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What Should Colleges Teach?

By **STANLEY FISH**

A few years ago, when I was grading papers for a graduate literature course, I became alarmed at the inability of my students to write a clean English sentence. They could manage for about six words and then, almost invariably, the syntax (and everything else) fell apart. I became even more alarmed when I remembered that these same students were instructors in the college's composition program. What, I wondered, could possibly be going on in their courses?

I decided to find out, and asked to see the lesson plans of the 104 sections. I read them and found that only four emphasized training in the craft of writing. Although the other 100 sections fulfilled the composition requirement, instruction in composition was not their focus. Instead, the students spent much of their time discussing novels, movies, TV shows and essays on a variety of hot-button issues — racism, sexism, immigration, globalization. These artifacts and topics are surely worthy of serious study, but they should have received it in courses that bore their name, if only as a matter of truth-in-advertising.

As I learned more about the world of composition studies, I came to the conclusion that unless writing courses focus exclusively on writing they are a sham, and I advised administrators to insist that all courses listed as courses in composition teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else. This advice was contemptuously dismissed by the composition establishment, and I was accused of being a reactionary who knew nothing about current trends in research. Now I have received (indirect) support from a source that makes me slightly uncomfortable, the [American Council of Trustees and Alumni](#), which last week issued its latest white paper, "[What Will They Learn? A Report on General Education Requirements at 100 of the Nation's Leading Colleges and Universities.](#)"

Click on the square at top right to read the paper.

Founded by Lynne Cheney and Jerry Martin in 1995, ACTA (I quote from its website) is "an independent, non-profit organization committed to academic freedom, excellence and accountability at America's colleges." Sounds good, but that "commitment" takes the form of mobilizing trustees and alumni in an effort to pressure colleges and universities

to make changes in their curricula and requirements. Academic institutions, the ACTA website declares, “need checks and balances” because “internal constituencies” — which means professors — cannot be trusted to be responsive to public concerns about the state of higher education.

The battle between those who actually work in the academy and those who would monitor academic work from the outside has been going on for well over 100 years and I am on record (in “[Save The World On Your Own Time](#)” and elsewhere) as being against external regulation of classroom practices if only because the impulse animating the effort to regulate is always political rather than intellectual.

It is of course true that political motives can also inform the decisions made by academic insiders; the professorial guild is far from pure. But the cure for the politicization of the classroom by some professors is not the counter-politicization urged by ACTA when it crusades for “accountability,” a code word for reconfiguring the academy according to conservative ideas and agendas.

Nevertheless, I found myself often nodding in agreement when I was reading ACTA’s new report. In it, the 100 colleges and universities are ranked on a scale from A to F based on whether students are required to take courses in seven key areas — composition, literature, foreign language, U.S. government or history, economics, mathematics and natural or physical science.

It’s hard to quarrel with this list; the quarrel and the criticism have been provoked by the criteria that accompany it. These criteria are stringent and narrow and have been criticized as parochial and motivated by nostalgia and politics; but in at least four of the seven areas they make perfect sense. Credit for requiring instruction in mathematics will not be given for linguistic courses or computer literacy courses because their “math content is usually minimal.” Credit for requiring instruction in the natural or physical sciences will not be given for courses with “weak scientific content” or courses “taught by faculty outside of the science departments” (i.e., the philosophy or history of science). Credit for requiring instruction in a foreign language will not be given for fewer than three semesters of study because it takes that long to acquire “competency at the intermediate level.” And credit for requiring composition will not be given for courses that are “writing intensive” (there is a significant amount of writing required but the focus is on some substantive topic), or for courses in disciplines other than English and composition (often termed “writing in the discipline” courses), or for courses in public speaking, or for remedial courses. In order to qualify, a course must be devoted to “grammar, style, clarity, and argument.”

The rationale behind these exclusions is compelling: mathematics, the natural sciences, foreign languages and composition are disciplines with a specific content and a repertoire

of essential skills. Courses that center on another content and fail to provide concentrated training in those skills are really courses in another subject. You can tell when you are being taught a mathematical function or a scientific procedure or a foreign language or the uses of the subjunctive and when you are being taught something else.

Things are not so clear when it comes to literature and history. Why should the literature requirement be fulfilled only by “a comprehensive literary survey” and not by single-author courses (aren’t Shakespeare and Milton “comprehensive” enough), or by a course in the theater or the graphic novel or the lyrics of Bob Dylan (all rejected in the report)?

With respect to science, composition, foreign language instruction and mathematics, ACTA is simply saying, *Don’t slight the core of the discipline*. But when the report decrees that only broad surveys of literature can fulfill a literature requirement, the organization is intervening in the discipline and taking sides in its internal debates. Why should trustees and alumni have a say in determining whether the graphic novel — a multi-media art that goes back at least as far as William Blake — deserves to represent literature? (For the record, I think it does.) This part of the report is an effort to shape the discipline from the outside according to a political vision.

This holds too for the insistence that only the study of American history “in both chronological and thematic breadth” can fulfill the history requirement. Here the politics is explicit: such courses, we are told, are “indispensable for the formation of citizens and for the preservation of our free institutions.”

Indispensable I doubt (this is academic hubris); and while the formation of citizens and the preservation of our free institutions may be admirable aims, it is not the task of courses in history to achieve them. The question of how best to introduce students to the study of history should be answered not by invoking external goals, however worthy, but by arguing the merits of academic alternatives; and I see no obvious reason why a course on the Civil War or the American revolution or the French revolution (or both of them together) would not do the job as well as a survey stretching from the landing at Plymouth Rock to the war in Iraq. (At any rate, the issue is one for academic professionals to decide.)

But if I have no problem with alternative ways of teaching literature or history, how can I maintain (with ACTA) that there is only one way to teach writing? Easy. It can’t be an alternative way of teaching writing to teach something else (like multiculturalism or social justice). It can, however, be an alternative way of teaching history to forgo a broad chronological narrative and confine yourself to a single period or even to a single world-changing event. It is the difference between not doing the job and getting the job done by another route.

This difference is blurred in ACTA report because it is running (and conflating) two

arguments. One argument (with which I agree) says teach the subject matter and don't adulterate it with substitutes. The other argument says teach the subject matter so that it points in a particular ideological direction, the direction of traditional values and a stable canon. The first argument is methodological and implies no particular politics; the other is political through and through, and it is the argument the authors are finally committed to because they see themselves as warriors in the culture wars. The battle they are fighting in the report is over the core curriculum, the defense of which is for them a moral as well as an educational imperative as it is for those who oppose it.

The arguments pro and con are familiar. On one side the assertion that a core curriculum provides students with the distilled wisdom of the western tradition and prepares them for life. On the other side the assertion that a core curriculum packages and sells the prejudices and biases of the reigning elite and so congeals knowledge rather than advancing it.

Have we lost our way or finally found it? Thirty-five years ago there was no such thing as a gay and lesbian studies program; now you can build a major around it. For some this development is a sign that a brave new world has arrived; for others it marks the beginning of the end of civilization.

It probably is neither; curricular alternatives are just not that world-shaking. The philosophical baggage that burdens this debate should be jettisoned and replaced with a more prosaic question: What can a core curriculum do that the proliferation of options and choices (two words excoriated in the ACTA report) cannot? The answer to that question is given early in the report before it moves on to its more polemical pages. An "important benefit of a coherent core curriculum is its ability to foster a 'common conversation' among students, connecting them more closely with faculty and with each other."

The nice thing about this benefit is that it can be had no matter what the content of the core curriculum is. It could be the classics of western literature and philosophy. It could be science fiction. It could be globalization. It could be anything so long as every student took it. But whatever it is, please let it include a writing course that teaches writing and not everything under the sun. That should be the real core of any curriculum.

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What Should Colleges Teach? Part 2

By **STANLEY FISH**

The negative comments on [my previous column](#) (there were many positive ones too) fall neatly into two groups, the attacks on me and the attacks on my ideas.

Let's do the ad hominem stuff first. More than a few posters declared that while I talk the talk, I don't walk the walk. [Eric](#) issues a challenge: "So Mr. Fish, how about teaching some comp classes yourself?" [English Professor](#) is confident that "we can safely assume that Mr. Fish has never actually taught a composition class himself." Ditto [anonymous writing instructor](#): "I'm sure that Fish is paid too dearly for his opinions here and elsewhere to actually teach composition classes." [Maeve](#) asks, "By the way, when's the last time you taught a freshman composition class?"

That one's easy. The last time I taught a regularly scheduled freshman composition class was my last year teaching in a liberal arts college. That was 2004-2005, and in the years before that, when I was the dean, I taught the course every fall. Since 2005, I've been a faculty member at a law school where there are no freshmen to teach, so I've had to make do with offering a non-credit writing workshop on Mondays; it's my version of pro bono work and last fall 50 or so students and a few colleagues took advantage of it.

Earlier in my career I taught composition (sometimes two courses in a semester) for 12 years at the University of California, Berkeley. I was one of two full professors to do so. In 1974, I moved to Johns Hopkins, where there was no writing course because of the (mistaken) assumption that students who were good enough to get into the university didn't need one. An enterprising graduate student named Pamela Regis enlisted my help in setting up a fledgling program, and by the time I left for Duke in 1985 the program was established and growing.

At Duke writing instruction was not housed in the English department, and so I could neither participate in it nor direct its course. After that to the University of Illinois at Chicago, where I was able to get involved again. As dean, I held seminars for the T.A.'s in my college and the business college and blocked attempts to add a service learning component to the writing course. (That's an answer to [Margaret Boerner's](#) question, which she thinks is rhetorical: "Did he do anything about it when he was dean?") Now I give workshops in colleges across the country, most recently at Columbia University's Teachers

College. When [Max Byrd](#) says (contemptuously), “Professor Fish might get off his high horse and teach a course himself,” I reply, Professor Byrd should climb off his low horse and do some fact-checking before he pronounces.

So that’s the experience part. Then there’s the expertise part. I am told by [MC](#) that I “don’t know a damn thing about composition.” [Liz](#) is kind enough to inform me that “there is an entire field of study on this topic; countless articles and books are written about the subject by experts.” And, she adds, it’s all too typical that people like me “who complain about poor writing don’t want to teach it themselves.” [Straight face](#) advises me to “know your limitations and defer your ignorant ‘common sense’ to the DECADES of theory and practice IN THE FIELD” and wonders why I “failed” to leave the matter of writing instruction to the “specialists” in my department.

Maybe because I was one. I haven’t written “countless articles” on the subject, but I have written some and they have been part of the conversation, especially [a 1987 piece titled “Anti-Foundationalism, Theory Hope and the Teaching of Composition.”](#) I have been on the editorial board of one of the leading journals, and the essays in that and other composition venues often discuss my work (not always favorably). I have written columns on writing, also widely discussed, in this newspaper and I have studied and taught many of the major composition theorists.

Of course, the fact that I can claim experience and credentials in the field doesn’t make my views correct. Those views can certainly be criticized, as they are by a number of posters. The main criticism is that my emphasis on teaching forms and only forms (a) leaves out everything interesting, (b) leads to boring classes no student would want to take and (c) has been discredited by the research years ago. That research, according to [Dee](#), shows that “teaching grammar out of context” is ineffective, in part because, as writer teacher observes, “students are afraid that they aren’t abiding by the rules.”

If that is what is meant by teaching grammar — memorizing rules and being always afraid of breaking them — I agree. If the effect of instruction is to make students fear that they are walking through a minefield of error and that at any moment they are going to step on something that will wound them, the odds of their learning anything are small.

The research that led Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer to conclude in 1963 that “the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible . . . even a harmful effect on improvement in writing,” is no doubt correct but beside my point; all it proves is that “drilling students on parts of speech” ([McLoughlin](#)) doesn’t work. What does work, I have found, is something quite different: drilling students in the forms that enable meaning; and these are not inert taxonomic forms, but forms of thought.

A small example. Let’s say I’m teaching the neither/nor form. I begin by producing a simple neither/nor sentence. “Neither his age nor his disability prevented him from

competing.” I then ask my students to write their own sentences on that model. Most of them are able to do it, and they produce sentences with 20 different contents, but only one form. The next step is for the students to figure out what that form is. Just how does a neither/nor sentence organize items and actions in the world?

It takes a while to work that out, but in not too much time students are able to explain that the form organizes three components: two conditions (age and disability) and the resolution (to compete) in relation to which they may have presented an obstacle, but did not. The important thing students learn, in addition to being able to generate neither/nor sentences forever, is that the relationship among those components, whatever they are, is always the same: two assertions that have a relationship to each other combine to highlight the unlikelihood of an action or an attitude.

Notice that this is an abstract and purely formal account of the matter and that it will fit innumerable narratives (and a narrative is what a neither/nor sentence is). While the content is variable and abundant — as [David Berman](#) says, “content is everywhere” — the form is unvarying. It follows then that what students must learn are the forms; the content will follow. A neither/nor sentence, or an even-though sentence or a nevertheless sentence, or a thousand other forms that can be studied and mastered — these do not clothe an antecedent content; they make it possible; they are not brought in to adorn a story; they are the story. In short — and I borrow this phrasing from my book editor [Julia Cheiffetz](#) — in learning how to write, it’s not the thought that counts.

That is my answer to the many posters who said things like, “students cannot write about nothing” ([cyndy](#)) or “students need to write about something” ([ISE](#)) or “the practice of writing has to be embedded in something” ([Erik Borg](#)). Writing is its own subject, and a deeper and more fascinating one than the content it makes available. Content just sprawls around; forms constrain and shape it. As [Jamakaya](#) says, “good writing skills instill good thinking,” not the other way around. [Robin T.](#) agrees: “Young people who can’t write can’t think.”

[Shunyam](#) would have it that “one can’t teach writing without topics and texts that students can be involved in,” but I have found that students very quickly become involved in the extraordinary power and generativity of ordinary forms; they are amazed, delighted and fascinated by the new analytic skills they are able to exercise. And the texts? Well, they can be anything; they are disposable; they are just filler; they are not and should not be the center of interest, which again is not mere form but enabling form.

I call this the “Karate Kid” method of teaching writing. You will remember that in the 1984 movie the title figure is being trained to perform in matches, but his teacher has him waxing cars and painting fences, repeating over and over again the same stylized motions. The kid thinks he’s not learning anything. But he’s learning everything. Like the forms my

students study, these motions — formal moves — need no context and can be made effective in any context, as the final scenes show.

Of course, “The Karate Kid” is fiction, but real-life contexts are brought in by two posters who make my point. In response to [George B.](#)’s dictum that “a class in painting should not be about brushes, tubes and canvas,” [Laurie](#) declares that in fact “a course in painting should be about brushes, tubes, and canvas.” If you don’t have control of what the tools do, you’re not going to be able to go on to the “higher” activity. [Chefesse](#), whose name identifies her profession, tells us that “learning to cook, you have to practice over and over again how to chop vegetables before you master the sauté pan.” The formal repertoire makes content-based performance possible; without a formal repertoire, internalized to the extent of being automatic, performance is haphazard and without shape or boundaries.

Finally, one criticism of me is certainly justified. It goes to my own writing in this column. [Blago](#), among others, finds me prolix. He gives a one-word piece of advice: “Concision.” (I haven’t followed it this time, either.) [Johnny](#) provides a deeper analysis. I wrote, he says, two essays, one about writing skills, the other about conservative efforts to undermine professorial autonomy. They didn’t quite mesh and got in each other’s way.

He’s right. I should have remembered a fellow columnist’s golden rule — one topic at a time. I’ll try to do better in the future.

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What Should Colleges Teach? Part 3

By **STANLEY FISH**

I write a third column on the teaching of writing in colleges and universities because three important questions posed by a large number of posters remain unanswered: (1) Isn't the mastery of forms something that should be taught in high school or earlier? (2) Isn't extensive reading the key to learning how to write? (3) What would a composition course based on the method I urge look like?

Questions (1) and (2) can be answered briefly. Question (3) is, as they say, a work in progress.

By all the evidence, high schools and middle schools are not teaching writing skills in an effective way, if they are teaching them at all. The exception seems to be Catholic schools. More than a few commentators remembered with a mixture of fondness and pain the instruction they received at the hands of severe nuns. And I have found that those students in my classes who do have a grasp of the craft of writing are graduates of parochial schools. (I note parenthetically that in many archdioceses such schools are being closed, not a good omen for those who prize writing.)

I cannot see, however, why a failure of secondary education relieves college teachers of a responsibility to make up the deficit. Quite the reverse. It is because our students come to us unable to write clean English sentences that we are obligated to supply what they did not receive from their previous teachers. No doubt this obligation constitutes a burden on an already overworked labor force, but (and this is one of those times a cliché can acquire renewed force), somebody has to do it.

The question of the relationship of reading and learning to write is more complicated. Classical rhetoricians preached the virtue of imitation; students were presented with sentences from the work of great authors and asked to reproduce their form with a different content. I like this exercise because its emphasis is so obviously formal.

But what about just doing a lot of reading and hoping that by passing your eyes over many pages you will learn how to write through osmosis? I'm not so sure. If to wide

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reading were added daily dinner-table discussions of the sophistication and wit found in many 18th and 19th century novels, I might be more sanguine. And if your experience with words were also to include training in public speaking and debate (itself a matter of becoming practiced in forms), I might say, O.K., you probably don't need a form-based composition course. Unfortunately, however, reading is not the favorite pastime of today's youth and debate societies don't have the cachet they once did; so my insistence that a narrowly focused writing course be required for everyone stands.

How does one teach such a course? What texts can one use? How does one effect the passage from sentences to larger prose units? "How do you determine whether and in what ways [this] approach improves . . . students' writing," asks [James Gee](#). My answers to these questions are provisional. I'm still trying to work them out.

I have reached some conclusions. First, you must clear your mind of the orthodoxies that have taken hold in the composition world. The main orthodoxy is nicely encapsulated in this resolution adopted in 1974 by the Conference on College Composition and Communication: "We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language — the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style."

Of course, as a matter of law students have the right to any dialect they choose to deploy (although in some small cities where the "English Only" movement has succeeded in the ballot box, linguistic rights have been curtailed). The issue is whether students accorded this right will prosper in a society where norms of speech and writing are enforced not by law but by institutional decorums. If you're about to be fired because your memos reflect your "own identity and style," citing the CCC resolution is not going to do you any good.

Behind the resolution is a theoretical argument. Linguistic forms, it is said, are not God-given; they are the conventional products of social/cultural habit and therefore none of them is naturally superior or uniquely "correct." It follows (according to this argument) that any claim of correctness is political, a matter of power not of right. "If we teach standardized, handbook grammar as if it is the only 'correct' form of grammar, we are teaching in cooperation with a discriminatory power system" ([Patricia A. Dunn and Kenneth Lindblom, English Journal, January, 2003](#)).

Statements like this one issue from the mistake of importing a sociological/political analysis of a craft into the teaching of it. It may be true that the standard language is an instrument of power and a device for protecting the status quo, but that very truth is a reason for teaching it to students who are being prepared for entry into the world as it now is rather than the world as it might be in some utopian imagination — all dialects equal, all habit of speech and writing equally rewarded.

You're not going to be able to change the world if you are not equipped with the tools that

speak to its present condition. You don't strike a blow against a power structure by making yourself vulnerable to its prejudices. Even as an exercise in political strategy, "having conversations with students about linguistic systems and democratic values" (V.F. Kinloch, "Revisiting the Promise of Students' Right to Their Own Language," CCC 57:1, September 2005) strikes me as an unlikely lever for bringing about change; as a strategy for teaching writing, it is a disaster.

And if students infected with the facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism declare, "I have a right to my own language," reply, "Yes, you do, and I am not here to take that language from you; I'm here to teach you another one." (Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it.

Of course, I still haven't explained how you get on with it. Not by consulting Strunk and White's "The Elements of Style," a book cited favorably by more than a few posters. I wouldn't go as far as [Randy Burgess](#) does when he calls the famous little book "the worst," but I would say that it is unhelpful because its prescriptions presuppose the knowledge most of our students don't have. What good is it to be told, "Do not join independent clauses with a comma," if you don't have the slightest idea of what a clause is (and isn't), never mind an "independent" one? And even if a beginning student were provided with the definition of a clause, the definition itself would hang in mid-air like a random piece of knowledge. It would be like being given a definition of a drop-kick in the absence of any understanding of the game in which it could be deployed.

You have to start with a simple but deep understanding of the game, which for my purposes is the game of writing sentences. So it makes sense to begin with the question, What is a sentence anyway? My answer has two parts: (1) A sentence is an organization of items in the world. (2) A sentence is a structure of logical relationships.

The second part tells you what kind of organization a sentence is, a logical one, and in order to pinpoint what the components of that logic are, I put a simple sentence on the table, something like "John hit the ball" or "Jane likes cake." I spend an entire week on sentences like these (which are easily comprehended by students of any background), asking students to generate them, getting them to see the structure of relationships that makes them all the same on a formal level, getting them to see that the motor of meaning production is form, not content.

Once they see that — and it is an indispensable lesson — they are ready to explore, generate and practice with the other forms that organize the world's items in increasingly complicated ways. Basically, there is only one thing to be learned, that a sentence is a structure of logical relationships; everything else follows.

I have devised a number of exercises designed to reinforce and extend the basic insight. These include (1) asking students to make a sentence out of a random list of words, and

then explain what they did; (2) asking students to turn a three-word sentence like “Jane likes cake” into a 100-word sentence without losing control of the basic structure and then explain, word-by-word, clause-by-clause, what they did; (3) asking students to replace the nonsense words in the first stanza of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” with ordinary English words in a way that makes coherent (if silly) sense, and then explain what they did, and how they knew what kind of word to put into each “slot.” (The answer is that even in the absence of sense or content, the stanza’s formal structure tells them what to do and what not to do.)

Notice that the exercises always come in two parts. In the first part students are asked to do something they can do easily. In the second part they are asked to analyze their own performance. The second part is the hard one; it requires students to raise to a level of analytical conscience the operations they must perform if they are to write sentences that hang together.

In the final exercise, [about which I’ve written before](#) in this space, the class is divided into groups of four or five and each group is asked to create its own language — complete with a lexicon, and a grammar capable of conveying the distinctions (of number, tense, mood, etc.) conveyed by English grammatical forms. At the end of the semester each group presents a text in its language and teaches the class how to translate it into English, and how to translate English sentences into sentences in the new language, to which the group always gives a name and about which it is always fiercely proprietary.

To my knowledge, there are no textbooks that teach this method — [Stephen](#) reports, “until you described it . . . I had never heard of such a course at any college” — although, in some respects, Francis Christensen’s “generative rhetoric” of sentences, now considered outmoded, comes close.

What I do is supplement the exercises described above with a standard grammar text filled with the usual terminology, a terminology that will not seem impenetrable and hostile to students who have been learning how language works at a level these texts assume but do not explicate. My current favorites are [Geraldine Woods’ “English Grammar for Dummies”](#) and [Martha Kolln’s “Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choice, Rhetorical Effects.”](#) I like the first because its examples are so fanciful (“Lochness loves my singing”) that there is no danger of becoming interested in their content. I like the second because of Kolln’s emphasis on how grammatical choices fulfill and/or disappoint reader expectations.

I have also assigned [J.L. Austin’s “How to Do Things With Words,”](#) [Richard Lanham’s “A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms”](#) and [Lynne Truss’s “Eats, Shoots & Leaves,”](#) and I have flirted with using the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* and parts of Quintilian and Seneca, if only to show students how old the formal teaching of writing is.

My course is entirely sentence-centered except for one exercise, when I put a sentence on the board — usually something incredibly boring like, “The first year of college presents many challenges” — and ask each student in turn to add a sentence while taking care to look backward to the narrative that has already been developed and forward to the sentences yet to be written by his or her colleagues.

At the end of the semester, I used to send my students into the class taught by Cathy Birkenstein and Gerald Graff, whose excellent book “[They Say / I Say](#)” introduces students to the forms of argument in a spirit entirely compatible with my focus on the forms of sentences. (We have taught in each others’ classes.)

As to the question of whether this method improves writing, I can only cite local successes in my classes and the anecdotal reports of former students who have employed it in their own classes. I take heart from veteran composition teachers like Lynn Sams, who says that after many years of experimentation, she has concluded that “the ability to analyze sentences, to understand how the parts work together to convey desired meaning, emphasis, and effect is . . . central to the writing process.” (“[How to Teach Grammar, Analytical Thinking and Writing; A Method that Works](#),” *English Journal*, January, 2003). Amen.