightened, modified, made more powerful, as it becomes more succinct? I think you want to emphasize the importance of arriving at a new idea or formulation, a shaping of words and ideas that helps people see things in a new light. Thus, when one student, after ten minutes of work, presented her epigram, “Fuck it,” I opined that that was not really good enough. Interestingly this student writes poetry and has kept in touch, sending me some of her poems from time to time, poems that are strong and original.

A less ambitious but, I think, still interesting streamwrite might emerge directly out of the quoted passage. “Have you ever had this experience yourself, of working hard on something and then discovering that the thing itself wasn’t as important as what you discovered ‘beneath it’?” Here is a response from one of my students:

The idea that writing is sort of this act of self discovery is a phenomenal idea. Throughout my life I have always used writing to express my thoughts. It helps you reveal the true nature of your thoughts digging into the depths of your brain to discover how you feel about an issue. In 12th grade I wrote a paper on the anatomy of the brain. Throughout the paper my mind raced on issues like where thoughts come from and free will despite not having anything to do with the project. I felt like a miner digging & digging discovering how I truly feel. I ended up getting an A on the paper but the journey is something I will never forget. (Eddie Farhi)

At some point early on, perhaps now, you might want to determine how much of the metalanguage of grammar your students already know. Most don’t know very much. And the learning curve is steep, I fear. But I’d start with the parts of speech. Each of these is defined, briefly, in the glossary, and the book’s chapters enlarge on, complicate, and sometimes challenge those definitions. Just the same, it is a good idea

to firm up understanding of the parts of speech. Much of the course emerging from or using this text is going to be redundant.

It's quite simple, in a way: students, like the general population, need to be told things many times before they stick—or before they can effectively disrupt and replace an existing paradigm, to draw on a term from Thomas Kuhn. In fact, and I know that many readers and teachers might shy from such a suggestion, you might want to tell your class about Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. One relevant section explores how paradigms are established and then abandoned, that is, how preexistent paradigms hold sway and can only be undermined or overturned by repeated disconfirmation. What Kuhn reports on is an experiment to have people identify playing cards held up to them. The experimenter holds up a card—a nine of diamonds, say—and the subject identifies it. The experimenter repeats this process half a dozen times, but then holds up a card that is not in a typical deck: a black five of hearts, for example. The subject identifies it as a five of spades. More “typical” playing cards follow, but more and more oddball cards are mixed in—a red king of clubs, a black ten of diamonds, a red two of spades. Eventually, the subject picks up on the oddity or abnormality of the deck, and starts identifying cards correctly—or rebels, becomes angry, and feels tricked or humiliated.

A similar situation occurs when you as the teacher of grammar or writing tell your students things such as “they” can only have a plural antecedent (at least, in American English, in 2017), or that “complement” is a different word from “compliment,” or, for that matter, that they really ought not join main clauses with only a comma, unless the comma is followed by a coordinating conjunction (that is, an “ABS OF NY” word). These ideas of are all potential paradigm busters.

I also think it is good to reveal what you have discovered or determined to be the most serious and prevalent student writing errors (on the sentence level, anyway): fused sentences, comma splices, semicolon use, sentence fragments, subject-verb nonagreement, and pronoun nonagreement. These issues are going to be discussed many times throughout the text, but providing a preview at this point might have the effect of preparing students for what's to come. Again, redundancy is not a liability in this course. In fact, students have probably already heard a lot of what you have to say about grammar and usage; it just has not been regularly reinforced by their other teachers, much less by the culture at large. Hence, it hasn't stuck.

To complicate the idea of subject-verb agreement, you need look no further than the example from Raines and Jerskey (24–28). Conveniently, these authors offer a couple of complexities. Discussion might ensue about the “real world examples,” for example, “None are boring” and the complex, ill-worded sentence from the *National Review*. Interestingly, one of the *New Yorker* editors who worked with the original article in which “none are boring” appeared defended her choice to use the plural verb. Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Mary Norris says that “to me, putting so much emphasis on the photos’ not being boring suggests that the critic was hoping for something boring. I would let it stand” (29). I agree that emphasizing the negative (the photos are NOT boring) does seem to imply that the author was expecting to possibly be bored by an exhibition of just photographs. However, whether one says “None is boring” or “None are boring” does not change that implication. You might ask your class their opinion about this.

In fact, I am sure that both “None are boring” and the complicated *National Review* sentence will spark controversy. For example, students usually maintain that “none is boring,” which I maintain should be used, simply “sounds funny,” and not “ha-ha” funny, I hasten to add. It does “sound funny,” one must agree, but part of the strategy for effective language use is to “sound funny” every now and again: something you can surely recommend somewhat unhesitatingly in cases where the funny-sounding sentence is actually grammatically accurate. (Later on, I will discuss the rhetorical value of “foregrounding,” or calling attention to phrasing, something that can be done by using the “correct” but “funny sounding” expression or form.) In this text, I do argue for the grammatical superiority of “none is” over “none are.” Now, whether you agree—or can get your students to agree—is another question altogether.

The *National Review* sentence is one that shows how a little modification or touching up can make a big difference. It also provides an example sentence that initially misleads and can be misread all too easily. The point I am trying to drive home is this: you as a writer need to be aware of how your sentences will be “taken in” by an imagined or projected reader. You need to place yourself in the position of an imagined reader. Then reread your sentences—trying to imagine how they might be misread, perhaps even by the most ornery and meaning-rejecting reader in the world.

Following along in the chapter, the soft power/hard power distinction seems a good one to make at this point, as it might allow you to back away briefly from the

intense scrutiny of single sentences (a slightly exhausting enterprise, that). Amiri Baraka's "Black Art" (30) has a real edge to it, too, a decided danger. Students find the poem to be quite powerful and even a bit scary. I'd try to wrap up the class with a streamwrite—possibly shared—about Baraka's poem. The rainmaker might be one of the following:

- Can a poem kill?
- Do you want poems that kill?
- Is "kill" being used metaphorically by Baraka? How so?
- Have you ever had the experience of reading a poem (or anything) that grabbed you by the throat? If so, tell us about it.

Sharing these might be tricky. I would collect them, but perhaps read your own to the class. After you have read the students' responses at home, you might select a few to read aloud—or have their authors read aloud—the next class session.

## Day Three

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### Introduction

**Formal Usage: Its Rules and Value**

**Language Use as a Reflection of Self and Social Class**

**“If you don’t have grammar, you don’t have sense”**

### Chapter One

**Why Learn the Parts of Speech?**

#### Day Three Lesson Plan

1. Work some more on the names of students. Catch up on five common errors. Collect any streaming not in hand.
2. Quiz possibility: “What political figure was ridiculed by the media because of the use of ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’?” “What book is quoted in which people don’t talk but instead just show each other objects?”
3. Grade quiz.
4. Ramping up in this course—we have started in an attempt to convince you that grammar matters; trying to get you in on the conversation—it’s not just “memorize this or else”; it’s “figure out how sentences work” or “figure out how grammar can be effectively used to aid and abet meaning.”
5. The multiple languages idea. Reviewer said people spending \$25 on a book or big bucks tuition for a course don’t want mealy mouthed statements that suggest things will change or are evolving and correctness will vary from situation to situation: they want answers. But I am simply offering a truth here: there is no “BEST” language; there are many versions of English, and each has degrees of appropriateness in any given situation.
6. Define *ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*. Why was Caroline Kennedy so mocked, do you think? SS card passage (37). (Secret spring; rainmaker: “What kind of ethos do you want to project? Shared.)
7. Read paragraph on pp. 38-39. Do you agree? Is language use an indicator of social class/position? (Another possible SW).
8. The Swift passage: read aloud. Maybe more than one voice on this.
9. The “that” sentence, which shows that one has to look beyond morphology and examine syntax.
10. SALUTE idea: subject (noun), predicate (verb), tense.

11. What do you make of “squish grammar” of Haj Ross? (Students will probably find Ross appealing and fresh, I note.) Talk about this. . . .

One of the many misconceptions that people have, I think, is that standard, formal English (sometimes abbreviated SWE) is only something honored or called for in the classroom. Outside of that, the idea is, no one really cares. However, I don't believe this is the case, and discussing the issue with students does prove valuable. For example, many online discussion boards and blogs will be regularly visited by very vigilant grammar geeks: they have no hesitation about chiding or even mocking the person who posts in less-than-perfect (often egregiously imperfect) English. Not only do we ignore what these hapless, grammatically challenged types say, but they are mocked as well. In a similar vein is this story: a student told me about a man she had met in a restaurant where she waitressed. He texted her and because he made a “to/too” error, she cut him off. I told my upper-level grammar class about this and, interestingly, the males all thought the woman was far too judgmental and quick to dismiss the potential suitor. But by contrast, the women in the class all thought it was perfectly appropriate to cut off anyone who could not keep “to” and “too” straight in a text—or who didn't think it worth the bother to do so.

International students, who are struggling to acquire a command of English, usually want the correct form of the language. They want models that they can imitate and that will allow them to be heard. After a certain period during which they struggle for basic communication, they often set the bar much higher than do native speakers, and strive for a genuine mastery.

Is SWE a “default” language, though? This seems to me a debatable issue. My impression is that people typically must employ several “dialects” of English (though “dialects” might be too strongly differentiating a word). They use one kind of English, perhaps, with their friends, one with their family, one at work (maybe), and one in the classroom. I am reminded of a time when, as a graduate student, I was sitting in a financial aid office, where I overheard another graduate student making a passionate appeal to the “greeter”: “I am more than willing to consider the widest imaginable spectrum of possibilities,” the student said. The greeter frowned.

The fact is, I argue (and this is an idea that students generally agree with), *you are your language*; or less metaphorically, your language represents who you are.

When presenting the idea of *ethos*, I usually take the time to introduce *logos* and *pathos* as well, just to provide students with three key terms from rhetoric.

One of the interesting things that might be explored is how, in high school, many of the most articulate and verbally forceful students were in fact rather poor performers in the classroom. They were the tough kids, the troublemakers, the loudmouths—and their language was effective because, in part, it clearly represented a self-defined *ethos*. They said whatever they wanted, since they didn't care about their grades and weren't afraid of anyone. I, and many like me, felt that we had to weigh our words much more carefully—we didn't want to offend our teachers, thus jeopardizing our chances to get into a good college—nor did we want to say to other students what we really thought, lest we end up with a fat lip and a black eye. I should add though that my worries about challenging fellow students were stronger my freshman and sophomore years, and my care with teachers increased as I approached graduation. By the time I reached senior year, then, I said pretty much what I wanted to other students. High school toughens one, I suppose.

This discussion could segue into a brief look at the material about Caroline Kennedy (35–36). Ms. Kennedy's language clearly did not convey a confident or impressive *ethos*, and it probably never will in a public arena. One might contrast the supremely confident language of Donald J. Trump who, by his own admission, is wealthy enough not to care whether people fund him or love him or voted for him or not. But the *ethos* his language use projects, we might easily discern, is on the one hand quite hilarious but, on the other—as it propelled him into the presidency—nothing short of terrifying. Indeed, it is his language-created *ethos* that the voters should have assembled and been wary of. I guess the big question is why they did not do this. People don't pay enough attention to language, I fear.

Students might streamwrite at this point, writing to the rainmaker, “What kind of *ethos* do you want your language and writing to convey?” which will get them thinking about both *ethos* and their imagined audience. Another option might be “Does language reflect social class?”

Audience, perhaps the crucial concept underlying rhetorical ideas, comes to the fore again in my discussion of the “S.S. card.” I have tried out this quotation on many audiences, and I get varying responses. For some, “SS” means “social security.” But others contend that “SS means Nazis.” Clearly, then for some audiences “SS” means

one thing, and for other audiences, it means something rather different. Streamwrite: Can you think of another example or two of such disjunctive understanding?

Chapter One opens with a discussion of Jonathan Swift's "sages" who have invented a "show and tell" variation of language. They just show things in order to communicate (45-46). One way into this might be a discussion of the various "emojis" or "labels" available to students as aids to texting or tweeting. This generation has resources that help them convert the nonverbal into a message. Xu Bin's work also might be evoked, his novel *Book from the Ground* told entirely in symbols and drawings being a good example of both how an image-based language might arise and how it inevitably has certain limitations. You might offer an excerpt for students to translate. One can be found at the following link: <http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/always-pioneer-artist-xu-bing-now-takes-novel-beyond-written-word>

I have recently tried the following: Have students get into pairs. With their partners, they will need to amass as many personal possessions as they can, with the goal of "communicating" using just these items (as do Swift's "sages"). But if you are not among the bravest of instructors—that is, if you are like me—you might shy from requiring/cajoling students to perform. In that case, you could have students work with the Swift passage. First, they might read it aloud. I'd go around the room, each student reading a couple of sentences. Then I'd have them read it again. Sometimes I use what I call a "rip tide" rainmaker, in which they tear the text apart, reading a sentence or line or word here, another one, there, in haphazard fashion. This often has a stunning impact, as such a strange, nonsequential presentation ends up conveying a slightly different meaning but complementary meaning to the text, one that deepens the experience of reading.

Then, students could speculate, again, in writing, on what Swift is getting at in the passage. My own interpretation, which follows the quoted passage, is one that some colleagues who have used my book have told me they think I've got all wrong. Here is what the critic Stanley Fish says about the passage:

What Swift is telling us with his characteristic wit is that the dream of doing without words will never be realized as long as we desire to produce complex statements rather than mere lists. Language is not a

handmaiden to perception; it *is* perception; it gives shape to what would otherwise be inert and dead. The shaping power of language cannot be avoided. We cannot choose to distance ourselves from it. We can only choose to employ it in one way rather than another. (42)

My angle differs somewhat from Fish's. But if you have students streamwrite and share their work (again, see page 307 for guidelines I recommend), make sure you join in the conversation, and of course feel free to disagree with me—or with Stanley Fish. How all this ties into grammar might need some emphasis. In the “showing things” scenario that Swift imagines, nouns and only nouns exist, and other parts of speech remain mute. What effect might this have?

In an aside, you might discuss the notion that nouns can be verbs, and that many words can function as more than one part of speech. The example I use is as follows:

He said that that that that that student used was wrong.

“That” functions in several different ways here: as relative pronoun, adjective, noun, relative pronoun, and adjective. Even if students cannot at this point identify the parts of speech, they will probably be able to ascertain that the word “that” seems to have multiple functions.

John Robert Ross's “squish grammar” makes for an interesting endnote. You might, if you like, photocopy or excerpt a section of Ross's writing on the subject, though it will be difficult, I expect, for many students to grasp. I would work first with what is in the text (48), attempting to explain Ross's idea. I think students are sharp enough, too, to streamwrite to Ross's quoted passage, explaining as best they can the basis for his squish grammar. One useful takeaway message is that grammar is not apodictic. There are multiple possible ways of describing how our language works—language, that is, preceded grammar. And Ross's “activity level” or degree of “warmth,” is attractive and intuitive. Nouns are cold, inert (as are pronouns). Prepositions suggest placement or relation, so have more by way of warmth. Adjectives add color and specificity to nouns. Participles are adjectival, but being derived from verbs, convey more activity than straight adjectives. And verbs are active, vital, hot, alive.

## Day Four

### Chapter One—Finish

#### Lesson Plan—Day Four

1. Quiz: What is my pet peeve about gerunds? Or, what is wrong with Tony Blair’s sentence? Or maybe: when does one use the subjunctive mode?
2. Prescriptive vs. descriptive grammar: brief presentation. Morality—absolutist v relativist.
3. Streamwrite: secret spring.
4. SW: How should we deal with the prescriptive/descriptive conflict? Shared.
5. Types of verb issues, as outlined in chapter; take one by one, assigning each to a pair of students, so that they can identify the problem represented and offer a way to solve it: here you are putting the students under quite a bit of pressure, as they will need to quickly prepare something and perform publicly. But you will need to do this to fight the steep learning curve many face.
  - Indefinite pronouns, such as “none” (read from Quirk and Greenbaum)
  - Intervening prepositional phrase issue
  - There is/there are OK in speech?
  - Unusual cases: conjoined subjects that are not plural; correlative constructions
  - Passive v. active
  - Appositives—nonassertive equivalence
  - Gerunds; participles
  - Possessive before gerunds
  - Split infinitives
  - Perfective forms
  - Mood or mode
6. Presentation/discussion of Speech Act Theory and its importance.

At some point, you might want to discuss the possibly vexing issue of “prescriptive” vs. “descriptive” grammar. Throughout *One Day* I argue for both types at once, and you have to make it clear what that argument is calling for. Undergirding effective communication to a wide range of audiences—and useful for preventing the stigmatization of a writer—is the prescriptive grammar laid out in this text and many

others. I argue that “none” is singular, for example, and that “they” should not refer to a singular antecedent. Yet at the same time you have to recognize the importance of a descriptive strategy or linguistic stance: it makes sense to describe the language as it is used not just by academics and professionals but by the average person. The language is evolving daily, and this handbook at least touches on places where the language is most actively evolving. This evolution ought not to be ignored by the teacher of English. And while I’m not saying we should cave to popular usage or opinion, we need to be aware of it, since that might have had a greater influence on students than formal English instruction. In short, we want to provide a prescriptivist grammar that students can deviate from (when needs be), along with a sense of where that grammar’s expansion joints exist, or (to use a more organic metaphor) where its newest offshoots will grow.

Subject-verb agreement isn’t an area, though, where prescriptivists and descriptivists diverge all that much. I’ve already discussed the problems with indefinite pronouns like “none,” “no one,” or “everyone.” And so I suggest later in the book that sometimes “everyone” or “everybody” will take a plural pronoun even in the prescriptivist grammar. This seems to happen when there is a change of clauses:

Everyone was shouting, so I told them to quiet down.

Everyone has his or her personal canon of literature.

Everyone is tired.

❓ Everyone are tired.

\* Everyone was shouting, so I told him or her to be quiet.

Most readers, even prescriptivists, would likely agree that the first three sentences are correct and the last two are nonstandard.

Keep in mind that it’s a good bet that some of your students won’t know what a subject and predicate are. You might go over these concepts, using multiple examples. For a group of words to be a sentence, what’s necessary are a noun phrase, a verb phrase (one that “agrees with” that noun phrase), and a tense. Some of these concepts might need fleshing out, and it would be useful to do so citing examples.

S-V agreement differs somewhat in British and American English. British writers, for example, use plural verbs with names of corporations, as in “Ford are predicting an increase in sales.” In U.S. English, a singular verb is standard (“Ford is predicting . . .”).

But on both sides of the Atlantic, many basic rules prevail, and these form the bulk of chapter 1. I would try to emphasize not so much a blind adherence to a memorized set of rules, but developing in students an internal understanding of the notion that a sentence’s subject really needs to predict and to determine its verb. When the two elements match up—that is, when they “agree”—this has the effect of both adhering to a standard usage (not setting off any alarm bells by deviation from a perceived norm) and reminding the reader of at least one significant aspect of the subject: whether it is singular or plural.

The notion of intervening elements, that is, prepositional phrases, which do not affect the “number” of the verb, can be examined via the example sentences in the text and also by providing simpler ones of your own, such as the following:

John as well as Jim is happy today.

John and Jim are happy today.

? John as well as Jim are happy today.

\* John and Jim is happy today.

You might speculate on why this particular construction has emerged, a speculation that will certainly touch on identifying the group of words called prepositions, showing how prepositional phrases usually function as modifiers (adjectivally or adverbially), and, finally, relating their intervention between subject and verb as resembling, to an extent, a parenthetical use:

John as well as Martha is running for president of the union.

A group of protesters is parading outside our office building.

The boxed element is not really the sentence’s main idea. What does it modify, though, in the first sentence? “Is” or “John”? It modifies “John.” (“Modify” isn’t quite the right word here, I know.) The speaker of the sentence is trying to get across an idea of a noun phrase (“John” plus something else), and he or she offers the single proper noun,

John. But there is a little addendum to it, a sort of minor add-on to that subject, not so important an element so as to make it plural, but a kind of adjunctive piece: “as well as Martha.” It’s so adjunctive and parenthetical that it can’t really be counted as part of the subject, at least not when determining what verb to use. The sentence is really about John’s running for president. The fact that Martha is, too, is sort of slipped in there almost as if the audience knew that fact already, so it didn’t need to be part of the subject, as it would be in “John and Martha are running for president.” In that case we have something resembling equality between John and Martha, or between the knowledge that a perceived audience might have of John’s and Martha’s career dreams. I’ll let you deal with the second example sentence, which might in fact be more difficult for students but the explanation of which follows the same lines as the “John as well as Martha” sentence.

“There is” and “there are” prove tricky for many speakers and writers because the subject follows the verb. One must think ahead when using this construction, a plan that is easier to exercise on paper than orally, as a rule. I note that a few of my examples are of oral language, and hence are more “forgivable” than subject-verb nonagreement in writing.

“A lot” fits into a slightly different category. We need to determine conceptual plurality or singularity. “A lot of ideas are good” is fine. “A lot of weight is placed on grades” also works. If the object of the preposition is plural (usually ending in an “s,” but not always: ideas, dollars, people), then a plural verb is needed with “a lot.” To state the obvious, if it’s not something plural, it takes a singular verb. The use of “a lot” with “there is/there are” compounds two slightly difficult issues, that is, the varying number of “a lot” and the inverted sentence order of the “there is/there are” construction (v-s-o rather than s-v-o).

The major difficulty of subject-verb agreement emerges in trying to determine, firmly and confidently, if a subject is singular or plural. Can a three-part entity be singular? Yes, it can: “A trio is here.” “Dewey, Cheatum, and Howe is a terrible law firm.” Conjoined actions are singular if tightly connected: “Running and hiding is not the best tactic for a presidential candidate.” But if the two elements are disconnected, then they need to take a plural verb: “Running for the train and doing my taxes are the two things I hate the most.”

Correlative constructions (not only . . . but; either . . . or; neither . . . nor) are interesting from an academic perspective but not really used very often in popular discourse. They are a good topic to discuss, though, in a grammar class, because they allow you as the teacher to talk about how the subject of a sentence can be rather complex. English allows, that is, for a splitting of the subject into two parts. Conveniently (but maybe not logically), the verb agrees with the part of the subject closest to it. You might (in a streamwrite) have students generate a page or so of correlative constructions, and then share them with the class. But for the most part, subject-verb agreement “exercises” in a class tend toward discussion, Q/A, and lecture or brief presentation. These should be interspersed with more “hands on” work, either with students generating their own sentences or analyzing the structure of published materials.

Lending itself more to actual writing practice, however, is the concept of voice. What effect on one’s writing might “passivizing” have? Here, you can have students streamwrite to a rainmaker they all can identify with, one I use often: “X makes me mad.” Then you can have them passivize their sentences and share aloud a section of both. What is the effect of passivization?

A prelude to this could be presentation of the gruesome DiGirolamo story (68–71) as it appears in the *Trentonian*. What function does passivizing perform? Note that one can use passive in a standard s-v-o form.

Juana hit the ball.

The ball was hit by Juana.

What was the object in the first sentence becomes the subject in the second, but the sentences mean more or less exactly the same thing. I try this out on students to see if they agree the sentences are equivalent. If they are not equivalent, then how do they differ? When would you use one form rather than the other? Is the active always and inevitably preferable?

One of the fun and exciting things about English is how it uses modifiers so complexly. On the board, I might go over with the class, taking suggestions as they come, what sorts of modifiers we have: adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases . . . these come first. But an apposition is also a form of modification, of assertion in a

mild, subtle way. (Other modifiers include relative clauses and participial phrases.) Can students generate a sentence using an appositive that offers a nonassertive equivalence of some subtlety and or danger? Can they detect the differences between the following?

Trump is a man who is possibly the most dangerous politician to have arrived on the scene since Joseph McCarthy. We should fear him.

Trump, possibly the most dangerous politician since Joseph McCarthy, should be feared.

These shades-of-meaning differences are crucial to master if students want to be effective writers.

The gerund is less spectacular. I include a possibly too long section on possessives before a gerund (“*His wanting* to be happy made him sad”). If I revise this book, I plan to trim this section and also suggest that in some cases using a possessive prior to a gerund is not a good idea:

❖ The problem with that’s surveying is unclear.

The problem with that surveying is unclear.

I don’t think many students or native speakers in general would come up with a sentence with a possessive form of “that,” but one needs to be clear that possessive forms are only necessary in certain words that appear prior to gerunds.

But gerunds might be interesting to students insofar as they are verb forms that function as nouns. Again, the point to make would be that to figure out a sentence, one needs to look at the syntax, not just morphology. And many students resist the whole concept of the gerund. For example, the sentence “Seeing is believing,” which contains two gerunds, confuses many students until we can get them to think of that sentence as being phrased as follows: “The act of seeing is equivalent to the act of believing.”

Curiously, *-ing* words, which function as present continuous verbs and also as nouns (gerunds), can be participles and function adjectivally as well (older grammar handbooks declared that the participle was a separate part of speech, not an adjective,

I might point out). For example, “a troubling situation” includes the present participle of the verb “to trouble.” I try to persuade students that any verb can be made into an adjectival (participial) form. I recently asked for suggestions, and once students said, “How about ‘to murder?’” This inspired some mirth from his classmates. But I took the high road. First I offer a gerund:

Murdering small animals is indicative of psychological problems.

Now, a participle in the past:

A murdered desire often resurfaces over time.

More difficult to generate is a present participial form, but here is one for discussion:

Murdering aliens seized the whole planet.

In this last sentence, the participle is a synonym for “murderous.”

One of the difficulties of participles, especially the past participle, is that people who have learned English by hearing it spoken often will drop the terminal “d” or “ed” when they write out the participial forms. So this is something you will have to attend to, especially with nonnative speakers.

Much handwringing has taken place over the splitting of infinitives. First, of course, you will need to define (or get a student to define) an infinitive. This might not be as easy as it sounds, since many students are not exposed to any formal grammar in grade school or high school—nor a foreign language--so these terms are all new to them. Perhaps a nod to foreign languages would help, too, such as to one in which infinitives are not split, like Spanish. In Spanish, the infinitive “to go” is *ir*, and there is no splitting that. Hence, the *Star Trek* split infinitive, “To boldly go where no one has gone before” would not be a problem in Spanish: *para ir audazmente donde nadie ha ido antes*. In the text, however, I do suggest that sometimes unsplitting an infinitive has a salutary effect. I have never seen the idea broached in that form. You might simply ask students what they think. This could take a few steps:

1. Secret spring
2. Rainmaker: write sentences of a narrative but split each infinitive (try to include several—maybe 4-6)
3. Underline sentences with split infinitives
4. Rephrase these with unsplit infinitives
5. Insert back into original sentences
6. Share aloud the two versions of the narrative
7. Reflecting pool: Are split infinitives better, worse, or the same? What effect does the modification of infinitives have, if any?

It seems to me that you will probably discover students vastly prefer split infinitives to unsplit ones, but the experiment is yours to make. (Of course I am ignoring the more difficult issue of the fact that many people, among them some professors of English, will look down on a piece of writing if it includes split infinitives. Strunk and White continue their pervasive, not-always-salutary influence.)

The section on perfective forms requires some explanation from the teacher; I don't think its illustrations are immediately or intuitively graspable. This might be done in a brief presentation. But the discussion that could ensue might be extremely valuable: why do we use these tenses instead of simple ones? Are they really necessary, at any point, in our attempt to convey a meaning? It seems to me that they are, and that careful writers use them—have used them—quite regularly. These tenses convey information in addition to just “pastness,” “presentness,” or futurity: they suggest the duration or interval of time during which an action occurred—and when it started or ended. And this is often important.

Some typical examples might help. In 2016 the Chipotle Mexican Grill chain ran into trouble because some customers got food poisoning (the business ended up closing all of its stores to give employees instruction about new food safety measures, in fact). What does each of the following sentences imply?

I ate at Chipotle.

I have eaten at Chipotle.

I had eaten at Chipotle.

I will have eaten at Chipotle.

I eat at Chipotle.  
I will eat at Chipotle.  
I might eat at Chipotle.  
I could eat at Chipotle.  
I may eat at Chipotle.  
I should eat at Chipotle.

Linguistic implicature is quite important. What one says directly is one thing, but what one's words imply is often quite another. Without getting into the complexities of speech act theory, I do introduce the terms "perlocutionary force" and "illocutionary force" and show students how these two inflections of meaning can operate in a given rhetorical situation. (Perlocutionary force is what is *really* behind the words being spoken or written: "I'm tired" could mean, "I'm not interested in doing anything right now," for example. Illocutionary force is how the recipient might interpret or inflect what s/he perceives as the message beneath the words: Depending on the recipient, "you wouldn't understand" could mean, for example (to that listener), "Men are too insensitive to empathize with any complex emotion," or "people of your generation are just so out of it that they can't understand anything at all.") Examples of such usages could be gathered in a discussion, which might also direct itself toward exploring why such "forces" actually exist, whether that is a good thing, and whether or not they exist in other languages as well.

Chapter 1 ends on one of the most curious features of English: the notion of "mood," in particular, the subjunctive mood. Students can usually grasp indicative and imperative fairly well, but the subjunctive remains elusive for many. Proverbial expressions in which it occurs seem rare and/or stilted or foreign: "If it please the court," "as it were," "God save the Queen." And if Tony Blair is making mistakes with its use, how can students be expected to get it right? Well, Blair is a politician, not a writer. Probably an assistant wrote or edited his piece for *Time* and hypercorrected it, since Blair is (or was) such a famous person.

At any rate, a discussion of this mood, as well as the others mentioned on page 84 ("generalizing," "conditional," "potential," and "obligative" moods) might sensitize students to more complexities of the language. Some students will surely question my preference for simple past over Blair's subjunctive. "Europe looks as if it were acting in

concert,” they say, is contrary to fact—Europe only appeared to be, only looked, that way; it wasn’t really acting in concert. Yet I would opt for indicative, since “looked as if” already implies it really was not. Blair is talking about a past situation of something apparent, not something contrary to fact.

Dealing with large issues such as subject-verb agreement is needed as a prerequisite to most of the remainder of the text. Don’t be alarmed if many students cannot actually identify a subject or a verb. They see language not in such theoretical, naming-of-the-part type ways; instead, they tend to look at sentences or paragraphs as a gestalt. Or to borrow an idea from Gary Shteyngart, they tend not so much to read as to “scan a page for information,” as if it were a computer screen. The “micro” details therefore tend to be lost in the “macro” of the message as an entirety.

So you might simply offer some practice. Take a paragraph of writing, and remove all the capital letters and punctuation. Students should be able to locate subjects and verbs. Since the sentences or paragraph existed first (before you eviscerated it of its punctuation), it should be fairly obvious where sentences begin and end, where caps need to be inserted, where a semicolon might make sense. I get the students to search for what John Robert Ross calls “the ultimate zero of this space,” namely, nouns. These should be fairly easy to locate. Subject pronouns (I, you, he/she, we, they) also can be swiftly discerned. And since the usual pattern of English is s-v-o, a goodly number of those nouns and pronouns will be subjects (though of course some might be objects, or in the case of nouns, appositives). Once students have located the nouns, the sentences fall into place fairly well. A list of subordinating words will help students locate dependent clauses (p. 117).

While such an exercise might seem tedious to some students, it could well be the most useful thing, for many others, provided by your course. To teach sentence boundary recognition is a great accomplishment, since the ability to recognize sentence boundaries is, for many people, so natural as to be almost innate. And I suppose it’s important to add that this kind of exercise needs to be repeated several times throughout the course.

Here are a couple of examples of prose (taken from my own writing) that I have stripped of punctuation:

When I was a child my father an amateur historian specializing in World War I bought a book about the Battle of Belleau Wood its title caught my eye *Do You Want to Live Forever* I remember thinking “well what would be wrong with that” the rhetorical question of wanting to live forever was typically posed to a fresh group of WWI conscripts as a way to remind them most of whom were going to die soon that no matter what happened they wouldn’t live forever anyway even my adolescent brain rejected that as sophistry though I didn’t have the name for it then

[or]

After the various arteries have been snipped tied off and reattached the surgeons will get the heart beating again and then close the ribcage wire together the sternum sew up the multiple layers of tissue they had to cut through and put some glue in to hold closed the long incision they’ll hope that the new conduits a jerry-rigged configuration that would do Rube Goldberg proud the organic equivalent of plumbing in the basement of an old house will function efficiently and smoothly at least for awhile five ten fifteen years twenty do I hear twenty twenty-five sold American

These are both quite simple ones to punctuate, but as the course goes on you can increase the level of complexity.

Sample student streamwrites: “What is a sentence?”

According to “One Day in the Life of the English Language,” a sentence is, usually, a combination of words structured as subject-verb-object. Although, this format can be changed, as in the case of the Jedi, and albeit a little strange-sounding, it can still produce a sentence. Sentences can consist of two words to forty words. Sentences can invoke emotion or be boring. A sentence is an abstract concept that can’t be fully described in sentences. Sentences must be seen as text or heard as sound to be recognized. Moreover, words must be arranged in such a way that they

make sense in order to be seen as a sentence. In written language, sentences must have correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar. However, as descriptive grammar suggests, sentence “rules” might be less strict when spoken. In fact, sentences can convey a different meaning when formally written than when informally read, as I am doing now. (Alexandra Badescu)

Having never questioned what a sentence is before, this seems a bit abnormal and abstract. Literally, a complete sentence would be one that has a subject and a verb and conveys a message. Whether the point of the sentence is to inform or command or anything in between doesn't matter. On a more artistic viewpoint, a sentence is the building block of communities, friendships and the world around us. Sentences are thrown around every day, and from those sentences, relationships are developed, class and status are verified. And so much more. I sound super pretentious right now. But the basic sentence leads to much more. (Michelle Zhang)

## Day Five

### Chapter Two

#### Words That Modify and Orient

##### Day Five Lesson Plan

1. “Business”: Possibly a quiz today? On adjectives and participles, perhaps?
2. Corrections and questions: Anyone have any of these? 3. Secret spring. Streamwrite: Carson quotation. What do you think of this? Everyone should read. Give an example of what C. means by “latches of being.”
4. 90–93; 102–8. Misplaced modifiers (adjs and advs). Go over these in class, trying to show students how these sentences might be misunderstood.
5. Gerunds and participles are not predicates. (From last class?)
6. Generation of adjective strings—this can be done in pairs (put on board the list that Celce and Larsen come up with, or else all the strings will be opinion adjs one after the other).
7. Relative clauses as another way of modifying. Restrictive v. non-restrictive.
8. Lumpers vs. splitters.
9. Conjunctive adverbs and the comma splice. This is hard for students, and will need to be revisited several times, no doubt. “However” and “although.”
10. Prepositions: the Empson angle on these. Maybe this could be something to streamwrite to as well. Why are poets so drawn to parts of speech?
11. A vs. an; thee vs. thø.

Anne Carson’s brief sentence about adjectives was quoted by a reviewer of this book as evidence that its author (me) was “smart,” which was nice, I suppose. But what is “special” about Carson’s comment on adjectives? How are adjectives the “latches of being”? Is that one of those hyperbolic statements that only poets can get away with? After having students do a “secret spring,” I would have them write to this very idea: Give an example of what Carson means by adjectives being “the latches of being.”

Adjectives, it needs to be stressed, have a tremendous potential for modifying. That is, they are not the “cold” nouns that John Robert Ross defines; they are hot, volatile. It’s almost as if they amount to a landmine or explosive charge which, placed proximate to another word, has the capacity to ignite it, blow it to flinders. If you can convey the explosive potential of adjectives, you will have done well. The idea is that

it's OK to have explosive, detonating language, but it needs to be a controlled explosion being offered, one that the writer is carefully engineering, methodically planning out.

Hence, adjectives need to be placed with word-bomb-squad-like care. They need to be near the very things they are intended to blow up—or to return to a less ordnance-dependent vocabulary, they need to be near the words they modify. If they are not, they end up distorting, confusing, or obscuring a sentence's meaning. The four examples of misplaced modifiers (pp. 90-93) are all memorable. I would go over them in class, one at a time, trying to get students to recognize what's wrong with them. While I know that it's true that no one ever mistakes these sentences' meanings for long, the idea, again, is that they evoke an absurd universe, and the evocation briefly delays—and possibly undermines—the sentence's communicative message.

As with the gerunds of chapter 1, participles present some difficulty for students. (Both of these suffer because the lexicon is off-putting, so part of your job is to try to naturalize that vocabulary.) Both gerunds and participles are “verbals,” that is, words made from verbs but not functioning *qua* verbs. Participles typically function, you need to stress, as adjectives. Like gerunds, they cannot take the place of a predicate in a sentence:

- \* Waiting to go to the store.
- \* Caught in the act.
- \* Pleased by the situation.
- \* Running for office.

Perhaps the simplest test, one for students unable to distinguish a full sentence from a fragment, is this: Does the sentence have a *tense*? Or, like the four fragments above, is it tenseless unless and until one adds words around it? (He was waiting to go to the store. He is waiting to go to the store. He will be waiting to go to the store. He should have been waiting . . . etc.). If there is no tense, or if the tense is indeterminate, then we probably do not have a sentence.

This will be trickier with one-word commands, such as “Hide!” or interjections (“Yikes!”) since these are actually full sentences of a kind, though usually the subject of

a command (“you”) is implicit, and interjections such as “Yikes!” do not typically appear in formal discursive writing.

I’d like to look at the long quotation on page 93, too, to attempt to piece out the verbs and the verbals. Can this quotation be improved by rephrasing? There is some dispute among linguists as to whether some verbals like the ones included here are actually verbs, but I would not get into that issue in a beginning course on grammar or in a composition course. Again, I emphasize that regular-form participles need to include the -ed suffix, as this is often elided in the written language of “ear learners” of English.

A somewhat more creative endeavor would be to get students to generate adjective strings. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman say that these recur in a more or less standard sequence (see p. 95), but maybe that’s not always the case. Can your students naturally generate a seven-adjective string? This would be fun to do in pairs—and then to exchange papers and decide on the best order. Is Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s the best? Did you, as it were (you might ask students), come up with a different order? Bolaño’s six-adjective string (96) might be a good place to start with a real-world example. Write on the board the list of things adjectives should “do” (origin, color, opinion, etc.) or else students will tend to generate strings of “opinions”—and these kinds of strings lack effectiveness, seem, in fact, redundant when used in formal prose.

Another method of modification (and you might review the thus-far-presented list of possibilities, namely, adjectives, appositives, participial phrases) is via relative clauses (97). These clauses are difficult since they can be either restrictive or nonrestrictive. So perhaps the first order of grammatical business should be to differentiate these two major categories. The usual explanation—“restrictive” means “essential” to the meaning of the sentence—does not really help all that much. It might be good to see sentences as composed of “word chunks.” What word chunks are necessary to convey the message? What is the message, in fact? One might imagine a handout with twenty-five or so sentences, each containing a relative clause. Students would have to decide which ones are restrictive and which not. Instead of giving them this, though, I have them generate it as a class. The challenge is that it needs to be more than just a list of sentences: it needs to be a coherent group of paragraphs, but each sentence in them needs to contain a relative clause or two.

Let me explain this further. “What,” you could ask, “would you like to write a paper about today?” Here you need to steer students away from the predictable, such as current events or perennial topics of debate. Once, when I was working for ETS, one of the people who reviewed the “items” or questions I generated responded positively to a sentence I’d written on eggplants. He wrote, “I love items about vegetables.” So maybe vegetables would be a good place to start. Try to get the class’s feel for the topic, and offer an opening sentence. Try to make it surprising, maybe even a little shocking. Pass that on to the first student, who will add one. Keep in mind that you should remind them that the sentence they add needs to contain a relative clause or two. The end result should be both informative and humorous. You need to duplicate the result to hand out during the next class meeting, during which you might also work with the students to determine which relative clauses are restrictive (“essential”) and which are nonrestrictive or nonessential.

The restrictive/nonrestrictive dichotomy is important for several reasons: First, deciding which clauses are restrictive and which are not will dictate punctuation—at least to an extent—in particular, the placement of the comma:

She hated guys who were messy. (restrictive)

She hated guys, who were messy. (nonrestrictive)

My brother, Grant, died six years ago. (nonrestrictive: speaker has but one brother)

My brother Grant died six years ago. (restrictive: speaker has more than one brother)

Relative clauses, which start with a relative pronoun and function adjectivally, can be restrictive or nonrestrictive:

I like the car that is green. (restrictive)

I like the car, which is green. (nonrestrictive)

Note that in the first sentence, the car being referred to as the one “liked” is evidently one of a group of varicolored cars, maybe on a used or new car lot. It’s likely the only green car, and the sentence might be restated (more typically) as “I like the green car.”

The second sentence just adds the color information. The important element of that sentence is “I like the car.” The color information is only an extra chunk that’s been added on.

I usually do spend some time on the “one of the”/ “only one of the” distinction. “One of those people who are always vying for a place in line” can be explained by looking at the adjective (relative) clause (“who are always vying for”) and figuring out what it modifies. It modifies “people,” so it follows the usual pattern with these constructions and is plural—hence taking a plural verb form (“are”). “Only one of the” is different. In the sentence, “It was the only one of the games that was crucial,” you have to ask, “What does ‘that was crucial’ modify?” My guess is that “the only one” is being modified here. Even if we make the relative clause nonrestrictive, the number stays singular; unfortunately the sentence kind of falls apart when we do this:

It was the only one of the games, which was crucial.

This is not wrong, but its meaning seems to me problematic. “The only one” almost always takes a relative clause that’s restrictive and uses a singular verb.

The section on adverb placement and misplaced modifiers resembles the one on adjective misplacements, and they might be dealt with together, since the book makes essentially the same point about both: make sure you clearly delineate what’s being modified. In class, I go over each of these issues (or at least the “used needles daily” and “getting laid in Brooklyn” examples), asking students if (a) it really makes any difference in terms of communication; and (b) how to improve the sentences. This often involves imagining the “best” sentence. (One sobering piece of information I discovered is that students don’t know what “getting laid” means. One said, “It means you lie down with a person, as in ‘I lay with her.’” It’s your choice whether or not you want to enlighten them on this matter.)

At this point, a distinction I like to bring up is that between “levelers” and “sharpeners” (or “lumpers” and “splitters”). The general idea is that “levelers” or “lumpers” tend to lump all things of a kind together. By contrast, “sharpeners” or “splitters” tend to sharpen or accentuate differences, even tiny ones. They split things into many categories and subcategories. They make ultrafine distinctions. The example I give in the text is one describing watches, but it seems to me that whatever people

have a great interest in—a collection, a practice, a hobby, a sport, a favorite potable or comestible—they enrich via making splitter/sharpener distinctions. So a lumper might say, “It was just a car,” but a splitter (who was into cars) would say “It was a supercharged, bizzarini red Z06 Corvette with OZ racing wheels.” On the other hand, some people tend to be lumpers in general, even about things they like, and some tend to make fine distinctions simply because it is their habit of mind. It’s not a bad habit of mind to cultivate, I might add—but if overdone might be problematic.

Conjunctive adverbs, which you might have alluded to earlier in the term, deserve another look here, too. “However” is especially troublesome, since it can also function as a concessive conjunction. This function, it’s important to note, cannot be fulfilled by “although.”

I was tired. However, I pressed on.

\* I was tired. Although, I pressed on.

She raised her hand. However, that was not necessary.

\* She raised her hand. Although, that was not necessary. [fragment]

She raised her hand, although that was not necessary.

\* She raised her hand, however that was not necessary. [comma splice]

Starting a sentence with “although,” even with a comma after it, makes the following clause subordinate. Hence, the above “although”-openers lead to sentence fragments. I added the last two example sentences for examples of what “although” can do that “however” cannot.

The comma splice and fused sentence are such common, ubiquitous, even endemic student errors that it’s important, I think, to discuss them several times throughout the semester. (This is why I dedicate at least three sections of the book to this problem.) The problem is often one involving a “pause,” and on occasion the pause between sentences seems so brief that it warrants just a comma. You will have to disabuse students of the “pause” rule—it simply is not a sufficiently reliable indicator of punctuation. Sometimes, it’s all we have to go on (see Rule One of comma use, e.g., “a natural pause”), but usually there are more solid syntactic reasons for comma usage, that is, things more reliable and specific than the “pause” suggestion.

At this point, it's useful to again remind students of the coordinating conjunctions and the mnemonic ABSOFNY that they might use to remember them. These words, along with a comma, can join main clauses. Some conjunctions make more sense to use in certain situations than do others.

He strove to succeed, for that was what he was trained to do.

❓ He strove to succeed, but that was what he was trained to do.

The second sentence is syntactically correct but semantically confused. I also would stress that in the MC, cc MC construction, the comma is really necessary and important, though more and more it's being omitted by contemporary writers, who (perhaps) want their prose to replicate the headlong rush of our lives.

Subordinating conjunctions, examples of which are listed on p. 117, also form a useful group of words to get students familiar with. The text does not emphasize the following, but you should provide examples of this: sometimes a subordinating conjunction precedes a fragment, and these can attach to a main clause (this is called an "absolute construction"):

Despite his not having been very successful, he was still a happy man.

Perhaps students could be enjoined to generate an "absolute construction" like the "despite not having been . . ." one above.

As far as prepositions and prepositional phrases, my suggestion here is more stylistic than grammatical: limiting the number of prepositional phrases makes sentences flow more smoothly. Preposition-free sentences tend to be in the active voice (prepositional phrases tend to invite the passive), and they rely less heavily on nominalizations (like that one). Many students think that more words and longer words are better, but I view this as a gross misconception, and the use of such verbal phlegm only blocks the path to getting ideas out of their systems and to an eager, or at least, waiting, audience.

But prepositions are more complex than one might imagine, and you shouldn't mention them only to say one should avoid them. Let me end this section with a quotation from William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930):

The English prepositions, for example, from being used in so many ways and in combination with so many verbs, have acquired not so much a number of meanings as a body of meaning continuous in several dimensions; a tool-like quality, at once thin, easy to the hand, and weighty, which a mere statement of their variety does not convey. (8)

I think Empson is on to something, but I would let students streamwrite to this quotation, maybe figuring it out as a group.

Here are two student streamwrites about Empson:

Empson means that prepositions are not used to accomplish one particular goal. Prepositions have a wide variety of uses, and the same preposition can convey an entirely different thought in different situations. He compares it to a tool. While a hammer is made the same way every time, the different uses for a hammer are infinite. There aren't hammers tailor made for every single different task because the same hammer can accomplish many tasks. (Parwiz Sultany)

The description that Empson gives to prepositions appears to mean that it's not simply a word that gives a meaning and is bound to certain extents, but can be adjusted to fit various situations and through its own power changes the meaning/idea that was there before. I believe that he is trying to say that if one modifies the modifier, they can create further change with further meaning. Basically, it urges one to use creative and diverse thinking in order to portray an idea to its utmost potential. (Roman Glavatskieh)

## Day Six

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### Chapter Three

#### Pronouns

##### Day Six Lesson Plan

1. Return of papers, comment on them.
2. Catch up on material from last week, if any. You might go over all the concepts the course has covered thus far. Hard concepts to grasp; Empson on prepositions; concept of the restrictive v. nonrestrictive clause.
3. Pronouns. Various types—review.
4. Case problems. Cellphone novel use (150).
5. Pronoun antecedent clarity issues. Lydia Davis (139–40); Wittgenstein (140); Craig on mortgage bankers (142); Gibbs on Palin (143); Weisbrod on doctors (144); Medina on statue (146); violent examples (147); movie example (150).
6. Correct but awkward-sounding pronouns (152 ff.).
7. Secret spring.
8. Streamwrite: What is the value of correctness in a Digital Age? If your teachers don't know “correct” English, why should you? Read aloud answers. (Much of the course seeks to convince students of the value of correct grammar.)
9. Indefinite pronouns (155–56).
10. Who/whom (157ff).
11. *I* and *you* in formal prose (160).
12. Gender biased language (161–68). Look at examples on p. 162. Singular they.

How do we differentiate pronouns? There are obviously many different classes of pronouns: subject, object, reflexive, and so on. The idea is that their function and placement in a sentence determines which form we need to use. The problems that confused pronoun case causes are not all that onerous, but the wrong case is, I contend, a mark that stigmatizes a careless writer. Perhaps the most egregious situations occur when people use the object pronoun when the subject pronoun is called for or neglect to use object pronouns when the pronoun is the receiver (so to say) of the action. “Bring your completed exam to the secretary or I,” or “Me and him went to the store” are common erroneous constructions. You might want to write one

or both of these on the board and have students correct them. The first could be seen as an example of hypercorrectness. And as to the second, it is interesting to hear students explain why they prefer not to say “He and I went to the store.” There seems to be a sort of prejudice against that kind of correct form.

The antecedent problem, however, is also large. You need to be very careful that the projected reader understands swiftly and even intuitively what the antecedent of your pronoun is. That imagined reader (you need to realize) isn’t someone likely to enjoy going back to parse your sentences to determine who a wayward “he” might be referring to. Readers are lazy. They want information that they can access effectively served up to them swiftly. Sometimes the problem emerges because there are >1 possible antecedents. In the examples in the text, that is the case with both of the “bankers” sentences and the “sonar” sentence (p. 142). There is no rule saying the nearest noun is always a pronominal antecedent, so a sentence structure has to clearly show which noun is actually functioning as an antecedent. Both the bankers and sonar sentences are comprehensible, of course, and a reader can probably figure out the most logical antecedent. But it takes extra work. In Nancy Gibbs’s article, from which I draw a quotation (p.143), the pronouns are out of control. I would work with students, using these three sentences to start, and choosing a few of the following five or six to work through. These are not simple examples such as what you will find in most grammar handbooks—they are “real-world” prose. Note that students will defend the writers, who in some ways follow a “student-prose” model, one relying on its readers to make sense of hastily composed, “youknowwhatImean” prose.

I include a small section on “fronting,” not so much because it’s all that common, but because I want students to think about varying their sentence structure. I know that exceeds the boundaries of a class on “grammar,” but in fact, stylistic concerns blend and blur into grammatical ones, and as you get students to stretch themselves stylistically, they simultaneously expand their grammatical flexibility; they therefore have to attend more carefully to their sentences’ parts and functions.

Correct but awkward pronouns abound. “It is I,” or “This is she,” or “It’s we” are all following a grammatical rule, but they don’t sound “normal” in most social (rhetorical) situations. Students who use such constructions tend to be ridiculed or seen as especially pompous, but this is another situation in which you might underscore the speech/writing contrast. Perhaps students could provide examples of

other forms of “correct” English that they consciously avoid. One that came up in a recent class involves the use of the semicolon. I opined that it would be a useful mark of punctuation in “texts.” The students found that possibility hilarious. “No one uses semicolons in texts,” they assured me.

The problem you are faced with is enormous: what you represent, what you are arguing the importance of, and what you are holding your students to is seen by many of them as being totally out of step with the way language operates today. “Formal grammar” is called for less and less often, even in college classrooms. Many professors do not themselves feel it’s necessary to learn or teach the rules of punctuation and sentence structure. For many of them, their own writing careers have come to an end, and the practice of writing does not intrigue or interest them. Outside the classroom—and beyond the dreaded essay portion of the standardized test—there is little support to reinforce the value of what we’re teaching. How do we handle this situation?

I recommend addressing the issued head on. I’d have students streamwrite to the rainmaker “What is the ultimate value of correctness and linguistic exactitude in grammar and usage, especially in the Digital Age?” A good companion article for this comes from the *New York Times Book Review* (Jan. 5, 2016). Here is a link to Benjamin Moser’s piece “Are There Any Unforgivable Sins in Literature?": [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/books/review/are-there-any-unforgivable-sins-in-literature.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/books/review/are-there-any-unforgivable-sins-in-literature.html?_r=0). Moser argues that correct grammar is connected to an ethical society. “Precision of language,” he writes about Confucian society, “was therefore a question of public welfare.” Does he have a point? Is his argument sound or even credible in application to our own culture?

The who/whom issue emerges in every grammar and writing course, I expect. There is an easy “test” for which form to use (p. 157), but the larger issue remains: to what extent has “whom” fallen out of favor entirely? Why do we as writers want to preserve “whom”? (Or do we?) My answer is that it’s a viable form, especially when the word is a clear object of a preposition or sentence (“To whom do you wish to speak?”), and its continuation in these spots suggests it has a hold on us if for no other reason than that “who” is hard to say sometimes. I also suggest that a “relative pronoun delete” transformation often works wonders, as the example on p. 159 demonstrates, often simply erasing the problematic who/whom altogether but retaining sense.

Sometimes students will ask if they can use “I” or “you” in their papers. I say that it’s OK to use “I” sparingly, but I recommend avoiding the second person, since it is too obviously informal.

The last significant issue of the chapter on pronouns involves gender-biased language. “New” pronouns are often proposed, but none has really taken hold. Many journalists and media commentators use the “singular ‘they,’” as do persons (in reference to themselves) not wanting to identify themselves as either male or female. (Sample short biography: “Chris Henson is a writer. They live in Massachusetts, where they teach at Amherst College. They are working on a novel.”) It seems to me not far off for the male and female pronouns to be bypassed altogether—seen, maybe, as “cissexist” and replaced with the third-person, gender neutral “they,” “them,” and “their.” In a streamwrite or a discussion, you might have students speculate about what the consequences of such a shift might be. Is there any downside? And you also might note that in December 2015, the *Washington Post* declared as acceptable the “singular *they*,” and also named it “word of the year.”

Sample streamwrite:

*“In the Digital Age, is there still value in correctness of English?”*

*I don’t believe that the value of the correct use of the English language is gone. It’s true that formal English is being utilized less and less as more people turn to texting and social media. More concern is now placed on what you’re saying rather than how it’s said. This is true in everyday life, but the value of formal language is still there for a variety of situations. Anyone who wants to be professional in my field needs an understanding of how to accurately articulate their words. Otherwise, they won’t be able to demand the respect necessary to survive in, or even enter that field. Whether through speech or text, as in the form of an email or letter, the English language and how it’s applied can display just how serious one is. If someone isn’t proficient, it most likely comes off as carelessness or ignorance. (Christian Buonamassa)*

## Day Seven

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### Review for Exam

#### Day Seven Lesson Plan

1. Business of class: return papers that you have commented on.
2. Describe the midterm. Tell them how much it will count toward their grade.
3. Paragraphing: maybe introduce major concepts.
4. Secret spring.
5. Ralph Lauren letter: distribute and have students read aloud (at least two times).
6. Rainmaker: What's "wrong" with this letter?
7. Have student read their responses aloud.
8. Your response (handout).
9. Discussion of context of the letter to the paper and the whole publicity stunt. Is this a good way to "run a business"?
10. Questions about grammar, in preparation for the midterm.

Students are going to be somewhat nervous about the upcoming exam, so you should probably try to allay their fears as much as possible. They will have to have read the text and also will have to have internalized much of the "sentence sense" that good readers and writers acquire. The exam will provide them with a "real-world" passage of writing from which you will have removed the punctuation—and which you might also have modified in some ways to make ungrammatical. The students' job will be to "correct" this passage. In addition to that exercise, students will be required to write a brief essay expounding on some point or idea regarding usage, grammaticality, or the like. They need not necessarily agree with you or with the text, but they need to write in cogent, complete, accurate sentences, and they need to use full paragraphs—something that, technically, you have not yet taught them but which presumably they have some inkling of. (You might go over the main ideas about paragraphs, though—topic sentences, coherence, development, and cohesiveness.)

To get students working with "real-world," recent prose, I give them some sample, usually from a newspaper or magazine (but it could be from a book, if you would prefer, or a scholarly journal), that has some features worthy of their attention. Thus far in the course, you have covered issues related to things like "garden-path

sentences,” “absurd-universe” constructions, as well as subject-verb agreement, comma splices, modifiers, and all the parts of speech. Thus you have a lot you can test students on.

Here is an interesting advertisement I encountered in the *New York Times*. It’s an entire newspaper page, in large print, and in the form of a letter:

**Ralph Lauren**

September 14, 2016

Today, I am proud to share with you, for the first time ever, my new women’s collection right off the runway and into your lives. For me, this is the ultimate expression of luxury—offering you every look, every accessory, every handmade detail immediately in my flagship stores around the world and online.

From the very beginning, I’ve always designed with you in mind. You are changing the way you live and the way you want to shop, and we are changing with you and for you.

I distribute a copy of this to the class and simply ask them to comment on it in whatever way they wish. They might talk about its grammar, form, content, or language. (Note that this should be preceded by a “secret spring,” allowing students to sort of warm up their writing brain cells.)

Students should read aloud what they have come up with. Fundamentally, this is an “accurate” piece of writing, without terrible or glaring errors, but it still has some significant problems and issues. In particular, it provides an example of pronoun misuse, improper modification, and even “garden-path sentences.” It also seems to lack content. Here are the kinds of problems I saw, as reflected in my comments to Mr. Lauren’s piece:

## Ralph Lauren<sup>1</sup>

September 14, 2016

Today,<sup>2</sup> I am proud to share with you, for the first time ever,<sup>3</sup> my new women's collection right off the runway and into your lives.<sup>4 5</sup> For me,<sup>6</sup> this

1. A letter from Ralph Lauren—to whom is it addressed, though? It's in the *New York Times*, so I guess it's for readers of that paper. He just didn't want to take up the space that an inside address would add, maybe? The 89-word letter plus his signature takes an entire page, which has background color. What could this be about? What did it cost? (>\$150K).
2. A comma after "Today" seems to make the reader pause: something really important is being said or going to be said. This is a significant occasion. Yes, and it is today; today is *the* day. There's a real urgency here.
3. A phrase set off with commas, again one that doesn't really need to be set off. "For the first time ever" is not all that distinct as to require setting off, but doing so makes it portentous and weighty. Yes, this is the FIRST TIME. EVER! Make note of that, reader.
4. Is the collection new or is it for "new women"? Is this the first "new collection"? The sentence "Today, I am proud to share with you, for the first time ever, my new women's collection right off the runway and into your lives" strikes me as odd because syntactically you don't immediately know whether the modifier "right off the runway and into your lives" is modifying "share" or "collection." If it's "share," it's strange, because he's sharing it off the runway, but if it's collection, it's also strange because it's into your lives.
5. "Right off the runway" recalls an airport. Zoom. But, no: it's the runway of *fashion shows*. Of course. "Right off" it and "into your lives," implies that there's an easy conduit between those runways and my workaday existence, my humdrumosity. Yes, these two things can be connected, the hint is, and the way they connect is through . . . the "new women's collection"—a collection maybe for the "new women" surrounding us, or maybe a new collection for women who are not all that new after all but could be, like Ralph Lauren, old.

is the ultimate expression of luxury—offering you every look, every accessory, every handmade detail immediately in my flagship stores around the world and online.<sup>7,8</sup>

From the very beginning, I've always designed with you in mind. You are changing the way you live and the way you want to shop, and we are changing with you and for you.<sup>9</sup>

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6. Yes, the “for me” signals importance of the writer. Mr. Lauren: you are the measure, the judge, here, the final arbiter, no?

7. “Ultimate expression of luxury”? How about your classic car collection, valued at hundreds of millions? How about your collection of zillion dollar wristwatches? Aren't those a bit closer to that “ultimate expression of luxury”? Or is the “ultimate expression of luxury” a teensy bit of luxury doled out to half a billion consumers?

8. What does this “immediately” modify? “Offering,” which appears eight words ago? Or is it somehow connected to “detail”? There are “details” that are “immediately in” your “flagship stores”? Huh? What precisely is on offer here? What are you sharing? (Line one promises sharing.) There is no hotlink to a website, photos, or anything at all: just words (again, 89 of 'em).

9. The biblical “From the very beginning” suggests a kind of empyrean, godlike status. God designed humans, I suppose. Yet Ralph Lauren is a humble god, who's “always designed with you in mind.” A little rhyme there, I note. BTW, six “you's” appear in this short paragraph of 34 words. That's 17.6% “you.” I as the reader DO feel important and valued. It's really about ME! Is this saying, “OK, you shop online now, and my stuff will be online, too”? Why not say this directly? “Changing with you and for you” also has a sort of musical ring to it. Now it's “we.” Is this the “royal we” (“We are not amused”)? Like what's being “shared,” what's being “changed” is also obscure, offstage. This is a letter with no content, just posturing and posing. It spins and primps like a (very wealthy) fashion model, whose runway here is page A11 of the *New York Times*.

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The next day we get a little bit of context. Apparently, Lauren is describing an event he was planning for the end of fashion week. Vanessa Friedman writes about it in the September 15, 2016, online *New York Times*, in an article entitled “Ralph Lauren Stops Traffic”:

On the penultimate day (and the final night) of New York Fashion Week, Ralph Lauren shut down a stretch of Madison Avenue and cast his lot decisively with the see-now/shop-now, fashion-in-season-and-in-the-stores crusaders, whose cause—immediate gratification to reflect digital reality—has upended the traditional women’s wear season.

Three blocks away from the East 72nd Street limestone mansion commonly known as the Ralph Lauren store, a traffic sign warned motorists of “delays.” At the corner of East 71st Street, pedestrians trapped behind barriers vented their ire at waiting police officers or whipped out their cellphones to snap photographs of the structure just beyond: a transparent atrium constructed from 75 glass panels on the concrete just in front of the shop.

How high up in the city hierarchy did Mr. Lauren have to go to get the avenue closed? (Or at least half of it; one lane was still open for traffic.)

“To God,” he said.

What followed was a declaration of faith: In populism for the 1 Percent (they deserve it, too, apparently) and the need for evolution.

Select clients from around the world were invited to join the industry crowd, the Lauren family and assorted celebrities to perch on crisp cotton cushions atop sisal-lined bleachers. The sidewalk was the runway, and the store the set. “You are changing the way you live and the way you want to shop, and we are changing with you and for you,” read a note placed on every seat.

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This provides us some interesting context, but the actual text of the letter still remains somewhat problematic. In fact, it's a bit unclear in both his letter printed in the newspaper and the notes he placed on the seats just what it is he means.

At this point you might have your students streamwrite to this simple rainmaker: rewrite Lauren's letter, with an attempt to clarify, as if one were speaking to a fifth grader, what it is that is being conveyed.

Some of these might be read aloud, but I would warn students ahead of time that you planned to collect them.

At this point in the class, you probably should, if time permits, just answer more questions about usage and grammar. When I last taught this class prior to the exam, students asked about the subjunctive, about "squish grammar," and about the exact "format" of the exam—multiple choice, essay, fill-in-the-blank.

Here is a student's revision of Mr. Lauren's letter:

Dear Loyal Ladies,

I have walked down from Valhalla to share with you the spoils of the Gods. I bring a new fashion collection for the goddess within. Indulge in vestments that feel and look as if they were made solely for you, The Goddess of Fashion. You need not travel the rainbow bridge for these gifts. You only need visit one of our stores or journey to the magical world of the Internet.

Today, I am at your service, and these clothes are meant for you, your grace.

With Love,

R. L.

## Day Eight

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### Midterm

First Exam, English 2100, Fall 2016

Professor Cioffi

#### PART I: Grammar (100 points)

Instructions: After each boldfaced section, a number appears in square brackets. Indicate on the answer sheet how you would revise that boldfaced section. Sometimes there are multiple possible errors and multiple ways to correct them. Sometimes the boldfaced portion is correct. If it is correct, just say “correct.” If you know what’s wrong but can’t think of how to fix it, just indicate what the error is (“comma splice,” “incorrect pronoun reference,” etc.).

#### The Onslaught of the Skloafer: A Science Fictional Tale

A new **group of students have entered** [1] our college classrooms. They register for **courses but they attend** [2] only sporadically. They listen to **their earbuds, text or look out the** [3] window. They have a capacious store of excuses as to why they were late, missed four consecutive **classes, did not do their paper on time could not make it to the midterm** [4], did not do the reading, spent forty minutes on a “bathroom break,” or cannot participate in an in-class activity. **Each receive a lot of money to be students** [5]. **Full scholarships.** [6] **This new breed of new student, the professional scholarship-loafer—the “Skloafer.”** [7] These students’ job is **to relax to sit back and listen to the tunes to keep up with friends via texting,** [8]-and to do all this from the comfortable (or cramped) seat of a college classroom. They have **to occupy that seat else they** [9] wouldn’t be paid. But **no one require them** [10] to do much more than that.

It’s not exactly clear what the moral and educational careers of **the scholarship loafer looks like.** [11] The skloafer has to do some work to apply to colleges for admission and financial aid. And this also costs a bit, too, since most colleges charge application fees. This student also has **to get themselves to class and frequently they have to offer** [12] their professors long and elaborate explanations of their tardiness,

absences, late papers, plagiarizing, or the like. **Each explanation usually revolve around** [13] **some grave terrible awful problem** [14] in their families—an ill parent, a house burned down, a murdered relative, or visa issues.

Why do students do this? The answer is simple. They enjoy it. It's also lucrative. **College foot the bill for tuition but they also give additional financial aid, that is, hard cash.** [15, 16] **These additional dollars is definitely enough** [17] for students to live on. Some use the money for trips abroad. **Ski trips, sometimes, even to the Swiss Alps.** [18] Dress warm. **Some use them to pay for rent** [19]. **Or drugs.** [20] One might **think, that the scam run out when the students** [21, 22] flunk a lot of courses. But interestingly, **many colleges extends forgiveness to** [23] students who flunk courses. **They are flunk-out-proof.** [24] Even the scholarship loafers can frequently loaf along to a C or a B (possibly an A!). They often need simply to take **multiple choice tests, most of these are fairly easy to master** [25]. Eliminate the two **ridiculous answers and then guess between the remaining two,**[26] the less likely one being almost surely the right answer. Thus, **the scholarship loafer “succeed” in many classes.** [27] **Paper-heavy courses are a bit problematic but at present papers can be purchased** [28] for about \$50 a page, which is not too onerous, and often the bought papers are of sufficiently low **quality that professors don't recognize it as being purchased** [29] and written by someone else.

Note that skloafers are not striving to get all A's, or even any A's. They are just there to slide through, take the path of least resistance, rack up a low but passing grade point (“decent grades,” as they say). Skloafers are very, very careful with the mathematics of the grade, one might call it. **They painstakingly compute their class averages, and they make sure that their professors are aware of such computations.** [30] “You say I receive a ‘D’ in class participation. Now, what do you use as a basis for such a grade? **And how many points is that** [31], when I am figuring out my average in the course?”

Still, time does run out for many skloafers. **They simply fail out the jig is up they need to move on** [32]. Some forestall **this by becoming actual students, though initially they** [33] were cynical parasites, they can sometimes morph into actual college students with an interest in a given subject. **They then can delude themselves into thinking that in fact they has been “real” students all along.** [34] If that helps them toward the degree, toward a job and success in life, so be it.

[Note: Add following for an upper-level course]

**Other skloafers, though, just have to drop out of a given college (let's call it College One) and move on to College Two. [35] A skloafer applies then to College Two based on their high school diploma and board scores; they do not disclose anything about their College One career. [36, 37] That career had effectively been deleted from history, [38] in an Orwellian gesture of erasure. There was no College One. After high school (the skloafer claims) he has struggled to make a little money for a very large and quite poor family [39] undergoing major medical and financial hardships. Now, finally (the skloafer contend), [40] they has a bit of breathing room, and can thus at long last attempt to attend college and find for him or herself The American Dream. [41, 42, 43] This history is often fabricated. Many skloafers are in fact from well-to-do families. But, it's on to College Two, to College Three, to College Four. At some point, the gig gets tiresome, and the skloafer either decide to become a real student [44] or just opt out altogether and get a more regular job.**

What do professors do when confronted with skloafers? They just ignore them. That is, the profs also take the path of least resistance. **And as class size continue to climb, [45] it's a lot easier to use exams than to assign actual papers. It's also a lot easier for a skloafer to hide in a class of 35 than in a class of 12 or 15 students. And what's the worst a professor can do, anyway? They can give an "F" grade to the skloafer. As mentioned above, an F is not all that hurtful. My suggestion? If I was in charge, I would [46] implement a new grade: SK. At least that will tell others something about the student. And the course can't be taken again. Grade point value of this should be a negative one, since the skloafer's presence in class diminishes that class's value for the real students in attendance.**

But this won't happen. No, the skloafer will pass on and through our classes, eventually out the door, **college diploma in their hand. [47] In a way, they have received an education. [48] Unfortunately, sometimes the skloafer has taken classroom seats away from students who really wanted the class, or who needed the class. Or maybe the seat was taken from another skloafer. [49] Let's just hope that the skloafers don't go to medical school or become engineers who attempt to design bridges or superhighways. Or air bag or emission control systems on cars. [50]**

## ANSWER SHEET

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

1. [EXAMPLE] group of students has entered [OR] subject/verb agreement error

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

[etc.]

## PART II: Essay (50 points)

Answer **one** of the following **two** questions. Please do not exceed the space provided.

1. Is the “absurd universe” a scenario that you think actually causes communicative problems? If so, explain. If not, explain why not.
2. John Robert Ross’s “squish grammar” proposes that we look at the parts of speech along a continuum from “cold” (nouns) to “hot” (verbs). Why would this idea help anyone learn to master formal English more effectively?

## Day Nine

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### Going over the Midterm

#### Day Nine Lesson Plan

1. Return exams, so as not to keep students waiting and worrying.
2. I suggest writing the grade distribution on the board.
3. Go over sentences one by one, writing multiple correct versions of each on the whiteboard, blackboard, computer, or overhead projector.
4. Note: some students will have variants that are not really correct but something of an improvement over the original. I usually give half credit. Sometimes, though, I mark these wrong. If students present these to the class, I reconsider them on a case-by-case basis.
5. Solicit suggestions for any modification of this exam format for the second midterm. (And note that you might or might not take those suggestions!)

After taking attendance, return the midterms. (Note that it is crucial you return the exams, graded, as soon as possible after the students have completed them. The longer you wait, the less fresh these issues will be in students' minds, the further they will have distanced themselves from the students they were when they took the exam.)

You have several options here, as usual. You have prepared an “answer sheet,” no doubt, since you had to grade these exams; you might simply photocopy that and distribute it. I don't do this, however, since the range of correct answers is quite large, and I don't want to give students the impression that there is only one way—or even one best way—to correct the problems of the paragraphs on the exam. Also, if you plan to use the exam again, it might not be good to have answer sheets floating around. (I never reuse exams, only because I find that with each successive exam I write, they get better and better.)

My preference here is to simply go over the sentences one by one, having students offer suggested correct versions. I also ask for both the correction and the grammatical terminology describing the error. I write the correct sentences on the whiteboard, along with the terminology (e.g., “comma splice,” “subject-verb agreement error”). Many of these “corrections” will generate discussion, and sometimes students will claim that they have provided the correct answer but were not given credit. I deal

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with these pleas as they come up, which lends a roll-up-your-sleeves quality to the class, as in, yes, of course these issues are to an extent negotiable; let's look at your exam again. I find that I fairly often will relent and give partial credit for answers I'd marked as wrong. There is no value in trying to maintain infallibility in a class like this. In fact, that's sort of the point: grammar and usage are in flux, are to an extent constantly under debate. Here is a sentence I couldn't give credit for, though: "They often simply need to take multiple choice tests, which most of these are fairly easy to master." I might have accepted this or given partial credit if "most of these" had been enclosed within either dashes or parentheses.

The last time I gave this exam, the grades ranged from B- to A+. It was a section of freshman composition that had in it many "honors" students, so perhaps was not a representative sampling. But it seems clear to me that the exam in its short version is a bit too easy, at least for this kind of class, given 100 minutes to complete it. (I asked if they wanted a similar exam for the second midterm, and everyone seemed agreeable to that. But then a student said, "Yes, but could you just eliminate the option of sentences being 'correct'?" I don't think so.) I also might use a small number of the more subtle issues covered in the text's "deep focus" sections. I don't of course want to make the exam impossible for students to do well on, but I do want that exam to provide at once a challenge and even a learning experience for students in my class.

## Day Ten

### Chapter Four: Commas

#### Day Ten Lesson Plan

1. Return of streamwrites as needed.
2. Comma usage: the unpunctuated passage exercise (distribute).
3. After students have finished, have students read aloud the corrected versions, including in their reading aloud where the commas and capital letters are.
4. Exquisite corpse exercise. Assign each student a comma use, and then have each add a sentence to a paper that makes its way around the class.
5. Read this aloud. You also might type it up and hand it out to the class the following session.
6. Lynda Barry drawing exercise. I urge you to get students to work with other communicative (that is, visual) modes. You will need to provide notecards. Students do a self-portrait; write what they were trying to capture in it; and then rewrite what they had, using ten types of comma use.
7. Have students read aloud their pieces. You might walk around the class, showing others the drawing. (Keep in mind that sometimes this exercise will generate personal stories and tearful anecdotes.)
8. “Forty-eight Star America”: explain the punctuation. Can it be improved? You might have students work on this individually, and then read it aloud yourself and have students jump in to explain a certain comma or dash or semicolon usage.
9. Streamwrite: are commas dying? Have students read aloud their work.
10. Extra commas and joining main clauses with commas—discussion.

At this point of the course (or unit), many students are getting nervous about the complexity, variety, and sheer number of “rules” that the course has kicked up so far. So I try to offer them a series of “hands-on” exercises. I offer four in the following. You probably won’t have time to do more than two, unless you have a three- or four-hour long class.

The first is simplest: correct and add punctuation to an unpunctuated paragraph. They find this exercise quite challenging, as might be expected. The first is an excerpt from an article I wrote on Natalie Kusz, Joanna Greenfield, and Lucy Grealy; the second is from a piece on Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.” Feel free to photocopy and distribute it as an exercise:

in what follows i would like to examine each of these works as they reflect and reflect on the development of the writer's personality of course the concepts of the "self" and of "personality" are under continual revision and probably always will be grealy kusz and greenfield all suggest a complex view of the self and the way it develops a personality they examine the physical the emotional the psychological the social and the writerly self they show the way that grievous bodily injury the thwarted telos of romance the growth of consciousness the response of a society at large and the embracing of a writerly cultural tradition all contribute to the development of a unique individual kusz for example emphasizes the healing and comforting influence of family and friends the extended communality that allows her to seek out the needed surgery or make the necessary trip grealy stresses her physical "otherness" and the sense she has of being outside of and apart from all humankind (even her family) a real-life female version almost of gregor samsa greenfield's focus is less on her physical mutilation than on how the actual disfiguring attack and her struggle with the hyena helped her understand something of the laws of the animal kingdom and of herself.

robert frost perhaps the 20th century's most well-known american poet wrote poems that have become icons of the classroom one such poem among his most popular is "the road not taken" (1918) many readers see it as being a poem about making the hard choices and feeling ultimately glad that one did for such hard choices "made all the difference" others though see the poem in rather different terms altogether claiming that it's about how we all mythologize our past and end up lying not only to others but to ourselves about what we did and did not do about choices we did or did not make.

One benefit of this exercise, aside from getting students to closely work with syntactic structures, is that it usually demonstrates how flexible language is. There are many, many ways to add punctuation to an unpunctuated group of words, and often the writer's choices are not the ideal ones. Then, too, the various options reflect some

differences in meaning—variations that might be explored in class. In short, the exercise often has the effect of emphasizing the kind of thing students really don't like to hear, namely that there is not, typically, a single "correct" answer. Instead, there's a range of plausible options, all of which are correct, and all of which need to be evaluated by the writer before choosing the ideal one that suits the audience, that captures the idea, and that has a level of correctness appropriate to the occasion.

The challenging (scary? maddening? off-putting?) thing about the "incorrect" options is that they are evidently employed by a fairly large group of writers. That is, readers are exposed to the same mistakes so often that their bludgeoning makes them seem almost "correct," just as multiple repetitions give the demagogue's lies a ring of truth. This point is perhaps inadvertently demonstrated by the book's multiple examples (from public media) of comma splices, comma omissions, apostrophe errors, misplaced modifiers, parallelism problems, and many others. Quite simply, people are being exposed on a regular basis to what many grammarians might think of as a degraded form of English—or at least to very divergent usage—which has the effect of establishing what one might call a paralanguage, but it is one that significantly departs from SWE.

Comma usage forms an interesting "case." I isolate thirteen uses of the comma, realizing, though, that that number is not one everyone would agree on. It might, for example, easily be collapsed down to eleven or twelve, or for that matter, increased to fourteen or fifteen.

How to "teach" comma use, though, remains a problem. Commas are notoriously difficult to use effectively, and in an era of the nonreading of books and the over-reading, maybe, of much shortened or, one might say, stunted prose (text messages, tweets, emails), comma use is becoming a greater mystery or anachronism every day. Since text messages are limited in the number of characters they use before they break up (and sometimes scramble) one's message, many people prefer to leave out commas, which seem like a "waste" of a character. So technology is to an extent hippping the comma out from under the basket.

I suggest grouping the usages into "easy," conventional, and "hard"—or to use more precise grammatical language, into usage groups that naturally coalesce around similar syntactic issues. For example, some commas indicate how to say a sentence out loud; they help the written sentence mimic speech patterns. Some inflect meaning or

are necessary to prevent confusion. Others are just conventional, as in dates, or degrees, for example, or between items in a series. (Conventions differ, of course. I argue that eschewing the “Oxford” or serial comma, as AP style requires, often undermines or confuses meaning.)

To get to comma use, you will have to look at a number of examples. I start by listing (in brief form, either on the board or in a handout) all thirteen commas uses that I offer in chapter 4. Then I have students generate one sentence each. In order to make sure that their examples cover all thirteen uses, I assign usages (“Jazo, you do Usage 1. Maharaef, you do Usage 2. Paroght, Usage 3.” Etc.). The trick, though, is that these all need to be generated on one piece of paper, which students pass around the room, each adding a sentence. (This is sometimes called an “exquisite corpse” exercise; I’m not sure why, though it was invented by French Surrealists.) While students are writing, the other students should be reading about their method of comma use. After the paper has made its rounds, I read it aloud. As might be expected, the comma to mark an omission is the hardest to generate, as are “natural pause” commas that do not conveniently fit into one of the other categories.

An additional way of getting at comma usage might seem a bit elaborate but it’s actually surprisingly effective. (I draw the basis for this exercise from Lynda Barry’s excellent book *Syllabus*.) I provide students with a blank index card (3 x 5). On this I ask them to draw a self-portrait. Then I have them write what it was they were hoping that self-portrait would convey, even if their artistic abilities were limited. The next step is getting the student to recast that prose piece into a version that uses the comma in, say, ten or eleven different ways. What’s amazing to me, when students read aloud their comma-complicated autobiographies, is how interestingly complex they are, how different from typical student prose. And students recognize this as well. Fluent use of multiple comma variants makes for complex prose.

It’s also worth looking at some piece of writing and simply identifying the types of commas being used. This is more difficult than it first might seem, partly because many published writers press on the margins of acceptability, and partly because there are often mistakes in printed material. Editors often see commas more and more (I expect) as optional, except maybe in situations like “No, schools are doing as much as they can,” as opposed to “No schools are doing as much as they can.” Here is a sample

passage (it is called “Forty-Eight Star America,” and it is by my late uncle, Frank Salavatore Cioffi):

Once upon a time, there was a country called America. Its flag had forty-eight stars. Its times were hard; its songs, sad—“Brother can you spare a dime”—but also (or perhaps, therefore) hopeful: “Over the rainbow” and “Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf.” People were told that all they had to fear was fear itself. On their radios, they listened to *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, *Gangbusters*, and the *Hit Parade*, and looked forward to the Army-Navy game and the World Series. They read with alarm and relish of the criminal activities of Dillinger, Pretty-Boy Floyd, and Machine-Gun Kelly; they laughed at the Marx Brothers, at “Fat and Skinny,” and Charlie McCarthy. They were encouraged to eat Wheaties, to use Fitch shampoo on their hair, to slug Bromo-Seltzer when they had hangovers, and to choke down Ex-lax when they couldn’t “go.” Their children had Buster Brown hair cuts, read Big Little Books, and collected bubble gum cards of Indian Chiefs, one Crazy Horse being worth four Sitting Bulls. At school they learned about John Smith and Pocohantas; The *Mayflower* & Plymouth Rock; “Give me liberty or give me death,” “Tippecanoe and Tyler too,” “Damn the torpedoes full speed ahead,” “Spare my country’s flag she said.” After school, kids listened to Jack Armstrong, All-American boy, and sculpted balsawood models of Spads, Sopwith Camels, and Fokkers. It was an era of great public defenders—Dick Tracy, The Green Hornet, The Shadow, Doc Savage, and the G-Men; of the sale of self-improvement—“They laughed when I sat down to play the piano,” “I was a ninety-pound weakling,” “Learn French in two weeks,” “I saw God last night”; of nightmares about Fu Manchu and Ming the Merciless. Comic strip heroes had sidekicks who were black (Lothar), brown (Punjab), red (Tonto), yellow (Connie, Sato), or even women—Wilma for Buck Rogers, and Dale for Flash Gordon—to help them out of tight scrapes and keep them from getting lonely.

Never such innocence again.

The superfluous comma section is relatively easy to grasp, since the commas inserted between subject and very (“While,” [use 7]), and “Mr. Piedrahita, is” seem to be simple lapses in copyediting. Or are they? That very question might be worth exploring in class: are these writers attempting to replicate speech? In the example from the *Trentonian*, the quoted sentence contains a second error as well, one that seems to make more of a difference (it involves “however”). Though many students will contend that these commas make no real difference, a view evidently shared by some copyeditors, part of your job is to convince students that such a view is a lumper/leveler’s position, and in your class, you are encouraging the sharpening of distinctions. You are trying to get them to be splitters.

With such a teaching philosophy in mind, you might want to have students write about Pat Caputo’s “While” sentence. After a secret spring of 3–5 minutes, have students reflect on the differences between the published sentence and the possible (and correct) revisions of it. In a “meander,” that is, a streamwrite branching off from the initial one, students might speculate on what the effects might be of a piece of writing containing multiple small errors like this. Both of the streamwrites could be read aloud to the whole group. Remember that these streamwrites are not “talking points,” but scripts to be read aloud word for word (and about which students should not apologize or offer disclaimers).

While the issue of commas before “that” and “which” might not be inherently fascinating or compelling, the fact that MS Word green-underlines any sentence with a comma before “that” seems worthy of note. Students (and we professors, too) are becoming more and more enslaved by their word processing programs, and many lack the self-confidence to challenge their apparently authoritative but invisible nonhuman monitors. Hence it’s necessary to emphasize that the program’s prohibition is too sweeping. This might usefully segue into a discussion of other problems with Word, about which you’ll find no shortage of gripes.

The chapter ends with three slightly controversial, or at least debate-provoking, issues: can commas be omitted in short sentences in which main clauses are joined with an “and”? Are comma splices ever acceptable, as in, “You cannot filibuster, you cannot stall” (203)? And can you use commas (rather than semicolons) to join three or more main clauses? My answers to these are predictable, I suppose: I urge people to use commas in the [MC], [cc] [MC] construction, though I allow that one might

sometimes omit the comma in situations in which a writer is trying to capture a sense of urgency and immediacy: “His heart was pounding and he thought death was near.” “Acceptable comma splices” ([MC], [MC]) I suggest should be avoided. But both of these issues certainly warrant discussion, and I welcome examples that challenge the tenets of a prescriptivist grammar.

As far as joining multiple (3 or more) main clauses with just commas, this is a noncontroversial practice, one that is only surprising because it occurs fairly infrequently. It’s also a situation in which a rule about commas (used for items in a series) trumps the rule that main clauses need to be joined with more than merely a comma.

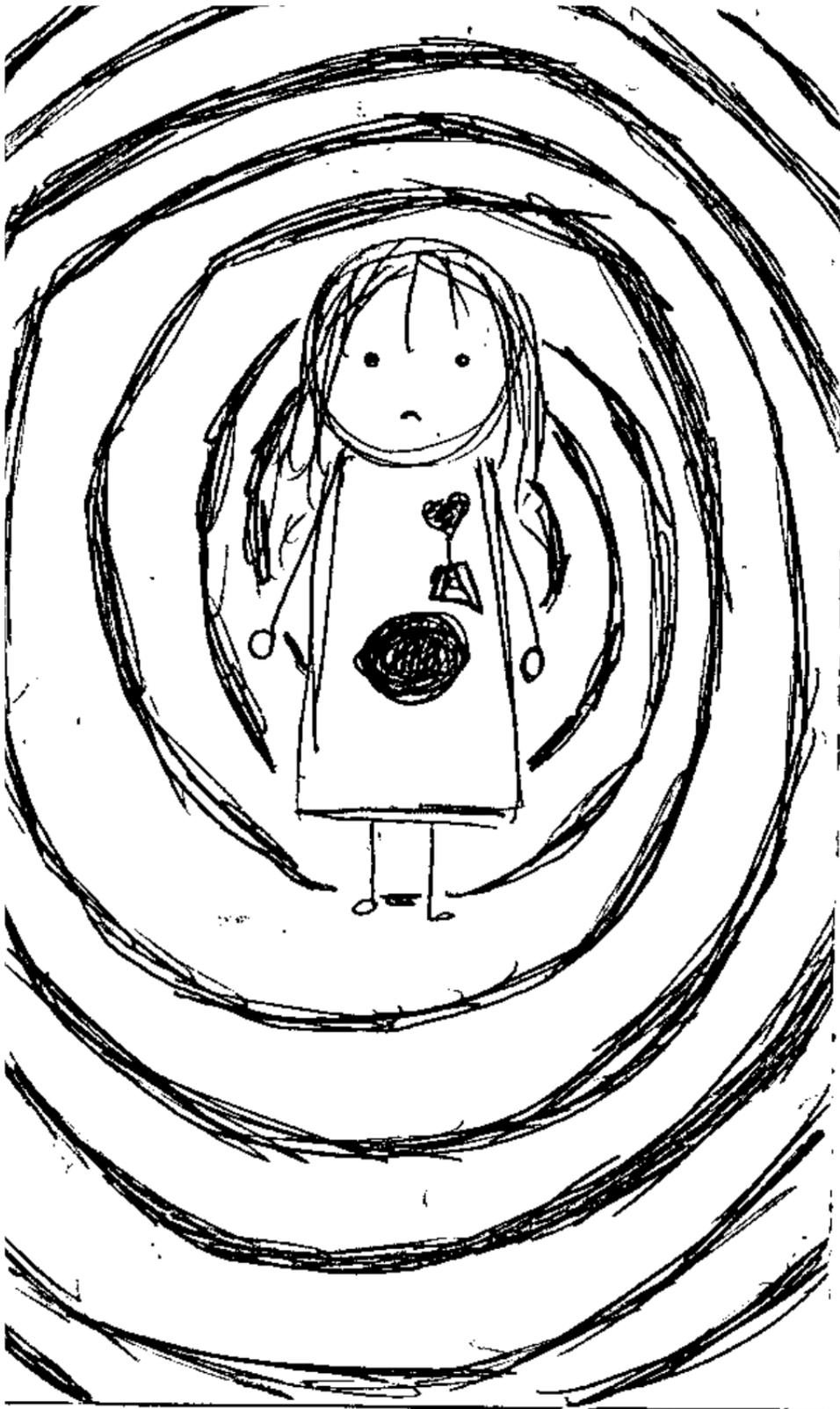
Sample streamwrites:

Rainmaker: Draw a self-portrait and then write what you were trying to portray about yourself. Now rewrite that piece, using eight or nine different “kinds” of commas.

*Many people said I looked confused in my picture. They're not wrong, but not completely right, either. I'm feeling hollow, empty, and lonely. Confused, too, but more so hollow, just so empty, without a proper reason, really. My friend, Carmen, seemed to notice my being off through my texts this morning. Friends, especially the kind who really know you, are a gift. If I didn't have them, I would probably not have anyone else. For example, my year in fourth grade was a disappointment. Today is September 27, 2016. 18 years of life, close to almost 19, and I still haven't learned to interact well socially. Professor Cioffi, this assignment is far more difficult than what I had previously expected.*

(Michelle Zhang)

Here is Michelle's drawing:



Rainmaker: Is the comma going out of fashion?

*The comma, today, is lost, wandering along a path to the land of the forgotten. People simply don't know how to properly use commas, so therefore they do not include them in their sentences. Sometimes, it is clear when one should use a comma, but sometimes it is ambiguous. The future of the comma is unknown, but if it continues its path to the land of the forgotten, some of the conventional uses of the comma would disappear. For example, the Oxford comma is important but is sometimes forgotten, because it is not included in news writing. Personally, I find it difficult to switch between using the Oxford comma in academic writing and not using it in news articles. Maybe the Oxford comma will completely disappear, or maybe it will prevail. Who knows?*

(Victoria Cheng)

## Day Eleven

### Chapter Five: Other Mysteries of Punctuation

#### Day Eleven Lesson Plan

1. Business of any kind, e.g., returning of exams, streamwrites, quizzes.
2. Commas. Students still need a bit of work on commas, so I devote usually a few minutes—maybe as much as half an hour—to going over some of the more challenging uses of commas. I page through *One Day in the Life* and choose some sample sentences to discuss. In particular, I go over the MC, cc MC pattern, which in our age of apparent de-commification, seems to be a difficult one to grasp (“Why do you need a comma if you have an ‘and’?”). This is also a good time to talk about restrictive vs. nonrestrictive sentence elements. In recalling the results of the exam, I focus on issues that seem to me troublesome for a given group.
3. Other marks of punctuation: semicolon—its main uses. Explain and take questions on this.
4. Secret spring.
5. Streamwrite: What does one of the poems “mean”?
6. Look for main clauses and join them in various ways, using semicolons.
7. Reflecting pool: How did that change your writing?
8. Oceanic.
9. Dashes and hyphens: Discuss and present Baker’s idea about them.
10. Apostrophe use: Generate prose with lots of incorrect apostrophes; then correct your neighbor’s.
11. Does “form” matter? (Streamwrite; meander; go oceanic).

I call some punctuation marks “mysteries” of the contemporary world since they are used less and less, and since they appear all around us—incorrectly used—or appear in sort of miscellaneous or promiscuous ways, even though there is no call for such promiscuity. Or to put it another way, the culture of digitalizing consumerism is purveying a method and a congeries of usages that really violently clash with SWE. The possible irony here is that none of this seems to have made an impression or terrible impact on the culture.

Or has it? It seems to me a tough case to argue that semicolon misuse is hurting our country’s environment, productivity, ethical values, living standards, or

global responsibilities. It seems plausible, in fact, that the semicolon will simply become interchangeable with the comma—but perhaps marking a longer pause.

But until then, we have two basic usages of the semicolon, which are swiftly outlined in chapter 5. First, semicolons join main clauses: MC; MC. Second, semicolons are used to mark major elements of a list, when one or more element on that list has internal punctuation. (I do mention a third usage, but I'm leaving that alone right now.)

One exercise you might try is as follows. First, have students compose a “secret spring.” Then have them write a response to a short poem. I use this quasi-literary critical rainmaker so as to get away from the constant media drumbeat on political squabbles, conflict with Russia and China, corporate corruption, violence in the streets, gun control, abortion rights, and transgender bathroom disputes. It is difficult, without really doing a great deal of research, for students to come up with anything original on such topics.

Here is the “poem” I use:

Yesterday I  
Went into town and bought  
A lamp. (Culler 63)

Jonathan Culler invented this poem, which was initially a sentence. Present it as a sentence, too, and ask students if there is any difference in meaning. This exercise has the added benefit of giving you some idea of your students’ sophistication—the less sophisticated (lumpers) will contend that there is no difference. You might want to distribute Culler’s explanation of the “poem” itself:

The words remain the same, and if meanings change it is because we approach the poem with different expectations and interpretive operations. What sort of thing happens? First of all, “Yesterday” takes on a different force: it no longer refers to a particular day but to the set of possible yesterdays and serves primarily to set up a temporal opposition within the poem (between present and recent past). This is due to our conventions about the relationship of poems to the moment of utterance. Secondly, we expect the lyric to capture a moment of some significance,

to be thematically viable; and we thus apply to “lamp” and “bought” conventions of symbolic extrapolation. The traditional associations of *lamp* are obvious; *buying* we can take of one mode of acquisition as opposed to others; and we thus acquire potential thematic material. Thirdly, we expect a poem to be a unified whole and thus we must attempt to interpret the fact that this poem ends so swiftly and inconclusively. The silence at the end can be read as a kind of ironic comment, a blank, and we can set up an opposition between the action of buying a lamp, the attempt to acquire light, and the failure to tell of any positive benefits which result from yesterday’s actions. This general structure can, of course, support a variety of paraphrases, but any interpretation of the poem is likely to make use of these three elementary operations enshrined in the institution of poetry. The conventions of the lyric create the possibility of new and supplementary meanings. (63)

Basically, because it is a *poem*, it means something different from what it means as a sentence.

Alternatively, you could have students write about Ezra Pound’s famous “In a Station of the Metro”:

An apparition of these faces in a crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Or Thomas Gray’s famous lines (53-56) from “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

H.D.’s “The Pool” also has resonance, at least for me:

Are you alive?  
 I touch you [with my thumb].  
 You quiver like a sea-fish.  
 I cover you with my net.  
 What are you—banded one?

I have put in brackets the addition to line 2 that appeared in the original first publication of this poem in *Poetry*. Subsequent printed editions left out the prepositional phrase, “with my thumb.” Perhaps students could speculate about why she left that phrase out, or about how the two versions differ.

The task is to get students *writing* here, since *One Day in the Life* is not a linguistics text, but really a guide to correct and effective written usage. The point of the course for which I wrote this text is to get students capable of generating their own accurate, effective prose, and at once give them the ability and tools to become good self-editors, able to bring their prose into greater alignment with the more or less widely accepted correctness of SWE. These abilities should result in writing with greater power and clarity, writing more able to convey its intended message.

The next stage of this activity would be this: have students isolate places in their streamwrites where they join main clauses. Have them list these on a separate page. (If they do not have anything but simple sentences, that’s a problem in itself; but just have them locate several places where two of them might be connected.) The next stage is to compare types of connection. Have students connect their sentences in at least these three ways:

MC, cc MC

SC, MC

MC; MC

Then, working with a partner, students should present their sentences to each other, and that partner needs to attempt writing out how all the variants have slightly different meanings. It will probably be necessary to apprise the partner of the general “drift” of the entire streamwritten mini-essay or interpretation, of course, so that he or she will have the necessary context for understanding the sentence varieties. (This

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exercise will help some in the semicolon section but also serves as a precursor of the later discussion of “sentence patterns” in chapter 6.)

Here is an example of a response to the question of why H.D. changed her poem, deleting the “with my thumb” from line two:

H.D., who was very interested in and expert on classical literature—she did many translations, e.g., from the Greek—is likely using “thumb” in the following way: it means “big toe.” (The OED lists that as the first definition of “thumb.”) The picture H.D. paints, then, is of a person going to a pool of water and dipping her big toe into it. The rest of the poem follows. Putting “with my toe” or “with my foot” would seem somewhat odd, perhaps, so she used “with my thumb,” that is, with the thumb of the foot.

But she omits the thumb’s touching after the original publication. Why? It seems to me that an obvious reason is this: if we think of someone going to a pool and touching it with the thumb of the hand, the imaged-up idea is odd. To touch a pool with one’s thumb, one would have to crouch before it and unnaturally rotate one’s hand outward in order to touch the water thumb first.

But worse than that, the thumb gives too much specificity. “I touch you” has a metaphorical impact that “I touch you with my thumb” completely lacks. “I touch you” can suggest “I reach you,” “I make you feel,” “I hurt you,” even.

And the fact is that while “thumb” can mean large toe, most people reading the poem probably won’t get that.

The assignment, then, is to locate compound or complex sentences—then transform one or two (at most) into MC; MC constructions. Look at the new version. How is it different? Is it improved or degraded?

Putting “with my toe” or “with my foot” would sound somewhat odd, perhaps, so she used “with my thumb,” or “with the thumb of my foot”

[this transforms into. . .]

Putting “with my toe” or “with my foot” would sound somewhat odd, perhaps; hence, she used “with my thumb” or “with the thumb of my foot.”

Reflecting pool:

This is a change from “perhaps, so” to “perhaps; hence.” What is the effect of this, finally? Is there any? It seems to me that several possibilities emerge. First, the revision sounds more formal. “Hence” after a semicolon has a really different, maybe even authoritative ring to it. Second, the revision is more definite, I think. It sounds as though it’s been logically, conclusively decided.

When I use this exercise, the results have been fairly good. Some students’ responses were improved by the inclusion of an “MC; MC” construction, some were negatively affected, and some were no better or worse. One useful ancillary effect of this exercise is that it gets students to identify main clauses (itself often a problem), and it makes them self-conscious about how these clauses might be put together.

Once each student has streamwritten to the idea of the sentences’ difference, these should be shared with the whole class. In what I call a “reflecting pool” (reviewing and reconsidering one’s own thoughts and writing), perhaps ask students to reflect on whether their ideas about semicolons have changed or not. They might now find the semicolon even more off-putting than before. In one class discussion, though, my students told me that that mark of punctuation is becoming popular as a tattoo. Getting such a permanent inking into one’s epidermis signifies, apparently, that one has finished a distinct—often terrible—phase of one’s life, but there is more yet to come. It might seem like a full stop, but it is not. Sign me up for that. In my next life.

One quoted passage I tend to read aloud from the book is that from Sam Roberts, who labels the semicolon a “pretentious anachronism” (209). Students who

regularly toss around expressions like “drunk-dialed” or “I don’t give A.F.” often have no idea what “pretentious” or “anachronism” mean. So you will have to help them define the term. But does Roberts have a point? Would it be best to “jettison the semicolon” and the (to my mind) nuanced punctuational options it offers? I would ask the class about that issue. Has texting caused our culture to be moving toward some version of English that does not use punctuation or full words—or abide by any rules prescribed by the formal grammar?

In some situations, dashes are valuable tools. I fear that I might overuse them in my own prose, and I don’t want to teach students to follow my verbal tics or poor practices. I think it might be good, though, to stress a couple of ideas about dashes. First, the dash vs. the hyphen problem emerges quite often. Students frequently do not see the difference between a hyphen, an en-dash, and an em-dash (many of our students tend toward being levelers), so you will have to explain these variations—as well as the technique used to form them in Word. (Few know that ctrl + alt + the minus sign on the number keypad is a way to insert an em-dash; ctrl + the minus sign will insert an en-dash.) And very few people can get the hyphen just right. The “rules,” such as they are (229–30), are not intuitive, vary from style manual to style manual, and need simply to be memorized.

I also emphasize that dashes, parentheses, and commas each convey a slightly different meaning or “delivery” of a group of set-off words. Russell Baker, the erstwhile *New York Times* writer, contended that “dashing” was like shouting, parentheses like whispering, and commas like normal speech. I’m not sure if students will like this trichotomy, but it seems to me a useful reminder of how punctuation can subtly influence meaning. (Perhaps that is the point of the entire chapter.)

One teacher of English I know told me that the surest way to really confuse students and to get them to generate a multitude of apostrophe errors was to teach a class on the use of apostrophes. If five students misused them at the start of that class, fifteen would be misusing them by the end. I’m not sure if she did an empirical study, but the idea is interesting. Still, though, I think our job is to attempt to demystify apostrophe use. Again, this mark of punctuation might be an endangered species, but it still exists and will continue on for a few more years, I expect.

Contractions are straightforward. The flash point with them, though, is whether they have a place in formal prose. Some professors (and professional journalists) proscribe their use. You might take a quick poll to see what your students have experienced. My suggestion here is that one must accord with whatever guidelines a course or publisher sets out; in my own classes, I tend to err on the side of formality. But it's also clear that occasionally a contracted form sounds better than its noncontracted form. In that case, I opt for the contraction.

Possession indicated in various ways, though, is a difficult issue for many students. I would divide the problem up into five areas:

- pronouns that indicate possession (i.e., his, hers, its)
- possessive form of nouns ending in s
- plural possessives
- possessives in non-ownership situations
- use of apostrophes to indicate plural (“I got all A’s and B’s this term”)

The temptation is to simply present these ideas and hope students will understand their complexity. But I am not confident of the success of that. Hence, I use an exercise in which I have students write incorrect apostrophe-laden sentences. This has an often humorous effect. Then I present my method of deciding on apostrophe placement (see *One Day in the Life*, pp. 218-20). Then have the students revise their neighbors' papers. Are they able to figure out where all the apostrophes go? (Generally, they cannot.) You might take problem sentences and put them on the whiteboard, in an attempt to get at the issues surrounding apostrophe use and misuse.

In a grammar course, it might not be useful to spend a lot of time on quotation marks, since the use and format of quotes is largely a matter of style (AP, MLA, APA, CMS), and won't be relevant in a course using only exams and quizzes. But if you are using formal essays as a requirement, you will have to cover issue of quotation form, punctuation of sentences that include quoted material, and plagiarism. The real challenge here, I think, is simply persuading students that it's worth their while to adhere to an established form such as MLA or Chicago. This might be a good in-class sequenced exercise:

Secret Spring: 4-5 minutes

Rainmaker: Think of and talk about an example of any situation where following the proper “form” matters a great deal?

Meander: Why do you think teachers insist that bibliographic/reference form matters so much?

Read aloud: “go oceanic” with both of these.

[Alternatively, you could use the “Yesterday I went into town and bought a lamp” example of Culler’s here, since that is in some sense an inquiry into the value of “form.”]

Sentence patterns are a crucial issue. I would go over these in class prior to having students demonstrate examples of two or three of the trickier ones. As I look through this section of the text, it seems to me that the restrictive/nonrestrictive distinction might be unnecessary. This could be something to ask your class. Is there a difference between subordinators like “that,” “which,” “who” (relative pronouns) and words like “because,” “since,” and “as”? The reason I have included the restrictive/nonrestrictive distinction has to do, finally, with punctuation. Restrictive usages don’t require a comma:

R: I ate because I was hungry.

but. . .

R: Because I was hungry, I ate.

Non R: I ate, though I was not hungry.

Though I was not hungry, I ate.

R: I ate the food that was fresh.

Non R: I ate the food, which was fresh.

It might be a good idea to work on generating sentences using subordination, restrictive, and nonrestrictive clauses. Each student could generate a pair of sentences such as, say, the last two immediately above and explain the difference in meaning.

The chapter ends with more discussion of comma splices and fused sentences; it gives you yet another chance to remind students of how important it is to recognize

sentence boundaries and not smash together two sentences without using the appropriate punctuation.

Sample streamwrite about “The Pool”:

*Throughout the poem, H.D. keeps the readers wondering what the object of the poem is. It is something that quivers like a seafish when it was touched: it is also something that can be covered with a net. The title of the poem is “The Pool,” which makes the unknown object seem like a marine creature that lives underwater. However, “the pool” can be any setting; the object of the poem might just be someone, or something that is trapped with the given setting. The reaction of “you” upon being touched by someone signifies that the object is scared and feeling unsafe. The net makes the situation even worse as the object is now trapped by something in an already unpleasant environment. (Haoxiang Chen)*

*The poem “The Pool” begins with a question: “Are you alive?” The poem is speaking to the audience, and the line serves as an introduction or greeting. In the next two lines, Hilda is interacting and discovering about her audience. The audience quivers with Hilda’s touch because it feels uneasy; it does not expect to be addressed by the poem. Hilda proceeds to cover her audience with a net, which is the poem. At this point, the audience is trapped and wants to finish the poem. With nowhere to go, the audience becomes more uncomfortable with its situation and listens to Hilda’s remaining question. Both Hilda and her audience are trying to understand each other better.*

## Day Twelve

### Chapter Six: Diction

#### Day Twelve Lesson Plan

1. Business of various kinds: Return of quizzes, streamwrites.
2. Quiz: Infer vs. imply (differentiate).
3. Apostrophe placement: Explain the “trick.” (Genitive, etc.)
4. Secret spring; Have students count off, 1, 2, 3. (This will serve as a way to get people to read their streamwrites, as in “all with number 1 will read,” etc.)
5. Milne: Read aloud and gather comments on.
6. Orwell: Read aloud. Streamwrite: what does Orwell mean? Oceanic.
7. Parallel structure and the ketchup bottle (259); sex pledges.
8. Streamwrite: Use 10 of the words in a piece of writing. Oceanic.
9. Read conclusion aloud, but modify it as per editing.

The text’s last chapter, on diction, attempts to reiterate many of the themes discussed throughout—that verbal accuracy matters, that our culture is actually working against our sentence-level accuracy, as it fills our heads with mostly meaningless—though sometimes meaningful—verbiage. A. A. Milne, writing close to a hundred years ago, was on to the same idea in his Pooh books. Winnie, who seems at times hopeless and hapless—a confused, if well-intentioned bear—sometimes invents poems and uses language in quite striking ways.

Winnie’s poem (p. 256), however, exemplifies how words can float into people’s brains, but often these words end up being more confusing than communicative.

I’d suggest reading the Milne passage aloud—that is, have students read it—and then briefly come to terms with what Milne is getting at. This might be a good rainmaker for a streamwrite, or it could form the basis for a discussion (if a streamwrite, be sure to precede it with a “secret spring”).

George Orwell is getting at a similar point in the passage from “Politics and the English Language”: he warns us not to “surrender” to words. I think this might be the basis for an interesting discussion. What does it mean to “surrender to words”? What is that battle that is being waged? Does it make sense to use such a militaristic metaphor? Is “the existing dialect” as aggressive as Orwell suggests; does it really rush

in, despite us, to explain or to codify abstract ideas? And his suggestion of putting off using words—what does this mean, exactly?

So how does this fit in with grammar? I think that the section on parallelism is a good follow-up here: a lot of times, set phrases or overused metaphors will invade our prose, and when we attempt to incorporate them into our own writing, smoothly and effectively merge them with our own prose, something gets lost—often it's the parallel structure itself.

I'd start with the ketchup bottle example (259). Of course you should concede that the sentence is comprehensible, but it might be a good idea to ask students what the effect of using this kind of structure might be. It's also a good example (to put on the board or projector) of how sentence elements need to be interchangeable, that is, grammatically equivalent, in a sentence that sets up a pattern of repetition. (The adolescent sex pledge example [260] might be too racy for your taste, but its very raciness, I'd argue, probably prevented an editor from vetting it with sufficient care.)

The “reason is . . . because” construction is so prevalent in our culture, so widely used, that any reform attempting to eliminate it is likely doomed. That said, it is still worthwhile to point out the problem and suggest to students that they would do well to avoid the construction, at least in their writing.

Confused words, a discussion of which comprises the bulk of this chapter, are just fourteen in number. After having used this text in several courses, I would like to add a fifteenth “confused word” or group of words, namely “conscience,” “conscious,” and “consciousness.” Students have a great deal of trouble differentiating these three words.

I think that reading about these words is one thing, but using them correctly, quite another. Hence, you might try to get students to use, say, ten of the fourteen, correctly, in a brief streamwrite, which could be read aloud in class. You probably should collect this, too, since you want to make sure the words are also correct in their writing. Alternatively, as students read, jump in to have them make clear what homonym they are using. (E.g., they will need to say, “My shirt complements (with an ‘e’) my jeans.”) What's interesting to me is how very arcane and even mysterious these words are to students. For example, often students will confess that they have never heard of the word “complement.” Some think I am simply making it up. I note too that students have a lot of trouble with the concept of differentiation that separates “infer”

from “imply” (not to mention trouble with “compose” and “comprise,” but I haven’t included those yet, either: stay tuned). Explain the infer/imply distinction to them. Keep in mind, though, that the biggest problems emerge with lay and lie. In particular, students have trouble with three elements: (a) past tense of to lie (down). Very few English speakers know this is “lay”; (b) “had lain” or “has lain” many people simply reject as a verb form, even though it is correct; (c) The whole verb “to lay” as in to “set” or “place,” some students were taught to avoid altogether because of the fact that it is identical to the vulgar slang, “to lay,” as in “to have sexual intercourse with.”

Slang and triteness, I might note, as long as we are on the subject, in addition to mixed metaphors, certainly abound in students’ written work. It is difficult, however, to get students to recognize what is slang and what is not. I think a discussion of this issue would probably be most appropriate as a way to get at it. Some questions you might consider posing, Socratic ones, of course, could be the following:

1. What is slang?
2. Does slang ever become “acceptable”? (Any examples of this?)
3. Why can’t you use slang in college papers? You know what it means, don’t you?

I like to retell the story of the TSA agents and the elderly couple. This did actually happen, and it resulted in the couple’s being caged for over an hour.

If you have time, mixed metaphors are useful to discuss—though you will have to explain what a metaphor is, and then also explain what we mean by “mixed.” My grammar course initially used a title that was a mixed metaphor: “Naked English: Baring the Bones of the English Language.” You might ask students if they agree that that title was “mixed.” (I suggested to a linguist colleague that it was not: “baring the bones” can mean, say, taking off one’s clothes. It’s slang. He frowned.)

I like to have students read aloud my “microconclusion.” This is partly because students tend to skip these kinds of things, not really reading the last words in a given reading assignment. Also, if I ever revise this book and my publisher agrees to publish a second edition, I will change the paragraphing. The fifth paragraph should be broken six lines from the bottom of the page, and paragraph 6 should be placed as the second to last paragraph of the book.

## Day Thirteen

### Appendix: The Myths and Generating New Ones

#### Review for Final Exam

1. Business: return of papers, commenting on them as needed.
2. Secret spring.
3. Pick a “myth” of digital-age English and setting aside the book’s description of it, expand on it, explain it, talk about it in relation to your own work. You might disagree with it (that is, think it is not a myth) or might you have an even stronger way of stating it?
4. Oceanic with this.
5. Now the task is to generate one’s own myth of digital-age English. I think the best way to do this is in pairs rather than individually. So pair up the students and have them work on generating a myth. If they can’t agree on a single one, then they can generate two, if they like.
6. Presentation of these.
7. Discussion of any problems that students have, any things about grammar or punctuation that they are unsure of—anything at all. . . .
8. Students generally appreciate knowing something about the format of the exam, which will be quite similar to the format of the first exam.
9. I would remind students of the five most common (serious) errors in student writing, as these will appear on the exam quite a lot: sentence fragments, comma splices, fused sentences, subject-verb nonagreement, and pronoun ambiguity/nonagreement/gender bias.
10. Read aloud the “microconclusion,” possibly having students do most of this.

The fifteen myths of the digital age prove interesting to students, partly because they think of themselves, for the most part as being far better connected to the Internet, to digital media, than their instructor or teacher is. After a secret spring, I ask students to pick a myth and, ignoring my explanation, streamwrite to it, expound on it, explaining it in their own words or enlivening it with their own narrative. Some, I note, believe in the myth—rejecting my sense of it altogether. After these two streamwrites are shared, I ask students to generate their own myths of digital age English. There have been some interesting and useful suggestions. My favorite is this: “You know more about yourself than the Internet does” (Justin Broomfield).

Here are some others:

- By generating all this language—emails, texts, tweets, etc.—we get better at language use. (Frank Cioffi)

*Comment: I would like to believe this. I'd like to believe that since we are employing English, modifying it for various purposes, we are becoming more and more adept. But I don't think that's the case. I think it's rather the case that our language is getting more like—and here comes a metaphor—a little bonsai tree, something that has been pared back and miniaturized, or that is stunted and tiny. I don't want my language bonsai-ified. I want it to spread out like a giant sequoia.*

- If you read an online newspaper story, it's true. (Manuel Melo)
- Penmanship no longer matters. (Melo)
- There is no need for real world connections since we exist on the Internet. (B. Wu)
- You won't be judged using shorthand language, e.g., texts and tweets. (Taylor Yanni)
- Grammar does not matter as long as the sender and recipient of the message understand the meaning. (Wayne Chim)
- The Internet has made everyone more informed. (T. Luk)
- What you post on the Internet doesn't matter. (C. Liu)
- People don't really absorb information in e-books. (P. Onyikuke)
- Descriptive grammar is the new prescriptive grammar. (M. Krishnanand)
- Knowledge is power. (D. Johansen)

## Day Fourteen

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### Final Exam

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### Midterm 2, English 2100 [Open Book]

##### Part I (30 points)

*Correctly punctuate the following*

the fact is that college and university students are eminently educable usually willing to change actually the ideal audience for writing instruction what has happened though is that they receive very little formal training in writing the standards used throughout their college careers are haphazard and wildly disparate and the value of precise accurate written expression is rarely upheld at the same time few are taught how to shape a coherent argument unless its about something that almost any reader would automatically concede after it is presented as a one-sentence thesis so why aren't they getting it why does their writing fail so often to take flight I'd like to suggest here that students writing deficiencies emerge from a fairly simple fact professors themselves have a neurotic relationship with writing professors were students for a very long perhaps an unconscionably long time and the problems afflicting our students to an extent afflicted and even shaped professors experience as well specifically their problem (our problem?) is that they see writing in instrumentalist terms they write have written for some extrinsic purpose such as completing requirements in a course getting a degree getting a job getting tenure promotion or money to see writing in these terms is to strip writing of any capacity to genuinely soar to aspire toward perfection it becomes only a means to an end a requirement a degree a job and thus loses the capacity to be any more than just that.

##### Part II (30 points)

*On the answer sheet, indicate what error is represented by each underlined passage. Also, correct the error. Some might be correct.*

We, present writing (1) as routine as the instructions accompanying a build-it-yourself piece of furniture. Who care about the (2) instructions, once we've got the bureau or file cabinet in the end? But the writing in college classes shouldn't be: simply (3) a means to get the palpable, thing (4) of real value—the "A," the college degree, the house in the country with two cars, an SUV, and a big shaggy dog. (5) No: it should (6) be a way of discovering new things about the universe, about texts, issues, and ideas, and fields of knowledge, It should have (7) value in and of itself.

Now into this mix this confused congeries of messages about writing its value the necessity (8) of doing it in order to advance, and the like, enter the (9) obligation to teach a required freshman writing

course. It used to be that a professor didn't have to worry too much about this—they knew that (10) grad students taught that class, in fact, that (11) was the primary function of grad students at many institutions, they were (12) exploited for cheap labor. Although, doctoral I research universities had big libraries. (13) They had highly specialized graduate programs, top-heavy departments, and legions of composition instructors, they were slaves but loved it. (14,15).

**Part III (40 points)**

*Answer two of the following four options. Strive to say something not only original and interesting but also well-focused and to the point. Please use the lined paper provided in this test packet.*

1. Explain Orwell's idea about holding off on formulating an idea using words until you ascertain your feelings (Chapter 6).
2. Looking at Agnes Denes's prose poem, part of which is reproduced in the conclusion of the book, explain what it's doing in a grammar handbook.
3. Some English is "correct" but sounds kind of odd: "It is I," "This is she," "I know that her wanting to leave was understandable," "I had lain down for an hour after lunch." What are we to do in situations like these, when the correct thing sounds funny but the incorrect form is, well, incorrect?
4. Should we have new pronouns for singular neuter case? ("The epicene *hu*" was proposed in the text), or should we just accept "they" as a pronoun that can refer to a singular antecedent?

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## Day Fifteen

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### Final Exam Returned and Discussed

Here is the original passage that I used as the basis for the exam:

The fact is that college and university students are eminently educable, usually willing to change—actually the ideal audience for writing instruction. What has happened, though, is that they receive very little formal training in writing, the standards used throughout their college careers are haphazard and wildly disparate, and the value of precise, accurate written expression is rarely upheld. At the same time, few are taught how to shape a coherent argument, unless it's about something that almost any reader would automatically concede after it is presented as a one-sentence thesis.

So why aren't they getting it? Why does their writing fail so often to take flight? I'd like to suggest here that students' writing deficiencies emerge from a fairly simple fact: professors themselves have a neurotic relationship with writing. Professors were students for a very long, perhaps an unconscionably long, time, and the problems afflicting our students to an extent afflicted and even shaped professors' experience as well. Specifically, their problem (our problem?) is that they see writing in instrumentalist terms—they write, have written, for some extrinsic purpose, such as completing requirements in a course, getting a degree, getting a job, getting tenure, promotion, or money. To see writing in these terms is to strip writing of any capacity to genuinely soar, to aspire toward perfection. It becomes only a means to an end—a requirement, a degree, a job—and thus loses the capacity to be any more than just that. We render it as routine as the instructions accompanying a build-it-yourself piece of furniture. Who cares about the instructions, once we've got the bureau or file cabinet in the end? But the writing in college classes shouldn't be simply a means to get the palpable thing of real value—the “A,” the college degree, the house in the country with two cars, an SUV, and a big shaggy dog. No: it should be a way of discovering new things about the universe, about texts, issues, and ideas, and fields of knowledge. It should have value in and of itself.

Now into this mix, this confused congeries of messages about writing, its value, the necessity of doing it in order to advance, and the like, enters the obligation to teach a required freshman writing course. It used to be that professors didn't have to worry too much about this—grad students taught that class; in fact, that was the primary function of grad students at many institutions. Doctoral I research universities had big libraries, highly specialized graduate programs, top-heavy departments, and legions of composition instructors, who were slaves but loved it.

I would go through the exam, sentence by sentence, in a way similar to what I did on the day I returned the previous exam. Keep in mind that there are multiple ways of correcting these paragraphs and that you need to be aware of that while grading the exam.

It seems to me too that photocopying the original and distributing it to the class will give them an idea of how the prose hangs together. (It's a piece from an essay I wrote about pedagogy, by the way.) The problems with it, though, have to do with specialized language: students don't know what "tenure" means, and they think that "tenure promotion" might be the expression. They have no understanding of "Research I universities," and think it's the personal pronoun that has crept into the sentence. I think that some students did not notice there were no capital letters in the paragraph to be corrected; this pretty well ruined their grades. My most recent results (in a 16-student class) were grades that ranged from 67 to 94, with the average being 85.3.

Be sure to leave some time for individual questions about exams; students might want to know why something was wrong or received only partial credit. The "partial credit" option, by the way, is entirely up to you—some instructors don't like to give it, since they feel it undermines the process of presenting Standard Written English. But my idea is that SWE has some flex to it. So I often offer partial credit.

As for the essay questions, make a note of some particularly good answers and have those read aloud in class.

You also might take this opportunity to get the students writing a little bit. Maybe somehow get them to reflect on the course's presentation of grammar and usage. (You might take this as an informal evaluation of the course.) So, after a secret spring, have them write to one of the following:

1. Has your concept of English grammar changed over the course of the semester?  
If so, how? (If not, why not?)
2. What do you think now about English grammar?
3. What do you wish we had covered but did not have time to discuss—and which the book itself did not cover, either?

And with these, you will want everyone to read—or go oceanic, as I have been saying throughout.

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