KNOWING THE RULES: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Abstract
Drawing on the author's 30-plus years of teaching experience and 18-plus years of directing the Writing Program at Wichita State University, this reflective essay examines some of the anxieties incoming graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) face concerning grammar instruction and how those are mitigated. While grammar instruction remains an important element of composition pedagogy, incoming GTAs often arrive to orientation with a lack of felicity with the rules, a sense of inadequacy knowing the rules, or both. The author postulates some reasons why this happens, but uses a gentle approach to poke some fun at the often over-seriousness of the entire endeavor.

Keywords: college, English, freshman, grammar, graduate teaching assistants, GTAs, heart, imposter syndrome, orientation, university, writing

"Teaching grammar takes heart," I tell my novice teachers. Increasingly, I find that the graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) under my supervision arrive with less and less confidence in their mastery of this root part of what they do. There are reasons for this. Increasingly over the years, the standardized tests that dictate high school curricula have moved away from things like identifying split infinitives and diagramming sentences. Simultaneously, technology has evolved exponentially to right-click errors and misspellings and even compose whole error-free essays. What need is there for knowing the rules when machines carry that burden?

Sure, there's a vigorous cult of grammarians at the edge of literate society, led by people like Mignon Fogarty, the Grammar Girl. Fogarty hosts a brilliant podcast and blog that seeks to elevate grammar from tedious, duty rule mastery into something hip and engaging. But such cultists exist largely in an esoteric world parallel to vintage baseball players or miniature goat enthusiasts.

"And more and more," I remind these novice teachers. "It takes heart from your students to *want* to learn that stuff." The heart has always been the lowest-hung fruit of metaphors. For teachers, this metaphor is deployed with any number of variations and nuance, as in "having a heart" when it comes to bumping a student's grade or easing off a pedantic grammar lesson; "having heart" to persevere in the face of a student's umpteenth-but-still-lacking draft or when contending with helicopter parents; or, simply recognizing "In this world, you will have trouble," as it says in John 16:33, so "Take heart!" and relish the importance and value of the work.

One of the favorite gifts I've received from a student over the years remains a hand-drawn and colored image of a disembodied human heart. Lucinda, who had just successfully completed her MA and two years of teaching freshman composition at Wichita State University under my supervision, presented this to me mounted and framed as a thank-you for helping shepherd her (and her peers) through the wilderness of first-time teaching. "I didn't think I could do this. You're the *heart* of this department," the inscription on the back reads.

Lucinda greatly overestimates my importance, but I keep the heart featured prominently in my office. The image is gruesome – just a bloody heart made to pop by its red-white-and black composition. This also serves a more subtle purpose in my daily prompting: first-time teaching is universally terrifying.

One of the main aspects of my job is to prepare GTAs for the freshman composition classroom; a job I've handled now since just before our "typical" entering freshmen have been alive. I try to impart to our new teachers that they need to approach the role of grammar in the college classroom as the shared language for writing success instead of attempting to master the arbitrary arcana. Grammar instruction may be at the root of effective composition teaching, but it certainly isn't *the* heart. Many of our new GTAs have openly expressed a sense of embarrassment that they don't know basic grammar rules (at least enough to articulate them). Holistically, I can assure them, they don't know less than their predecessors—they just know different things. Grammar has fallen off as a priority. They can typically learn it more quickly and better through their teaching prep than by mastering these concepts through their own writing and independent study.

Like many of them, most of what I learned about grammar and punctuation came to me intrinsically, from reading. If you've grown up liking to read, you can probably craft a decent, coherent sentence without much need of oversight. The things you get wrong will likely be venial sins that don't really inhibit your relationship with your readers.

Years before arriving here, when I had just turned 22 years old, I went through my own GTA experience. I think it was assumed that my BA degree in English meant I knew all I needed to know about grammar and mechanics and such. Poor vetting on someone's part. My degree checked a box, even though I hadn't had a class devoted to grammar since the eighth grade. Like most of our GTAs, I'd been moved ahead early in my schooling to Honors/AP/Gifted classes that glossed over grammar to spend more time on "bigger things." As a voracious reader, I probably made fewer grammar mistakes than my peers, but I couldn't explain the rules. Things just looked right or wrong on the page.

When I got to graduate school, the pattern sadly persisted; I was given a three-hour "orientation" to tell me what classes I would be teaching, to tell me not to sleep with my students, and to show me how to make copies on an old thermofax machine whose purple fumes students huffed with relish. As it had been for me, most of our GTAs arrive eager to begin their MA or MFA programs at Wichita State with little to no classroom experience. The fact that they'll be spending 16 weeks in front of two sections of college freshmen (as many as 25 in each class), tends to be an afterthought to their academic aspirations until orientation descends. I hold them captive for two weeks prior to the fall semester and dispense as much practical information and as many anecdotes as I can, knowing nothing will really suffice. Knowing nothing I can say will make someone have the heart to teach well or even enjoy the ride.

I recall two other GTAs from Lucinda's cohort: Aoki and Zora. The entire orientation Zora sat back confidently, shrugging off my tales of terror. I should say that I don't mean to simply terrorize new GTAs like some fraternity pledge master, but I want them to know the kinds of "class management" things they might encounter that they won't find in the MLA. One such example I share frequently is not from my own experience. My wife (who is also professing at Wichita State) had been teaching an otherwise excellent writing skills class for freshmen when the proctor showed up to administer the student evaluations. Melinda, my better half, left the room to wait in the hallway while the proctor handed out number 2 pencils and bubble sheets meant to gauge student perceptions of effective pedagogy. As she waited, a student who had seemed overly stressed by every assignment all semester (typically peppering Melinda with emails concerned with grammatical and punctuation minutia) came down the hall late to class. "I just found out my advisor messed up and I didn't even need to take this class in the first place," he said.

"You've done fine, though," Melinda responded. "You're clearly going to pass," she added. He seemed so visibly upset at the realization he'd spent nearly an entire semester fretting over improving his grammar and writing. She ushered him into the room and watched through the door window as the proctor handed him a pencil and bubble sheet.

A few moments later the same student burst out the door, blood streaming down his face. "*Oh my god*!" Melinda exclaimed. "What happened to you?"

"It's self-inflicted!" he said, and ran off out of the building. Melinda called the campus police and our student support offices, waiting anxiously for someone to emerge from the classroom to help explain what had transpired. But no one exited the room. She opened the door to see 20 students still busily filling out their evaluations, the disinterested proctor piddling with her phone. "*Does anyone mind telling me what just happened?*" she asked.

One student put down her pencil and whispered, "I don't know. He said something about how he wasn't supposed to be here and then walked back and started hitting his head against the wall." She pointed to a part of the room where Melinda could see blood running down the wall and then the student resumed filling in empty bubbles.

Let me interject here, as I did for Lucinda and Aoki and Zora, that Melinda's bloodied student was ultimately okay. He got the psychological help he needed through the university and eventually received his degree. I tell this story to illustrate that freshmen will often get so stuck on the "rules" – whether the rule is that you must complete your bubble sheet and turn it in before you do anything else or whether you should never allow your sentences to run on as I'm doing here and elsewhere in this essay—that they miss the bigger picture entirely. As such, good instructors should likewise be mindful of the importance of grammar to successful writing, while not getting too hung up on the rules for a subject so often inextricably subjective.

"Got it," Zora said.

Aoki, though, seemed triggered to the point of a panic attack by my story about Melinda's student. "I don't think I can do this. I don't think I can do this," she kept repeating.

"You can," I insisted. Aoki was possessed of an obviously ebullient spirit and seemed incredibly bright. All the other GTAs in her cohort took to her immediately. I knew her students would love her, too. She had a good heart, worn on her sleeve, that her students would immediately appreciate.

"You got this," Zora added, confidently. Zora had a good heart, too. But she was maybe a little cocky.

After the first day of classes I asked all the new GTAs to check in with me. Aoki, to my delight, came bounding down the hallway: "It went great! I love my students!" She gushed on and on about how manifest her fears had been before walking into that first classroom, but then the students' generalized shyness/excitement/fear/anticipation coalesced into a vibe Aoki felt ready to embrace. "I freaking *LOVE* my students!"

Zora, who had seemed so bored by my stories during orientation came crawling into my office later that day in literal tears. "I can't…I can't …I can't," she sniffled. "There's too many of them. I can't do this." As we discussed her situation it became clear that Zora suffered from Sudden-Onset-Imposter Syndrome. She was prepared to teach (as much as any of her peers at least), but undermined by a haunting sense all those students peering up at her were inwardly parsing everything she said, scrutinizing her verbiage, cannibalizing her look and demeanor and everything she said right down to her bones.

I was able to convince Zora to try again. With a little hand-holding she got more and more confident in the classroom to the point that she's now made it into a successful career teaching college. It's easy to dismiss the incapacitating feelings of Imposter Syndrome if one's never set foot in a freshman composition classroom, but they can be crippling. And for all but the psychopaths

among us, those feelings never really go away. Ours is a discipline with a truly impossible knowledge-base—grammar-syntax-punctuation-etymologies—everything written in English Literature and beyond for thousands of years.

I'm reminded of another thing I share with the new GTAs as we talk about grammar. Their fears are often "What if a student asks something I can't answer?" That's a legitimate fear. Think about standing in front of 25 freshman students and getting a question for which not only don't you know the answer, but something for which you know, in your heart, *you should know* the answer. For me it's usually something to do with comma usage. Given the amount of stuff I continue not to *know* after this many years in the business, it's no wonder I can't ever shake my Imposter Syndrome.

If you teach English in any of its many forms, you'll know this from that time at a family gathering or spouse's work party or some other event where non-academics congregate to make merry. One of these non-teachers will approach and ask the standard question: "And what do you do?"

"I teach English." This is universally met with a slight recoil, as though you announced you've got a communicable disease or need a loan. The person will then root around for something to say.

"Oh, I know. Have you read *Such-and-such*, by *So-and-so?* It's so good, isn't it?"

In my experience, the book referenced is usually something from a book club a couple years prior. I don't cast judgment on that, as someone reading anything is sort of splendid in my opinion. But the chances of me knowing the book itself let alone anything about the book they bring up or its author are incredibly rare. "I don't know it. Sorry." That response is always met with a silent, subtle reproach: Faker.

So, here's one last anecdote: A former professor of mine who I stayed in contact with moved to California with his wife who had never been to the ocean. To her delight, they'd found a place so close to the beach she could run out the front door to the ocean, which she did on their first day there. As she frolicked, a giant wave came in and slammed her into the surf. She came up sputtering and limped back inside, likely feeling a bit deflated by the whole ocean thing.

The next day she fell ill. They went to see a doctor who looked her over and said something to the effect of "You're just getting used to the new climate. You'll be fine."

She wasn't fine, though, and so a couple of days later, when dark circles appeared around her eyes and her fatigue and nausea worsened, they tried a different doctor. This doctor, too, looked her over and affirmed: "It's just the pollution out here. You get used to it."

Unconvinced, my former professor decided to go the Dr. Google route and discovered a condition called myocardial contusion: a bruised heart. They raced to a third doctor who confirmed the diagnosis. Left untreated, a bruised heart can prove fatal.

"That's really frightening," I said, upon hearing this story from my former mentor.

"You want to know what's really scary?" he said. "Your average MD knows about as much about the human body as you or I know about English. Let that sink in."

I tell my GTAs this story every fall. I want them to know as much as they can, but to understand "I don't know. Let's look it up!" is a perfectly acceptable response to even a simple question about grammar or punctuation or whatever that they think they really should know but don't. "You're never going to know *all* the rules by heart."

Author Biography

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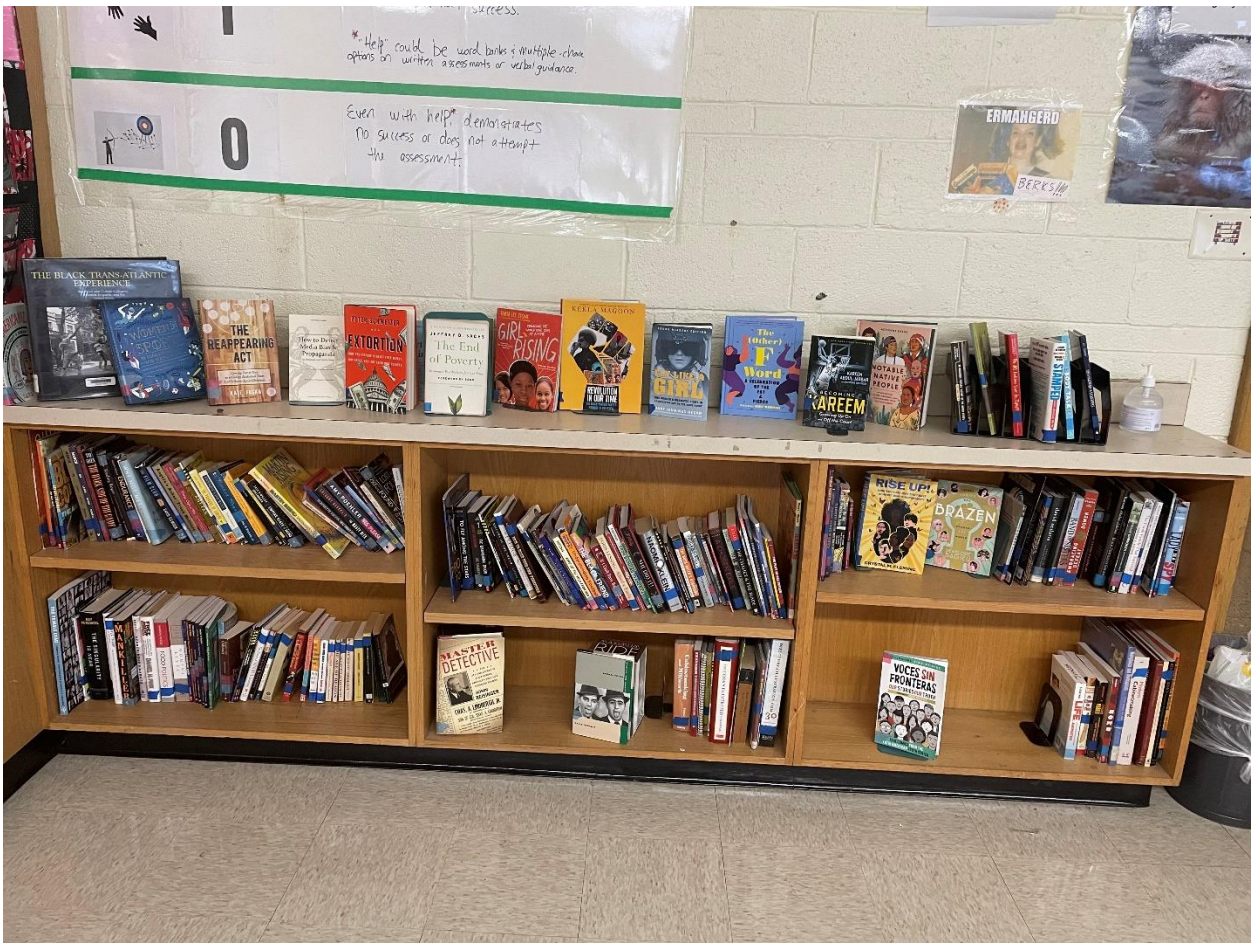

Mary Harrison's classroom library at Wichita West High School