

Getting a Grip on Grammar

If I had to distill the essential things to teach about grammar it would be these.

Parts of speech

There are usually 7 or 9 identified. They can be taught quite easily and then reviewed, and some students like the neatness of direct teaching and rote learning. Teachers can make it enjoyable by inventing memory and other games to help students remember. It can also help to make use of the terms when marking written work, just to underscore the usefulness of knowing the parts of speech. A useful concept here is that one word (e.g. “Back”) can be several parts of speech depending on position (See position).

Major parts of a sentence

Subject, verb and objects or completions. I would add to this some knowledge of phrases and clauses.

Concept of position

It helps immensely to know that English is a language of position, not inflection (though inflections do exist). The fact that subject nouns are generally in front of their verbs, or that adjectives generally precede the modified noun, makes finding things easier, and is an extension of the concept of grammatical function.

Sentence deconstructing, re-ordering, combining

Some sentence errors can't be dealt with by describing a simple error like the comma splice. They get too convoluted and mixed up and things are out of place. Part of composing sentences is being in control of the (often) multiple ideas you want in there and how they need to attach. Breaking problem sentences up and playing with new orders or combinations generally illustrates how to “fix.” Books are available on sentence combining, but doing them as exercises is pretty boring stuff.

Concept of Modification

A big issue. Spend some time getting students to find adverbials and adjectival words or phrases and you'll see just how puzzling this is to most students. No substitute for practice.

Sentence patterns, structures

If you did no other, do parallelism. This is the one sentence pattern that students have most

trouble with. It's easier when the parallelled items are single words. Move into phrases and clauses and you have more challenging stuff.

Style

A tough one, but essential to critical reading of literature and letters, etc. I'd teach style as a function of audience, occasion, and desired voice or tone. Style generally hangs on two broad features: vocabulary and sentence structure. Comparative samples, and stopping over the literature you are reading are both good ways to approach this. Formality and informality are part of this discussion, as is Irony. (My own preference is to ask students, for example, to write in a clear "direct" or "plain" style; never "formal," in which attempts they end up sounding pretty fake. Don't we all?)