

Sadlier School

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES**

# Best Practices for Teaching Grammar and Writing at the Elementary Grades

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### WE TEACHERS ARE COMMITTED TO HELPING STUDENTS BECOME BETTER WRITERS.

We integrate writing into different content areas, including language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics.

We encourage students to write for different purposes and authentic audiences. We introduce students to diverse forms of writing: letters, reports, stories, poetry, and articles. And we guide students through the writing process, which includes prewriting/planning, drafting, revising, and editing.

The writing process is recursive and flexible. Some of our students prefer to draft, revise, and edit their writing simultaneously. As these students write their first draft, they revise by refining their ideas and changing words and sentences, and they edit by checking their spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Other students, however, choose to write a complete draft of their ideas before they revise and edit. These students like to revise their writing for ideas, organization, and word choice before they edit for spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

Regardless of when students choose to attend to editing, we can help students improve their writing through mini-workshops on the conventions of written English. The term “conventions of written English” refers to grammar, usage, and mechanics. Grammar is usually defined as a set of rules that defines how a language is structured.

## GRAMMAR, USAGE, AND MECHANICS

In the classroom context, “grammar” refers to the concepts of subject, verb, and sentence sense (parts of speech and parts of sentences). Usage includes concepts of agreement (subject-verb, noun-pronoun, and verb tense) and modification (adjectives and adverbs). Usage also addresses language variation in terms of word choice and phrasing (formal to informal, regional and social dialects, oral language as related to written language). Mechanics is commonly defined as spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

When we teach students how to edit for the conventions of written English, we show how their choices in grammar, usage, and mechanics contribute to—or detract from—the meaning of their writing. By teaching students to value both the content and the conventions of writing, we help students grow in their command of written language and improve their ability to communicate effectively with their intended audience.

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### WHAT DO STUDENTS IN GRADES 3–5 KNOW ABOUT GRAMMAR, USAGE, AND MECHANICS?

When students value the purpose and audience for their writing, they are motivated to revise and edit. They understand that effective writing needs to contain clear ideas and organization, appropriate word choice, and correct conventions. However, as students encounter new information, expand their critical thinking skills, and experiment with different styles of writing, they may spend more energy on the content of their writing and pay less attention to the conventions of written English. This unevenness is natural for students in the upper elementary grades.

Even when students show mastery in one form of writing or in one content area, they may encounter difficulty when they write in a new form or in another content area. According to an NCTE summary of research about students' writing in grades 3–5,

...taking on the challenges of a new topic or type of writing entails learning new or different vocabulary, syntactic patterns, patterns of errors, and organizing structures. An accomplished writer of one form may seem to regress in his or her abilities when taking on a new form. (Writing in the Intermediate Grades, 3–5)

When teachers understand this tension between fluency and conventions, they can assess more accurately the developmental writing abilities of their students. The research of Dyson and Freedman (2003), Farnan and Dahl (2003), Strickland and Feeley (2003) describes the characteristics of student writers in grades 3–5 and emphasizes the positive effects of writing process workshops, teacher and peer conferences about works in progress, and discussions about text structures in reading.

Since 1969, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has assessed and reported our nation's student performances in many subjects, including writing achievement in grades 4, 8, and 12. In its Writing Framework for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP describes the Basic, Proficient, and Advanced achievement levels for the writing of students in grade 4.

### **Basic—Students performing at the Basic level should be able to:**

- Create a somewhat appropriate response to the topic, purpose, audience, and specified form
- Present a few ideas relevant to the topic, purpose, and audience and show some evidence of thinking and writing approaches that support development of ideas
- Use a few supporting details relevant to the topic, purpose, and audience
- Create a response whose organizational structure shows a little evidence of appropriate thinking and writing approaches
- Write some sentences that are correct with responses that use a little sentence variety
- Use word choice that is mostly clear and appropriate for the topic, purpose, and audience
- Use voice and tone that show some understanding of what is appropriate for the topic, purpose, and audience
- Use grammar, usage, and mechanics that are mostly correct but with distracting errors that may occasionally impede understanding

### **Proficient**—Students performing at the Proficient level should be able to:

- Create a somewhat competent response to the topic, purpose, audience, and specified form
- Present some ideas that are relevant to the topic, purpose, and audience and show some evidence of effective thinking and writing approaches that support development of ideas
- Use supporting details that are mostly relevant and effective to develop ideas
- Create a response using logical grouping of ideas and with some thinking and writing approaches that are relevant for the topic, purpose, and audience
- Write most sentences that are controlled and with some sentence variety, as appropriate, for the topic, purpose, and audience
- Use word choice that is sometimes specific and that is appropriate to communicate relationships among ideas
- Use voice and tone that are mostly controlled and appropriate for the topic, purpose, and audience
- Use grammar, usage, and mechanics that are mostly correct but with some distracting errors

### **Advanced**—Students performing at the Advanced level should be able to:

- Create an effective response to the topic, purpose, audience, and specified form
- Present clear ideas that are relevant to the topic, purpose, and audience, and show evidence of relevant thinking and writing approaches that support development of ideas
- Create a response that is organized effectively to show a somewhat logical progression of ideas and some evidence of relevant approaches for thinking and writing
- Write with most sentences being well controlled and varied, as appropriate, to communicate relationships among ideas
- Use word choice that is specific and appropriate for the topic, purpose, and audience
- Use voice and tone that are usually controlled for the topic, purpose, and audience
- Demonstrate good control of grammar, usage, and mechanics to communicate to the reader

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)  
2011 Writing Framework



## GRAMMAR, USAGE, AND MECHANICS

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts articulate the understandings and skills elementary students need in writing and language.

The Anchor Standards for Writing (grades K–5) state:

- W.4.** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience
- W.5.** Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach

The Anchor Standards for Language (grades K–5) state:

- L.1.** Demonstrate a command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking
- L.2.** Demonstrate a command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing
- L.3.** Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening

## GRAMMAR, USAGE, AND MECHANICS

National standards and assessments for the English Language Arts emphasize the importance of grammar, usage, and mechanics in the context of the writer's purpose, audience, and form/genre. Effective writing includes the writer's correct and consistent demonstration of his/her knowledge of the conventions of standard English.

State departments of education and local school districts look to NAEP, NCTE, IRA, and CCSS for research and leadership in the English Language Arts. From the national to the state and local levels, the standards and assessments for writing clearly emphasize the importance for students to demonstrate their ability to use the conventions of written English in order to communicate clearly and effectively with readers.

*Effective writing includes the writer's correct and consistent demonstration of his/her knowledge of the conventions of standard English.*



### WHAT IS THE ROLE OF GRAMMAR IN WRITING INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS IN GRADES 3–5?

Instruction in grammar should focus on helping students communicate their written message with clarity and correctness. When students understand the standards of written English, they can make appropriate choices about grammar, usage, and mechanics to improve their writing.

Numerous research studies support the teaching of grammar in the context of students' writing (Angelillo, 2002; Calkins, 1980; Dyson and Freedman, 2003; Farnan and Dahl, 2003; Graham and Perin, 2007; Noguchi, 1991; Hillocks and Smith, 2003; Weaver, 1996).

By placing grammar instruction within the writing process and mini-workshops, teachers can use written texts, such as children's literature, magazines, advertisements, and students' own writing to teach reading comprehension as well as writing concepts, such as word choice, sentence variety, and punctuation. Teachers can also help students analyze how grammar, usage, and mechanics contribute to the audience's ability to read and appreciate the written message.

Many teachers encourage their students to think of mechanics as road signs along the highway. Using effective sentence structures, appropriate usage, and correct spelling and punctuation is similar to providing traffic signs and road markings for drivers. When writers use conventions correctly, they allow their audience (or drivers) to read and understand their message easily. It also makes the reading—and driving—more enjoyable.

## GRAMMAR IN WRITING INSTRUCTION

The teaching of grammar to enhance the clarity and correctness of the written message has replaced teaching grammar for “grammar’s sake.” According to the NCTE review of research about the teaching of grammar:

Skilled teachers of writing know how to teach grammar to their students as they write, when they have a particular need to know the information. Students need to be able to compose complex, varied sentences, and they need to be able to proofread their writing for mistakes that might distract their audiences or distort their intended meaning. The evidence is clear that to learn to write well, students need time living in and making decisions among a forest of sentences, manipulating syntactic parts and grouping thoughts, while they also juggle their ideas about content and organization. (Beyond Grammar Drills: How Language Works in Learning to Write, 2006)

By emphasizing grammar as an essential tool in communication, teachers help students expand their repertoire of writing strategies. When students learn how to make effective choices in conventions, they gain command of the written language and develop their writing style.

*Students need to be able to compose complex, varied sentences, and they need to be able to proofread their writing for mistakes that might distract their audiences or distort their intended meaning.*



## EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR

### WHAT STRATEGIES ARE EFFECTIVE FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR TO STUDENTS IN GRADES 3-5?

Helping students understand that readers need, expect, and appreciate the conventions of written English is key to teaching grammar in the writing curriculum. By reading students' writing, teachers can assess students' understanding of grammar, usage, and mechanics. Teachers can also determine which concepts need to be introduced or reviewed for different students.

Through mini-workshops, teachers can present grammatical concepts, model revising and editing strategies, and encourage students to apply these concepts and strategies to their own writing.

Three effective strategies that improve students' writing—and grammar—are sentence combining, sentence expansion, and sentence imitation. (Haussamen, 2003; Hillocks and Smith, 2003; Holdzkom, Reed, Porter, Rubin, 1984; Killgallon, 1997; Noguchi, 1991; Strong, 2001)

*By reading students' writing, teachers can assess students' understanding of grammar, usage, and mechanics.*



### SENTENCE COMBINING

Sentence combining has long been acknowledged as an effective strategy for improving written sentence fluency and sentence variety. In sentence combining, students take short written sentences and combine them into longer sentences. When oral sentence combining is integrated into the written activity, students also improve their speaking and listening skills. (Writing Standards 4 and 5; Language Standards 1, 2, and 3. See also CCSS for Speaking and Listening Standards)

Here is an example of a mini-workshop on sentence combining:

The teacher presents students with a series of short, choppy sentences. The teacher then orally models different ways to combine the information in these sentences into one longer sentence.

#### **Example:**

**Josh likes to read.**

**He likes magazines.**

**The magazines contain stories.**

**The stories are about animals.**

#### **Combined:**

**Josh likes to read magazines that contain animal stories.**

**Josh likes reading animal stories in magazines.**

**Josh likes to read animal stories in magazines.**



By modeling various ways a speaker might combine sentences, the teacher shows students the many ways people create sentences in oral language. This oral modeling also demonstrates the difference between informal oral language (in which people often speak in fragments and run-ons) and more formal oral language.



## WRITE

Sometimes you may write two sentences that refer to the same subject.

Orangutans grasp branches with their hands and feet.  
They swing through the trees.

You can make your writing smoother by combining these sentences. The combined sentence will have one subject and a compound predicate.

Orangutans grasp branches with their hands and feet **and** swing through the trees.

Notice that the complete predicates of the two sentences have been combined with the word **and**.



Additional Resources at  
[grammarworkshop.com](http://grammarworkshop.com)

☐ Combine each pair of sentences by writing a sentence with a compound predicate. Write the new sentence on the line.

1. Male orangutans grow up to 4½ feet tall. They weigh up to 200 pounds.

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2. These shy apes usually live alone. These shy apes spend their days searching for food.

---

3. A male orangutan's call travels long distances. This call protects his large territory.

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4. Females and their offspring live together about seven years. They share the same nests.

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5. Orangutans search for fruit with sticks. Orangutans use leaves for umbrellas.

---

6. Orangutans live for about 40 years in the wild. They survive much longer in captivity.

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## SENTENCE COMBINING

The teacher then introduces another series of short, choppy sentences and asks students to combine orally these sentences into new, longer sentences. After several students have offered several versions of sentences, the teacher asks students to discuss the similarities and differences among the spoken sentences.

When students begin with oral language sentence combining and then move to written sentence combining, they draw upon their natural oral language fluency and apply this knowledge to their own writing. As students explore sentence variety through written sentence combining, teachers can introduce grammatical concepts, such as compound sentences or prepositional phrases, and punctuation, especially commas.

By introducing, teaching, and reinforcing grammar and conventions in the context of sentence combining and with students' own writing, teachers make language an interesting, relevant part of students' lives.

*When students begin with oral language sentence combining and then move to written sentence combining, they draw upon their natural oral language fluency and apply this knowledge to their own writing.*





## SENTENCE EXPANSION

A second effective strategy for teaching grammar is sentence expansion. In sentence expansion, students add information to short sentences in order to make their writing more detailed and interesting. Students often like to challenge themselves to make long sentences that are interesting and grammatically correct.

Here is an example of a mini-workshop on sentence expansion:

The teacher writes a simple sentence and models different ways to add words, phrases, or clauses to the end of the sentence. After the modeling, the teacher asks students to add information to the end of the sentence. The new information must make sense, and the new sentence must be grammatically correct.

Sentence expansion can also teach variety in sentence beginnings. For example, the teacher might use the same basic sentence and model other ways to expand at the beginning of the sentence.

Here is an example of sentence expansion at the end of the sentence.:

**Basic sentence:**

**The dog chased the squirrel.**

**Expansion:**

**The dog chased the squirrel, which scampered across the yard.**

**Expansion:**

**The dog chased the squirrel, which scampered across the yard and up the tree.**

**Expansion:**

**The dog chased the squirrel, which scampered**

## SENTENCE EXPANSION

When students gain control over sentence expansion at the beginning and end of sentences, the teacher can show students how sentences can be lengthened at both ends and/or in the middle of the sentence.

Through sentence expansion, the teacher can introduce or review the parts of speech, parts of the sentence, and punctuation in meaning contexts.

As students experiment with expanding the beginning, end, and middle of sentences in their own writing, they discover the relationship among word choice, sentence variety, and writing style. (Writing Standards 4 and 5; Language Standards 1, 2, and 3)

**across the yard, up the tree, and onto the roof of a nearby house.**

Here is an example of sentence expansion at the beginning of a sentence.

**Basic sentence:**

**The dog chased the squirrel.**

**Expansion:**

**Immediately, the dog chased the squirrel.**

**Expansion:**

**With a bark, the dog chased the squirrel.**

**Expansion:**

**Running full speed, the dog chased the squirrel.**

**Expansion:**

**While the children played in the backyard, the dog chased the squirrel.**

Here is an example of sentence expansion at the beginning, middle, and end of a sentence.

**Basic sentence:**

**The dog chased the squirrel.**

**Expansion:**


**Barking playfully, the dog chased the squirrel for several minutes.**

**Expansion:**

**The dog with large paws and floppy ears chased the squirrel.**


## SENTENCE IMITATION

Another effective strategy for teaching grammar in the context of writing is sentence imitation. Here students imitate the structure of a sentence, but replace the original words and ideas with new words and their own ideas.



**WRITE**

**D** Proper nouns can make your writing more interesting and more exact. Change the words in **boldface** in each sentence to a proper noun. Write the new sentence. You may use the names of real people, places, and things, or you may make up names. The first one is done for you.



Additional Resources at  
[grammarworkshop.com](http://grammarworkshop.com)

1. A **friend** and I might organize a funny race.  
*Marla and I might organize a funny race.*
2. This event would raise money to clean **the pond**.
3. Maybe **a teacher** would help us plan the details.
4. Let's have a meeting at **the library**.
5. We could hold the race in **a park**.
6. Maybe we could run the race on **a street**.
7. Many students at **the school** might take part.
8. **A holiday** might be a good day for the race.
9. A day in **a spring month** would be the best time.
10. Let's put up signs all over **the town**.

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Grammar Workshop, Level Blue, p. 51

Revising Sentences

Here is an example of a mini-workshop on sentence imitation:

The teacher writes a simple sentence comprised of “basic” words and asks students to replace one or more of the words with more precise words. For example, the teacher might write:

**Original sentence:**

The vehicle drives down the street.

The teacher asks students to replace the word “vehicle” with more precise words. Students might offer “car,” “truck,” or “mini-van.” The teacher then introduces the grammar concept of noun as something or someone that does action.

Next, the teacher can ask students to replace the word “drives.” Students might suggest “races,” “speeds,” or “swerves.” The teacher can introduce the concept of verb as the word that shows action.

If the teacher wants to use this sentence to teach subject and predicate, the teacher might ask students, “What else could go down the street? For example, the wind blows down the street.” Students might say, “Marathon runners jog down the street.”

## SENTENCE IMITATION

As students gain competence in imitating sentences, the teacher can introduce more sophisticated sentence structures.

### **Original sentence:**

By the end of the race, the athletes were tired and needed to eat a snack.

### **Imitation:**

At the beginning of the party, the children were excited and wanted to play some games.

With six pies in the oven, the baker was satisfied and hoped to please the judges.

With sentence imitation, teachers help students understand parts of speech and sentences in natural, engaging ways. In addition to learning grammar, students discover the relationship between sentence structure and meaning as well as the importance of precise word choice in their writing. When students create their own sentences based on published authors' sentences, they gain insight into the craft of writing. They learn to write like a reader—and read like a writer. (Writing Standards 4 and 5; Language Standards 1, 2, and 3.)

*When students create their own sentences based on published authors' sentences, they gain insight into the craft of writing.*



# EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING EDITING SKILLS

## WHAT ARE EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING EDITING SKILLS TO STUDENTS IN GRADES 3-5?

Being a careful editor and proofreader entails more than being a good reader.


When students edit and proofread their own and their classmates' writing, they need to learn and apply their knowledge of grammar usage and mechanics.

Here are some guidelines to help students improve their editing and proofreading skills:

1. When you proofread, read slowly.

When we teach proofreading, we need to teach students how to read more slowly and attend to the smaller details of sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. By reading carefully and deliberately, students focus on the writing conventions.

2. When you proofread, read the paper aloud to yourself or to your partner.

**Remember** 

A verb must agree with its subject. If the subject is singular, the verb must be singular. If the subject is plural, the verb must be plural.

**C** In these paragraphs from a report about chimpanzees, Ivana has made nine errors in subject-verb agreement. Use the proofreading marks to correct the errors.

The scientist Jane Goodall study chimps in Tanzania and writes about their use of tools. The right tool makes a job easier. Chimpanzees knows that. For example, chimps often "fish" for termites. They pushes a stick into a termite mound. Tasty insects attaches themselves to the stick. Then the chimp pulls the stick out and eats the tasty bugs.

Jane Goodall says chimps use sticks in other ways, too. They comb themselves with twigs. They reaches hard-to-get objects with long branches. Sometimes chimps carries their favorite sticks with them, too.

Other scientists watches chimps using cameras. Sometimes a camera spy a chimp with a tool. On one videotape, a mother chimp teach her babies to crack hard nuts with a rock.

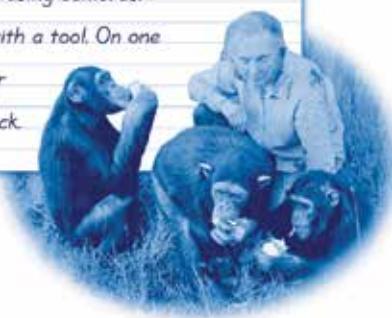
**Proofreading Marks**

- ^ Add
- Period
- ✓ Take out
- ≡ Capital letter
- / Small letter

**Look Back**

Did you find and correct nine errors in subject-verb agreement?

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## EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING EDITING SKILLS

When a partner reads the writer's paper aloud to the writer, both students can listen for smooth or awkward sentences, precise or vague word choices, consistent use of verb tenses, and agreement with subjects and verbs.

When the partner or the writer hears an error, the writer can use the editing symbols to mark where the correction needs to be made. Some students prefer to make the corrections as they discover them. Other students prefer to make all the corrections after they have finished working with their partner.

### **3.** When you proofread, focus on only 2 or 3 areas at a time.

Students can remember a finite number of grammar concepts. When they learn new rules, they often "forget" the other rules. As students prepare to edit, teachers should present a mini-workshop that introduces or reviews the specific editing concept.

If students are working with editing partners, each editing partner can read for a specific feature. For example, one partner might be the spelling editor, another partner might be the comma editor, while a third partner might be the complete sentence editor. Through the use of editing partners, students engage in reading like a writer.

### **4.** When you proofread another person's paper, keep a separate list of specific areas you want to check in your own writing.

Students will often see errors in another person's writing that they might not notice in their own writing. Writers may not notice the problems in their own writing because they are already familiar with the content and are reading for meaning—not editing for conventions. By making a list of items they may need to check in their own writing, students become more responsible, independent proofreaders.

When teachers review these lists and read students' writing, they can document the students' growth and set new goals for grammar and writing instruction.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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With over 40 years of experience, Dr. Chin is a passionate advocate for professional development for all educators, kindergarten through university levels. She has received numerous awards for her teaching and professional service, including the 2011 NCTE Distinguished Service Award. Using best practices and active pedagogy, Dr. Chin conducts writing/reading workshops that align curriculum and instruction with standards and assessments.

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