

What Are the Priorities?

R. BAIRD SHUMAN

Although society assumes that (1) schools should teach grammar and (2) learning grammar will help students to write better, those who teach both writing and grammar have long questioned the second assumption. As early as 1906, researcher Franklin S. Hoyt demonstrated that a knowledge of grammar is not a concomitant of effective writing.¹ Schools, however, have continued to teach grammar. Scholars have invented new grammars to teach. Indeed, the word *grammar* is meaningless today unless qualified by a descriptor such as *traditional, structural, or transformational/generative*.

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mar a person knows.³ One might argue that if the reverse were true, grammarians would be the best writers in our society. Those who have read widely in their works certainly cannot endorse such a contention.

A moderating voice in this argument is Rei R. Noguchi, who, although essentially siding with those who deny the

value of formal grammar instruction in teaching writing, establishes a middle ground by defining the basics in a writer's grammar and by suggesting how best to teach these basics.⁴ Identifying the essential elements of writing as content, organization, and style, Noguchi dismisses a knowledge of grammar as having much to do with any of these elements except style.

Working from this base, Noguchi establishes grammatical priorities, arguing, for example, "It makes considerably more sense to teach the concept of 'subject' than the concept of 'objective complement.'" Noguchi does not suggest that no one needs to know about objective complements. He acknowledges that grammar is both an academic subject that specialists study and a tool that can help students to write better or at least to understand better the operations performed in writing. Specialists must study grammar in ways quite inappropriate for students.

Citing a study of 3,000 graded essays drawn from students across the United States,⁵ Noguchi notes that the 20 most common types of error are in punctuation, especially the use of commas and

apostrophes; in verb use, particularly irregular verbs; and in pronoun use and reference of pronouns. The types of errors identified can be addressed quite succinctly in English classes, and for most students, this limited presentation is adequate, although for

some it will need to be repeated and reinforced.

Noguchi bases much of his proposed instructions on Maxine Hairston's hierarchy of errors—a nonacademic hierarchy that ranges from "status marking" errors to "very serious" errors to "minor or unimportant" errors.⁶ These errors are those recognized by people from the

"real" world, the world that will in time draw its work force from the products of our schools.

The virtue of Noguchi's approach is that it suggests an honest, compact, and effective method for teaching practical grammar to students at all educational levels. His approach will fit into any English curriculum without seriously disrupting the more important concerns. It is also an approach that can be pursued informally for a day or two whenever student writing assignments suggest a need for specific instruction. □

¹ F.S. Hoyt, (1906), "The Place of Grammar in the Elementary Curriculum," *Teachers College Record* 7: 467-500.

² See, for example, M. Kolln, (1981), "Closing the Books on Alchemy," *College Composition and Communication* 32: 139-151; or J. Neuleib, (1977), "The Relation of Formal Grammar to Composition," *College Composition and Communication* 28: 247-250.

³ Anti-grammar studies appearing from 1957 to 1963 are listed and discussed in R. Braddock, R. Lloyd-Jones, and L. Schoer, (1963), *Research in Written Composition*, (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English). Similar studies published between 1967 and 1986 are investigated in G. Hillocks, (1986), *Research in Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*, (Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Conference on Research in English).

⁴ R. R. Noguchi, (1991), *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing*, (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English).

⁵ R. J. Connors and A. A. Lunsford, (1988), "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research," *College Composition and Communication* 39: 395-409.

⁶ M. Hairston, (1981), "Not All Errors Are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Profession Respond to Errors in Usage," *College English* 43: 749-806.

R. Baird Shuman is Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Box 1687, Champaign, IL 61824-1687.

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