

Sentence Diagramming

"Why do I have to learn grammar?"

Have your children ever asked you why they have to learn grammar? Or to put my question another way, do they have a pulse? (g) Well, here are 8 answers for the next time they ask.

Core knowledge. If you're educated, you know grammar. It's like learning state capitols. No one yet has asked me the capitol of North Dakota (it's Bismarck). But it's one of those things educated people learn.

Jargon. Grammar provides a vocabulary to communicate about writing. When your teacher says, "Great vivid adjectives," it helps to know what adjective means.

Be able to apply rules. One rule says, "Avoid passive voice; it makes dull writing." You can't avoid passive voice until you know what it is.

Understand writing better. Can you compose music without knowledge of music theory, major/minor chords, and dominant sevenths? Well, yes. But you'll write music better if you know music theory.

Analyze others' writing. A knowledge of grammar lets you analyze, describe, and eventually imitate the style of good writing.

Foreign Languages. Knowledge of grammar helps you learn foreign languages, especially inflected ones (all the European languages).

It's a mental discipline. The Army makes recruits do pushups. Now I've never yet seen a soldier do pushups when he's fighting the enemy. But building up those muscles equips him to perform his other tasks. So also, learning grammar strengthens logic skills, and you use logic elsewhere.

Equipping. I want to equip my child for whatever God calls him to. Even if today he wants to be a fireman, one day God might call him into a vocation that requires strong writing skills.

Why teach diagramming?

Diagramming gives you a tool to attack sentence globally, not in a fragmented approach. You get to see how parts interact. You see not only parts, but also their functions.

"In the town parade, Sam carried the scout troop flag."

Some students might identify six nouns in that sentence, and they might not know which word is the subject. When students diagram that sentence, it becomes clear that there are only three nouns in the sentence (parade, Sam, flag), and it is obvious which one is the subject (Sam).

When you diagram, you develop an eye for breaking down a sentence, so you can fix it more easily.

"After the last performance, the director of the play thanked Sue, Mary, and (me/I) for all our work with the children's choir."

It's hard to tell whether to use me or I. But when you diagram it, you strip it down to the core which is, "The director thanked (me/I)." Now that you've simplified it, it's easy to fix.

For some students (like mine!) diagramming simply works much better. We used a sentence mark-up method for a year and retained nothing. Within two weeks of starting diagramming, his understanding soared. It might not be the best approach for everyone, but for us it clicked. And great was the click thereof!

We started diagramming, and IT'S WORKING!!

We did Winston Grammar last year. I admit I didn't teach it as intensively as I should have. When we started 5th grade this year, my son had trouble - great trouble - identifying the subject, verb, prep phrases, etc. Clauses? Predicate adjectives? FORGET IT!!! I knew we had to do something different.

I got a wild idea: Diagramming! Now mind you, I never learned diagramming in school, but I did have good grammar instruction. I found a web site and learned the essentials. It looked promising. Instead of attacking a sentence as a pile of pieces to identify and label, diagramming looks at a sentence as a whole with different parts performing different functions for the whole.

Today marks the 5th day we've worked on it. We are going through last year's Winston workbook and diagramming each of the sentences, generally 1/2 worksheet per day. Today we did the second half of worksheet 3.

My son EASILY identified almost all verbs (a helping verb gave him a little trouble), all subjects, and all prep. phrases. He also easily identified whether the verb was transitive, intransitive, or linking. He placed all the direct objects correctly on the diagram, and knew that they were direct objects. He also placed all the predicate nouns/predicate adjectives correctly on the diagram although he couldn't remember what they were called. But he DID understand their function. He easily determined what was a modifier and what noun or verb it referred to. And with some coaching from me, he's starting to figure out which word the prep. phrase modifies. That will need some more work, but that's okay because some of them confuse me too. Just remember, this is the kid who had trouble finding the verb a week ago.

Most of all, he's starting to grasp how a sentence works together. That's what he was missing before. He had been learning (poorly) the vocabulary of grammar but not the big picture. Now he's starting to see that the subject, verb, and direct object or complement are the core of the sentence, while the modifiers (including prep. phrases) are extraneous.

Hallelujah, we've found something that works!

My favorite analogy: Music & Grammar

From: Sandra in So CA

I have come to believe that learning grammar is much like learning music. Should everyone be exposed to music and grammar at least a little? Yes. Is it beneficial to expose your child purposefully to excellent music (and writing) so that he develops an ear for it? Yes. Can your child learn to compose music (and language) by ear? Yes. Will he ever be a great classical composer (an exceptional author or speaker) if he learns only by ear? Probably not. He will likely have to learn about music theory (grammar) and technique in some sort of formal setting. Should absolutely every child be required to have this training from a young age? Probably not. Is it highly beneficial to train from a young age those who show an aptitude and interest? Probably so.

Teaching Writing Without Grammar

From: Brian of WriteAtHome.com

I think it's a mistake to teach writing without grammar. It's possible to do it (to some degree), but it will be a handicap as a student grows as a writer and communicator. One reason is that grammar provides a vocabulary for discussing writing issues. Advice like "Avoid overdependence on modifiers," "Be sure your pronoun case is correct," "Avoid passive constructions," "Try not to split infinitives," and "Don't dangle participles" all mean nothing without the vocabulary that grammar provides.

I've taught English to high school students for 20 years and I can tell you that helping poor writers who don't know the basics of grammar is very difficult. Good craftsmen know their tools. Writers with limited knowledge of their tools will always be limited in their writing.

Analytical Skills

From: Mary L

My younger children love diagramming sentences for the challenge of it. It stretches them, challenges them, builds their logical thinking capabilities, and is well worth the time and energy. Will it make them better writers? Probably not. But I really believe it makes them better thinkers.

Diagnostic Tool

From: KPzz in Nebraska

Have you noticed that diagramming is a wonderful diagnostic tool? When you can diagram a sentence, it means you know everything about each word in that sentence. Where you make mistakes in diagramming, it is a spotlight shining directly on an area you need to review.

Go Beyond Parts of Speech

From: Michelle (fivearefun)

My 10yo would write a topic sentence like, "Isaac Newton, who was a brilliant scientist, liked building things as a child." He would follow this topic sentence with a paragraph about Newton the brilliant scientist, but this is actually a subordinate part of the topic sentence. Even though he can underline subjects and verbs, I think the visual diagram will help him see what is the main clause and what is not.

See WHY Something's Wrong

From: Jennifer W. in TX

When a college professor pointed out mistakes on my papers, I was unable to understand why my sentences were wrong. I think that by diagramming a sentence, you can clearly see many errors. Even better, the practice of diagramming helps you avoid mistakes before you get to college level writing.

Is diagramming necessary?

From: Paula H

I hear it frequently, "Is it necessary to learn diagramming?" That's akin to asking, "Is it necessary to make a timeline for history?" Simple answer: no. There are other ways to learn the sequence of history and other ways to learn grammar well.

But I firmly believe that diagramming is the best way to teach grammar if it works for your child. I believe that diagramming is the most direct route to giving the most clear understanding of grammar. It should be your first choice. So try diagramming. If it works for your children, they'll be well on their way to a strong grasp of grammar. If it doesn't work, chuck it and find something else that's a better fit.

What I have learned from diagramming

From: Sandra in So CA

My experience in the business world (about 20 years practicing as a CPA) demonstrated to me that those who had had training in grammar were almost always better at composition than those who had not. It was not uncommon for those who had not had formal training to fail to see the specific reasons why others wrote more clearly and concisely or even to recognize the other writing as superior at all.

I am sure I make errors in writing and speaking that those who are more educated can identify readily, and I am equally certain that people who identify these errors may consequently make judgments about my education or lack thereof. It is one of my goals to sufficiently educate my child so that he will be regarded as well educated in the community, and if I can remove a superfluous barrier to this goal by teaching formal grammar in great depth, I intend to do just that!

Winston Grammar is an excellent introduction (IMHO). From it a student will gain the skill necessary to analyze sentences found in many language textbooks, standardized tests and basic readers. It will not, however, provide the skills required to analyze complex constructions found in more advanced works, as has been evidenced by our attempts this year to diagram the dictation exercises in LA 4. Diagramming somehow forces the student to make a definitive judgment as to the character and function of EVERY word in a sentence. Programs such as Winston somehow allow one to gloss over troublesome words and phrases in complex writing, but diagramming does not. Having never diagrammed a sentence in my life before this year, I did not understand the distinction until I experienced it. I can only say that a few months of diagramming have dramatically increased both my understanding and appreciation of eloquent writing.

How to diagram: My Five Steps

This section is not meant to teach diagramming. For that, see Workbook of Sentence Diagramming and Guide to Grammar and Writing. This section simply gives a "stripped down" 5-step method to break diagramming into bite-sized chunks. If you follow these steps in order, it will make diagramming easier.

Mark up the sentence.

In advanced sentences, mark the break between clauses.

In the basic level, put parentheses around prepositional phrases. Why? I have found that prep. phrases cause more trouble than anything else. They get in there and disguise themselves as other things! So if you safely lock them away in parentheses until you're ready for them (Step 5), they can't fool you and cause trouble.

Find the verb and place it onto your diagram to the right of the vertical line. (See example.)

Find the subject and place it onto your diagram to the left of the vertical line. (See example.)

Why do I find the verb first and then the subject? There are usually more nouns than verbs in sentence, so it may be hard to know which noun is the subject. Once you know the verb, then ask yourself which noun is performing the action. That is your subject.

What kind of verb is it (transitive, linking, or intransitive)? Mark the verb type and direct object or complement (predicate noun or predicate adjective).

Place everything else onto your diagram. In basic sentences, "everything else" usually consists of modifiers (including prepositional phrases). Most modifiers go onto diagonal lines below the word they modify. (See example.)

Other Hints

These words are virtually always modifiers, so put them on a diagonal:

a, an, the, very, never, not.

Beware the Helping Verbs! If you see one of these, look for a partner! You'll often find one.

- have, has, had
- do, does, did
- would, could, should
- will, can, shall
- may, might, must
- The "being" verbs sometimes have a partner too. Sometimes they're linking verbs.
- am, are, is
- be, been, was, were

Test for indirect objects: Can it be replaced by a "to" or "for" prepositional phrase? Does it have a direct object?

Independent clauses usually begin with a coordinating conjunction, so learn them by this chant:

And Or But For Nor Yet So! (or a semicolon)

Review the common prepositions:

- of
- on off
- in out
- to from
- up down
- above below
- over under
- around through
- between behind
- at by near
- across
- before during after
- with without
- for against

RESOURCE:

<http://www.redshift.com/~bonajo/diagram.htm>