

Tutors: A Site for Multiliteracies About Tutoring

Volume 2

Issue 1 Summer 2015: *Telling Tutoring Tales*

Article 2

7-2-2015

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Recommended Citation

Moore, Nick (2015) "Two Monologues on Grammar," *Tutors: A Site for Multiliteracies About Tutoring*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.plattsburgh.edu/tutors/vol2/iss1/2>

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Two Monologues on Grammar

By Nick Moore

Grammarall

When tutors are asked to check grammar, they try to dig through it. If it has to be looked at, a tutor looks briefly and moves forward.

Grammar to us is synonymous with what tutoring should avoid: complexity, fear, mistakes, condescension, shame.

But grammar is not all of its negative connotations; it is a meaning-making system that everyone uses to communicate.

So why does misusing a word seem like a crime?

Because people fed up with common mistakes turn these errors into jokes, written on whiteboards or forwarded to friends. Jokes that let some laugh and leave others to keep scrolling. I see “Word Crimes” as the real crime. It sustains a community where insiders rant and it ostracizes the outsiders it could help.

This insidious attitude stems from the classroom, even from what tutors do. Good writing seldom hears the word “grammar.” It has good “flow” or a distinct “style.” Only when a writer struggles does a teacher expand: “This essay is confusing because of misplaced modifiers, cluttered with run-ons here and choppy with repetitive sentences here.”

This sends the message that good use of language is pure intuition, that only the unsuccessful writer can be picked apart.

I understand I’ve gotten condescending myself. It’s easy to do, though, when I’m not thinking.

I think we should scrutinize beautiful sentences with the same eye we spot clumsy ones. Even if we don't remember the terms of grammar, we should still speak. A subordinate clause can be a "subsentence." The tense we can't remember the name of is just "what happened before this did."

Tutors shouldn't move forward from mechanics, they should move forward *with* mechanics. Maybe even move forward *to* mechanics. Just like an automaker needs to know transmissions to build a solid car, a tutor should know the role that grammar plays in any piece of writing.

Grammarian

There's something we need to talk about.
 And I know we don't know each other,
 but that shouldn't matter, because I would
 say this to almost anyone I've met:
 I want to teach you some things about grammar.

Calm down, I didn't mean it that way!
 You haven't done anything wrong.
 What's wrong is how that made you feel,
 how even the word "grammar" can make you feel.

You're probably used to hearing it after words like
 "terrible" and "correct." Some people take pride in
 grammar, and a lot of people are afraid of it.
 I want to try to share with you, though,
 how strange this all seems to me.
 Grammar is not a rulebook, and it is definitely not the law.
 It is a system of communication.
 Even "system" sounds too rigid to me;
 grammar is just the way we use words.
 At its best, grammar is a list of dance moves—
 there's a way that each maneuver was invented,
 but every dancer looks different doing it and no two dancers use the same ones.
 People, even people who write very well, seem to think
 that grammar means correct English.
 That offenses are punishable by six years in writing jail.

When I hear people talk about grammar, it sounds like...
 "Kids today are just rude."
 "Ugh, I need to get my car inspected."
 "If you don't straighten up, you're going to land yourself in jail."
 The way that people talk about grammar
 is too close to the way they talk about criminals or credit ratings.
 Grammar is some sort of snooty club that isn't accepting new members.
 "Bad grammar," "good grammar," "correcting your grammar,"
 these phrases don't mean anything. It makes just as much sense
 as if the word were "underwear."
 "You have bad underwear."
 "I do like that scarf, but you should take it to someone who knows her underwear if you want a
 solid opinion."
 "You'd be a much better person if you just put a little more effort into your underwear."

If you want to learn how to write a sentence,
 or why a sentence doesn't make sense,

one word isn't going to come close to explaining it.
More importantly, grammar is a part of everything.
It is as much a part of good writing as flawed writing;
It's not just in essays; it's in every use of language.
The writers of SNL use grammar. Beyonce uses grammar.
I'm not supposed to talk about this,
but even the guy who started *Fight Club* used grammar.

You'd be surprised.
If I haven't convinced you of anything, that's okay,
but I hope I've started to change grammar for you.
I hope this hasn't been the lecture you thought it would,
and that grammar seems a little more interesting.