GRAMMAR TO ENRICH & ENHANCE WRITING

CONSTANCE WEAVER

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Preface

We started this book three years ago as what appeared to be a fairly simple task: to create an updated version of Connie's *Teaching Grammar in Context*. Oh, how plans can go awry! And what interesting things can happen when well-made plans do collapse. What we've developed has gone far beyond what we first planned. We think it's far better as well. Though clearly a continuation of Connie's work, this book is considerably more than a new edition of *Teaching Grammar in Context*: more comprehensive, more reader friendly, and more concretely focused on teachers' practical needs. Readers familiar with Connie's work will recognize in this new book, too, her deep understanding of grammar, theoretical approaches to language study, and pedagogical strategies for the teaching of grammar—the teaching stance and grammatical analysis found in *Grammar for Teachers*, the commitment to theory and research seen in *Teaching Grammar in Context,* and the focus on classroom pedagogy seen in *Lessons to Share* and her recent *Grammar Plan Book*. Readers will also see Jonathan's commitment to making classroom writing "real," and to developing techniques and skills that teachers can immediately implement for teaching grammar in conjunction with and in the context of writing. In short, although this book is based in theory and research, we wrote it *as* teachers, *for* teachers. This is a book with ideas and techniques that can immediately be put into practice, based on the work of thoughtful, skilled teachers we've admired and worked with over the years.

Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing is a snappy title, but we don't like it just because it has alliteration (although we admit that we like it for that reason too). We also like it because it includes two key terms—*enrich* and *enhance*—that aptly describe our approach to teaching grammar. Grammar can be a way to e*nrich* student writing—a way to make writing better, more complex, more exciting, and overall, more rich and interesting. Grammar can be a toolbox for the writer, or as Stephen King (2000) says, one of the tools in the top shelf of a writer's toolbox. The more the writer knows about his or her tools and the more practice—and guidance from a teacher—in using them, the more expert

the student writer becomes at using those tools in crafting words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, transitions, images, and eventually complete, polished writings. Grammar is also a way to *enhance* student writing—not only in terms of correctness and conventions, but, when appropriate, going beyond correctness for effect: with purpose and for specific stylistic reasons.

For us, grammar is not only inherently connected to the teaching of writing, it is, broadly construed, the *essence* of writing. The following key themes permeate the text:

- ***Grammar can address all of the popular "6 traits" of writing*** (Spandel, 2005; Culham, 2003). These, more broadly worded, are ideas/details, organization, word choice, voice/style/tone, conventions, and of course sentence sense, variety, and fluency.
- ***Often, in teaching grammar, less is more.*** Grammar is not something to be "covered" in writing class. Nor is it something that writing teachers need to teach in a way that ensures understanding of every language feature, skill, and tool. Rather, we suggest that teachers be selective, concentrating on aspects of grammar that enrich and enhance student writing and minimizing the use of grammatical terminology.
- ***The teaching of grammar should be positive, productive, and practical.*** Grammar is more than correctness, and the teaching of grammar should emphasize and open up possibilities for expression. Students should be able to see grammar as a way to strengthen writing, and as something that has immediate and clear implications for writing in real genres, for real purposes and real audiences. Grammar examples can and should be drawn from real sources—literary, journalistic, others.
- ***The teaching of grammar should occur throughout the writing process.*** Too often, grammar allegedly taught "in context" is completely separated from the actual process of writing, and n'er the twain do meet—at least instructionally. Teaching grammar, both to enrich and enhance, has a natural place within all writing phases, from planning through revision and editing, in preparation for ultimate publication.

The book is organized into three main sections. Part 1, Teaching Grammar for Writing: Principles to Practice, integrates theories of grammar and the teaching of grammar with classroom practices, creating our overall vision of teaching grammar specifically for writing. Part 2, Teaching Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing, manifests that vision with specific grammatical tools and teaching ideas, implemented within specific classroom contexts. It culminates with a chapter that invites teachers to consider different aspects of grammar to enrich and enhance writing and

Making Decisions That Make a Difference

Grammar and the "6 Traits" of Writing

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Throughout this book we've echoed Rei Noguchi's assertion that when teaching grammar, less is more. The sheer number of grammar skills, concepts, and notions makes it impossible to teach them all in a single classroom—or ever. We question the efficacy of attempting to do so and view such a pedagogical decision—the "coverage" model—as one of the banes of grammar instruction.

The "coverage" approach rears its head whenever we talk to teachers about grammar skills—grammar to enrich and enhance writing. No matter what we've talked about, we often hear the response: "We've covered that." Sentence variation? "Covered it in September." Fragments and run-ons? "We cover that during the third quarter." Yet teachers also admit that their coverage hasn't had much effect on most students' writing, at least in heterogeneous classes (see Chapters 2 and 3). Instead of coverage, we need an in-depth approach:

- When teaching grammar, teachers must be selective—perhaps very selective—about what they teach.
- Once these choices are made, the teaching of grammar must be, as we say in Chapter 4, "a mile deep"—meaning that concepts and skills aren't taught just once but are practiced, reviewed, reconsidered in published writing, redeveloped, and made rich through repeated application: the antithesis of "covered."

So how do we decide what to teach? As teachers, our decisions must be based on our own understanding of grammar (not the answer key provided with a grammar book), our goals for enhancing and enriching writing by teaching selected aspects of grammar, and the skills our students

already possess or haven't yet mastered. We advocate teaching grammar strategies and skills for rhetorical purposes, in depth and in conjunction with and in the context of writing, because this pedagogical strategy is most effective and efficient.

More specifically, why do we want to teach grammar in conjunction with and in the context of writing? To enhance students' *sentence sense*, *sentence variety*, and *syntactic fluency*? To promote the use of appropriate *conventions* for writing? Yes, of course. But, as we've said before, there are other reasons, too:

- To generate details—that is, rich *content*—by using key grammatical constructions to elaborate on general or abstract *ideas*.
- To use transitions and other connectors that relate ideas appropriately: in other words, that make the *organization* of a piece clear and coherent.
- To use *voice* and *style* appropriate to purpose, content, and audience.

Together, these factors constitute five of the popularly acclaimed "6 traits" of writing (Spandel, 2005; Culham, 2003). The sixth is word choice. By whatever names others may call them, these are the characteristics of writing that are most valued.

Grammar on standardized tests

As we use various procedures for teaching less grammar but teaching it more intensively, we can incorporate much of what is expected on state or other large-scale assessments of writing. An examination of scoring rubrics often shows we need not be nearly as picky as we think. We can also incorporate into the teaching of writing, almost painlessly, what is actually emphasized on the tests of English that may be administered. It pays to examine such tests carefully, because many teachers have assumed certain things are tested, or tested extensively, when in fact they aren't. The ACT and SAT, for example, don't test students' ability to analyze sentences and label parts of speech. And even on the multiple-choice English questions, they pay much more attention to grammar as it relates to organization, rhetoric, and style than to editing to eliminate errors. See, for example, Connie's informal analysis of some ACT tests in her *Grammar Plan Book* (2007, pp. 65–69). The SAT multiple-choice questions include more than twice as many items on sentence and paragraph revision (taken together) as on correcting errors in grammar and usage.

What should we teach when?

By helping us determine students' level of competence, the schematic in Figure 12–1 helps us decide where to go next in our teaching. It may look, walk, and talk like a rubric, but it isn't meant to be used that way. Although most of the grammatical features in a given paper may reflect the same level of competency, there are always exceptions. We felt it necessary to give some specific examples, yet the chart becomes less reliable the more specific we get: Our examples must be taken only as suggestions. Furthermore, we have strong concerns about rubrics in general, believing that they can be used in such a lockstep, formulaic way as to stifle individuality and encourage teachers to turn a blind eye to good and even outstanding writing if it doesn't include every characteristic listed at whatever level seems to predominate. We've found that teachers sometimes use rubrics this way even when they are aiming for a holistic score.

What's this guide good for, then, if not to evaluate writing with a score? *To help teachers decide what to teach next*, in terms of grammatical elements that will promote the expression of ideas, organization, voice and style, word choice (effective nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs), conventions, and, of course, sentence dexterity. This may seem like a fine distinction, since you obviously need to look at students' writing to determine what kind of guidance they might benefit from most. Nevertheless, the distinction is important one. You could use the guide to:

- Help you notice patterns of grammatical development
- Confirm your existing sense of writers' grammatical development
- Help you determine where to go next in helping students use grammar to enrich and enhance their writing

The guide can give you sufficient additional background to read students' writing quickly and determine impressionistically which aspects of grammar to teach next—in order to help students make their writing more detailed and therefore more compelling, not just to deal with faulty this or faulty that. We've used this guide (and others) to help us sort students' writings into three, four, or five piles before deciding what to teach next to each clearly identifiable group. In other words, we don't use the guide to grade or label individual students' writing, but rather to plan for instruction. We often have *more than three groupings* to capture the gaps between the three levels indicated.

Once you have a sense of what's involved in each column and cell of the guide, you can use just the overall statements characterizing the three levels for holistic sorting, while keeping in mind the specifics they represent

Try it yourself

Examine two or three student papers that reflect different levels of quality overall. Does the use of grammar differ noticeably among the writers? Our guide typically reflects what teachers already perceive intuitively but may not have verbalized consciously about increasing sophistication in the use of grammar. Bringing our intuitive sense to conscious awareness helps us make instructional decisions about what to teach next.

What Should I Teach Next?

ENRICHING writing through grammar

Sentence Sense • Variety • Fluency

Voice • Style • Tone

Ideas • Details

Organization • Structure

High—*highly effective*	Middle—*competent*	Low—*basic*
Sentence structures and lengths are varied; sentences flow effectively throughout the paragraph. Rhetorical devices add flavor to the writing.	**Sentences are sometimes varied in length and structure, with some variation in connective and cohesive devices. Occasional use of a rhetorical device.**	**Simple, short sentences occur regularly, with minimal sentence variation and basic kinds of transitions/connectors, if any.**
• If or when sentences in sequence start the same or nearly the same way, they have a clear rhetorical effect, for emphasis.	• Some sentences are compound: they have two or more independent clauses. Some are complex: they include one or more subordinate clauses.	• Many sentences follow the basic subject + verb + object pattern, often with the same subject, such as *I, he,* or *she.*
• Generous use of various grammatical and stylistic tools for flow or other effect, such as—but not confined to—participial phrases, appositives, absolutes, etc.	• Noticeable and varied use of introductory phrases and subordinate clauses; substantial and varied use of prepositional phrases to describe and elaborate upon nouns as well as set the scene.	• Minimal use of adjectives and adverbs; prepositional phrases more often used to set the scene for what's going on than to describe someone or something.
• Transitions/connectors are diverse—and, *if* appropriate to both the genre and the tone, may include some conjunctive adverbs like *meanwhile, thereafter, simultaneously, moreover, nevertheless, regardless,* and *granted that,* and correlative conjunctions like *both . . . and, either . . . or, neither . . . nor, not only . . . but also.*	• Transitions/connectors include use of subordinating conjunctions like *when, because, if, until, while,* and—depending partly on the genre—some others like *afterwards, thereafter, even though,* and *although.* May include conjunctive adverbs like *however, for example, for instance, of course, on the other hand, then, thus,* and the word *so* to indicate consequence.	• Transitions/connectors, if present, mostly deal with time or sequence—*then, next; first, second*—or joining of elements with *and* or *but, also, in addition,* and such.

• Other cohesive devices to start a sentence or paragraph include rhetorical devices like
  • a fragment
  • *but* or *and*
	• Other cohesive devices across sentence and paragraph boundaries include more than just the basics, such as
	  • conventional words and phrases like *as soon as, in the meantime, in contrast, in spite of*
	  • phrases unique to the piece
		• Other cohesive devices across sentence and paragraph boundaries, if present, are mostly limited to pronouns like *he, her, my, they*, etc.; the words *this, these, that, those*; and some repetition of words and phrases previously used.

• Other rhetorical devices may include
  • multiple instances of parallelism
  • varied sentence lengths
  • inverted, "cleft" sentences
  • other sentences that put the most important information last
	• Other rhetorical devices may include
	  • minimal use of parallelism
	  • occasional variation in sentence length
	  • a few sentences that put the important information last	

Note: While "connector" is not a traditional grammatical term, we find it useful to cover not only the traditional transitions but also any cohesive device that seems to connect one part of a text with another, either within or across sentence and paragraph boundaries.

FIGURE 12–1. What should I teach next? A guide for examining the grammar of student writing

ENRICHING writing through word choice

Ideas • Details
Voice • Style • Tone

High—*highly effective*	Middle—*competent*	Low—*basic*
Infrequent use of common, bland, general words; frequent use of precise, "just right" words.	**Some use of precise words, though many words are common, bland, or general.**	**Frequent use of common, bland, general words throughout.**
• Verbs such as *loped* instead of *ran*, nouns like *curator* instead of *director*. Phrases like *feisty cocker spaniel* instead of *dog* or *in a flash* instead of *suddenly*.	• Some effective use of specific nouns, active verbs, and uniquely descriptive adjectives and adverbs.	• Vague nouns; imprecise, dull verbs; minimal use of adjectives and adverbs that describe.
• Inverted and "cleft" sentences that add *is, are, was,* or *were* are effective and not overused.	• Infrequent use of *is, are, was, were*, instead of a more powerful verb. Possible overuse of inverted and "cleft" sentences that include one of these verbs.	• Common use of *is, are, was, were* instead of a more powerful verb.

ENHANCING writing through punctuation and usage

Conventions and Voice • Style • Tone

High—*highly effective*	Middle—*competent*	Low—*basic*
Hardly any errors in punctuation, though the writing may have occasional errors in using more sophisticated punctuation, such as semicolons and colons.	**Some errors in punctuation, perhaps reflecting a clear and specific pattern, but these errors do not usually interfere with comprehension.**	**Errors in punctuation are frequent and/or make it difficult to read the piece.**
• Semicolons, when used, are almost always used appropriately. • Colons may be used as introducers, when a sentence shifts from general to more specific.	• Within compound sentences, a comma usually occurs before a connecting *and* or *but*. A semicolon, if used, may or may not be used appropriately.	• Sentences may not all have end punctuation. Run-on sentences may occur.
• Comma use is mostly conventional, though a comma may be added to separate parallel parts of a long phrase, even when no "comma rule" supports such use.	• The writing may not necessarily include the commas conventionally associated with longer introductory elements and/or other nonessential descriptive phrases.	• Commas are seldom used, or used randomly.
• The writing shows clear and bold experimentation with stylistic devices, such as emphatic fragments, run-ons to capture stream of consciousness, dashes to separate and emphasize, juxtaposition of two voices, use of punctuation or type font for special effects.	• One or more sentences may simply be malformed; the writer may have lost track of the sentence structure while writing.	• Fragments, if they occur, consist of garbles or occur before what they refer to, not after.
• There are few errors in punctuation, none of which interfere with the construction of meaning. • Dialect features, if used, serve a clear rhetorical purpose.	• Errors may amount to frequent occurrences of one, two, maybe three patterns, such as comma splice sentences, faulty subject-verb or pronoun-referent agreement, or excessive use of unneeded commas.	• Writing may have features associated with informal English, such as *ain't*; multiple negatives; and lack of basic subject-verb agreement, as in *he don't* or *we was*. Such features may or may not be associated with particular dialects or the add-on learning of English.

as well as the possibility that there may be more levels in *your* students' writing. As you work with the guide, feel free to email us and share your own observations.

Interpreting the guide

The very lowest level of writing would consist mostly of false starts and garbles—or virtually nothing! Our low level starts a bit higher, with patterns we have seen in student writing at all levels, from kindergarten into college. The gap between the low and middle range is large, to emphasize that development from one level to the next will be gradual. The middle range is also especially broad, running the gamut between beginning use of some constructions and proficient use. The column labeled high includes features that tend to make us, as teachers, say "Wow!" about a student's use of language.

We drew not only on our own experience as teachers and teaching consultants, including a wealth of student papers, but also on research into the development of children's written language (see Chapter 3). As you read the guide from right to left, from low to high, you'll find that some features listed for the middle level are not included at the low level, and some features listed at the high level are not included in the lower levels. In effect, the chart suggests a hypothesis: that features new to the high level are not likely to appear often in a writer's work until his or her writing has demonstrated automatic use of features new to the middle level, and so forth. Still, we caution you not to take too seriously the examples of specific transitions/connectors (we'll explain our rationale shortly). Here's how we broadly characterize the levels in our chart:

High *Highly effective*	**Middle** *Competent*	**Low** *Basic*
Demonstrating appropriate voice/style	Ranging from above low to proficient	Possibly very weak in some areas

For the high level we chose the descriptor *highly effective* rather than *outstanding* or *superb*, because we wanted to emphasize that high-level writing has a clear voice designed to reach a clearly defined audience. You may find it helpful to divide the middle level into low-middle, mid-middle, and high-middle, or to make some other distinctions within or between the categories. We find these distinctions easy to spot when looking at individual papers but too idiosyncratic to specify in a chart.

There are five categories labeled vertically at the side of the chart:

1. Ideas/details
   - Grammatical options
   - Word choice
2. Organization/structure
3. Voice/style/tone
4. Sentence sense/variety/fluency
5. Conventions

This list includes all six major traits of writing, with sentence sense, variety, and fluency also relating to each of the other five. Under "Ideas/details," note that not only "just right" words but also grammatical options like phrases and dependent clauses add to the specificity of the text. The only aspect of conventions we've emphasized in our chart is punctuation as it relates to grammar; most other grammatical aspects of usage don't lend themselves to specification by level.

You can skip the following explanatory discussion if you already have a good sense of what the categories entail, but our comments will help you understand why this chart—and any rubric—should be used thoughtfully rather than mechanically, as if cast in stone.

Enriching writing through grammar

The first section of the guide deals with ideas/details, organization/structure, and voice/style/tone as affected by sentence sense/variety/fluency.

Grammatical options

Below the boldface overview statements, the first and second descriptors in each column deal with grammatical structures and options within a sentence. Here are the second statements at the low and middle levels:

> ***Low:*** Minimal use of adjectives and adverbs; prepositional phrases more often used to set the scene for what's going on than to describe someone or something.
>
> ***Middle:*** Noticeable and varied use of introductory phrases and subordinate clauses; substantial and varied use of prepositional phrases to describe and elaborate upon nouns as well as set the scene.

These statements reflect the fact that very young, emergent writers tend to use prepositional phrases adverbially, especially to indicate time or location, but they may not make as much use of prepositional phrases to describe nouns. The corresponding high-level statement includes the kinds of adjectival modifiers emphasized in Chapters 5 and 6. We are not sure to what extent older but still very basic writers follow this pattern.

Organization/structure

This category includes a set of statements dealing with transitions and other connectors—not only those that operate within a sentence, but also those that clarify meaning relationships and add cohesion across sentence boundaries.

We haven't been able to disentangle genuine writing development from the sequence in which modes and genres are typically taught in schools. We've assumed that the most basic writing will be expressive, with a descriptive or narrative flavor that favors connectors indicating time or sequence rather than, say, subordination of ideas or sophisticated logic. But this limitation depends partly on what teachers are having kids write. If we compare students' narrative pieces with their persuasive pieces—as Connie did in an earlier investigation (1982)—we will find subordinating conjunctions used: not only those like *when* and *until*, indicating time, but ones like *because* and *if*, which are commonly used in persuasive writing. In fact, *because* and *if* are common in the persuasive writing of even first graders.

So where should connectors like *when*, *because*, *if*, *until*, and *while* be listed? In the middle level, where we've put them? In the low level? Perhaps ideally in the gap between the two levels? You may need to modify this transitions aspect of the chart to reflect the writing that students in your own classrooms are producing, since we've tried to cover the gamut from kindergarten to college in only three levels.

Our rationale for listing certain conjunctive adverbs at the high level rather than the middle is this: While some are relatively sophisticated words for time relationships, most are more likely to be used in argumentative writing, the specific kind of persuasive writing that often emphasizes logos, or logic, and that's usually not taught until at least junior high. This is a prime example of grammatical "development" reflecting not just age, but mode and genre as well as instruction.

Parallelism

Parallelism, as we've said, refers to using a series of the same kind of grammatical construction. "The same" can mean repeated exactly or be construed more loosely. Rhetorically, grammatical parallelism calls attention not only to the structure but also to the content of the items in the series, which often are meant to surprise or shock, inflame or inspire. Sometimes just two items will have that effect, though usually a series is thought of as having three and sometimes more items. Following are some examples from *Night* (1960), by Elie Wiesel, an autobiographical novel based on the author's horrific experiences as a Jewish teenager during the Holocaust.

Clearly parallelism is a rhetorical device that Wiesel uses with craft and care:

> They said he was a charming man—calm, likable, polite, and sympathetic. (p. 7)

> Several days passed. Several weeks. Several months. Life had returned to normal. A wind of calmness and reassurance blew through our houses. The traders were doing good business, the students lived buried in their books, and the children played in the streets. (p. 4)

> I had asked my father to sell out, liquidate his business, and leave. (p. 6) [The *to* is understood before *liquidate* and *leave*.]

> I looked at our house, where I had spent so many years in my search for God; in fasting in order to hasten the coming of the Messiah; in imagining what my life would be like. (p. 16)

> Perhaps they thought that God could have devised no torment in hell worse than that of sitting there among the bundles, in the middle of the road, beneath a blazing sun; that anything would be preferable to that. (p. 14)

> One by one they passed in front of me, teachers, friends, others, all those I had been afraid of, all those I once could have laughed at, all those I had lived with over the years. They went by, fallen, dragging their packs, dragging their lives, deserting their homes, the years of their childhood, cringing like beaten dogs. (pp. 14–15)

> "Each person will be allowed to take only his own personal belongings. A bag on our backs, some food, a few clothes. Nothing else." (p. 11)

At the ineffective extreme—clearly the overuse of parallelism—are the seven sentences beginning with "his" this or "his" that, in the student's second version of "The Big Guy" (see page 125). The sentences have the same basic structure, yet their overuse characterizes the writer as emerging rather than highly competent.

What of the series of sentences that start the same in "Choices," the essay Jonathan wrote for Chapter 11 in an attempt to illustrate effective writing typical of an eleventh grader? You be the judge!

A note about infinitives and gerunds

We have not specifically illustrated infinitives or gerunds up to this point because we believe they contribute little to style except when they occur

in parallel phrases. An *infinitive* consists of *to* + the base from of a verb, as in *to go*, *to think*, *to flee*. However, infinitives don't function as main verbs; they generally work like nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. Here are some examples from *Night* of infinitives in a series:

> We began to look for familiar faces, to seek information, to question the veteran prisoners . . . . (p. 45)

> We were no longer allowed to go into restaurants or cafes, to travel on the railway, to attend the synagogue, to go out into the street after six o'clock. (p. 9)

> The idea of dying, of no longer being, began to fascinate me. Not to exist any longer. Not to feel the horrible pains in my foot. Not to feel anything, neither weariness, nor cold, nor anything. (p. 82)

In the last example, the infinitives are preceded by *not*. They occur as fragments.

We saw in Chapter 5 that verb forms ending in *-ing* often modify a noun, in which case they are called participles. When an *-ing* verb form works like a noun, it is called a *gerund*. We skimmed *Night* several times, looking for series of gerunds or gerund phrases. All we found however, were sentences with two:

> The idea of dying, of no longer being, began to fascinate me. (p. 82) [Actually, it's the prepositional phrases that are parallel, but they both have a gerund within them.]

To further illustrate some gerunds in a series, we have generated two sentences that relate to *Night*:

> The Jews of Sighet had a history of ignoring warnings, going about their daily business as usual, and pretending they were safe. But simply waiting, praying, and pulling the wool over their own eyes were fatal mistakes.

If you feel you must teach infinitives and gerunds—perhaps because they're listed in your state standards—we suggest you teach them in parallel series as a part of effective style.

"Cleft" and other inverted sentences

By putting the "new" and/or most important information at the end of our sentences, we can make the information more prominent and therefore

more memorable. There are many ways to do this—for example, it helps simply to put adverbial modifiers at the beginning of sentences whenever possible.

Here is a different kind of example. Which of the following three sentences do you find most memorable?

> To note that the ISR was never directly indicated anywhere on Martino's page is interesting.
>
> That the ISR was never directly indicated anywhere on Martino's page is interesting to note.
>
> It's interesting to note that the ISR was never directly indicated anywhere on Martino's page.

We consider the third, published (Plait, *Skeptical Inquirer,* 2006, p. 54) version superior, because it doesn't limp off into the sunset with the "interesting" commentary but rather ends with the interesting statement itself. This and the following examples are all from popular magazines.

More common are sentences beginning with *it is true* or *it is true that*, *the idea is*, *the solution is*, and others. Here's an example:

> The truth is that this prophecy, like one that supposedly predicted the September 11, 2001, attacks, was a recent creation. (Gámez, *Skeptical Inquirer,* 2006, p. 12)

Such a sentence would be very awkward if reworded so as not to begin *The truth is*.

Here's an inverted sentence structured a little differently:

> And it is here, with Narayan finishing high school, that the diverting particulars of childhood—the monkeys and peacocks, the colonial cruelties, the academic misadventures—run dry. (Mason, *The New Yorker,* 2006, p. 89)

The word *that* has been added as the sentence is inverted, putting *here* near the beginning rather than at the end. Such a sentence is called a "cleft" sentence because it is divided, or "cleft," by an added word (in this case, *that*). Here are slightly different examples with the added introductory *what* underlined, along with the added *is* or *was*:

> What this means is that for the foreseeable future we will be unable to ascertain what goes on in places like Guantánamo without taking some extraordinary measures. (Griswold, *Harper's,* 2006, p. 41)

> What he knew then, what we all know now, is that 1,600 miles away in Colorado he had a considerable ace up his sleeve. (Lacayo, *Time,* 2006, p. 77)
>
> What passed for investigation in earlier times is illustrated by a "true" ghost story related by Pliny the Younger (ca. 100 AD). (Nickell, *Skeptical Inquirer,* 2006, p. 23)

The structure of such sentences catches a reader's attention, thus emphasizing the important content at the end. Such sentences often connect not only the old with the new but also one paragraph with another. In their original sources, each of these *what* cleft sentences occurred at the beginning of a new paragraph. All the other example sentences did, too!

Shouldn't we offer students models of such sentences and encourage their judicious use? Cleft and other inverted sentences occur in published writing—both fiction and nonfiction. They make some sentences less awkward and, in general, help a writer emphasize what's most important in the sentence.

Enriching writing through word choice

Why include word choice in a guide featuring grammatical elements? Because when we talk about using concrete, interesting, and precise words, we're talking about words that work as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—in other words, particular parts of speech. With pressure from various citizen groups, some states have put back into their content standards the expectation that students will use, and perhaps also "know," these functions. Not all states test the ability to recognize them, nor do the SAT and ACT assessments. But the rubrics for large-scale writing assessment do include some attention to word choice—which makes sense, since good writers choose their words carefully. Instead of focusing on analyzing sentences to label the parts of speech, why not focus on making effective word choices in writing: on *using* these grammatical elements to good effect and learning their names while doing so? Again, we suggest *production* rather than analysis.

"Just right" words

At the heart of word choice is the "just right" word, a word of such specific detail and tone that nothing else will do as well. (The "just right" concept can be extended from the single word to the simple phrase.) Specifically, we want to get our students away from vague nouns; imprecise, dull verbs; and minimal use of descriptive adjectives and adverbs (low-level characteristics) and toward frequent use of precise words and phrases.

Teachers can show students the power of specific imagery in words and phrases. Take, for instance, the following example from *The New York Times Magazine*:

> Moments before a recent show in Peoria, Ill., the world's No. 1 preschool band appeared on two projection screens flanking a stage already set with a drum kit, an electric guitar, a Spanish Galleon, and a smiley face house. Calling into the camera with their standard welcome—"Hi everyone, we're the Wiggles. I'm Greg . . . I'm Murray . . . I'm Jeff . . . I'm Anthony"—the Australian quartet seemed to come straight toward the audience in a cartoony red car, smiling, waving, and giving everyone a big thumbs up. (Scott, 2006, p. 36)

So which words and phrases are "just right"? Let's rewrite without them and see what's missing:

> The band of colorful and energetic men appeared on two screens and introduced themselves to the crowd and gave hand signals.

All the style, voice, description, and detail are gone. Find the words that add those elements and you've found the "just right" words and phrases. The "just right" elements enhance the overall image presented, adding both depth and strength to a scene that sets the tone for the article. Even if they are not parents of toddlers, readers can feel the setting that makes the children's band the Wiggles so popular among its target audience.

Here's another example, taken from *The Atlantic Monthly*:

> At the age of twenty-two, Hamid Hayat appeared to be adrift on two continents. He slacked, by turns, in his hometown of Lodi, California, and in his family's home country, Pakistan. Having lived for roughly equal amounts of time in each, he seemed without direction in either. But on June 5, 2005, the young American offered up alarming evidence of personal initiative: after hours of questioning at the FBI's Sacramento office he confessed that he had attended a terrorist training camp in Pakistan and returned to the United States to wage jihad. In quick succession came his arrest, a packed press conference, and his indictment—and suddenly, it was all over but the trial. (Waldman, 2006, p. 82)

Again, we see the use of precise, "just right" words and phrases. Readers can make their own decisions about which ones are most powerful in adding to the tone of the writing. While the previous example used such elements mainly to add to a scene, this piece uses them to convey both

credibility and tone. We are particularly taken with the specific dates and places—*Lodi, California; Pakistan; FBI's Sacramento office; June 5, 2005*—in addition to the descriptive elements like *adrift on two continents* and *slacked*.

So, what are "just right" words? Let's summarize with what they aren't. They aren't vague, dull, or generic. They are words carefully chosen by the author to convey specific points, information, tones, or feelings. They are words chosen with care and thought. They aren't "just good enough"; they are "just right."

Forms of the verb to be

The chart also mentions the use of forms of the verb *to be*, specifically ones for present or past tense: *is* and *are, was* and *were*. Writers are often admonished to eliminate these verb forms whenever possible. But sometimes this advice is better ignored than followed. For example, what about the title of Nora Zeale Hurston's book *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937/1991)? Phrased this way, the action is described as continuous over time. In the simple past tense, "Their eyes watched God," the main verb alone, without *is*, suggests a single point in time—apparently not what Hurston meant.

We're also often told to avoid the passive voice, in which the subject of the sentence is not the doer. But what about *Garbage is collected on Mondays*? Isn't that better than the *is*-less but wordy phrase *Garbage collectors collect the garbage on Mondays*?

And some cleft and other inverted sentences also require *is* or *are*, *was* or *were*. We suggest in our chart that these, if not overused, are a high-level characteristic.

Enhancing writing through punctuation and usage

There are three particular points to be made about this last section of the chart:

1. When writers are learning a new grammatical construction or way of conjoining or subordinating sentences, they often don't use the punctuation associated with it, even though we may have taught the punctuation too. Missing or misused commas and semicolons (the first two bulleted items in the middle level) are examples of new kinds of errors that may initially accompany progress (discussed more generally in Chapter 3).
2. While a paper may contain many errors, there may be far fewer error *patterns*: multiple instances of comma splices, for instance, or

A cautionary tale

A few years ago, one of Connie's students who was doing his intern teaching was asked by his supervising teacher to correct the capitalization and punctuation in her high school students' papers. Unsure of the rules himself, he asked Connie if she would teach him the rules needed. Dutifully, they went through one paper together, error by error, rule by rule. Of course the intern teacher needed to learn the rules, but was this the right approach to the writer's paper? Embarrassed at having fallen so easily into the trap of correction, Connie suddenly exclaimed, "What on earth are we doing? We could correct every single error in this paper and it would still be a level 1 paper [on the state writing assessment], because it has no real content!!" We need to tame the Error Beast and our own tendency to try to slay it through corrections and prohibitions. We need to develop a much richer concept of the role that grammar can play in making writing effective: in helping to generate ideas, use "just right" words and phrases, organize, create voice and style—all in the process of making sentences and paragraphs and whole pieces flow more smoothly, with sentence variety and finesse.

excessive use of unneeded commas (see the last bulleted item under the middle level). A related point is that even highly effective writing is not necessarily error free.

3. While dialect features likely reflect a writer's inability to eliminate them—at least from one-draft-only writing—or the writer's deliberate choice to resist emulating mainstream conventions, there are also positive uses for dialect features. Think, for example, of *Huckleberry Finn* or the novels of Nora Zeale Hurston and Toni Morrison—or Will in the TV sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (see Chapter 3).

Using the "nonrubric" with caution

The "What Should I Teach Next?" guide can help teachers evaluate students' writing to determine their current skills and decide where to go next instructionally—always keeping in mind, though, that any one paper is just that: a single snapshot that may or may not be representative of the student's work. Another important thing to remember is that the guide is not grade-level specific. It is not just for high school or for middle school or elementary school. It includes not only developmental levels but multiple age ranges and grade levels.

The guide spans three broad categories:

- *enriching* writing through grammar
- *enriching* writing through word choice
- *enhancing* writing through punctuation and usage

Basically, the guide helps us verbalize quick insights about the use of grammar in a student's paper, but we have to be careful not to let our overall impression of the piece—led perhaps by its content, organization, and support for ideas or lack thereof—mislead us into thinking that the writer's use of grammar is stronger or weaker than it really is. Indeed, one purpose of the guide is to help us be more objective and more consistent with other teachers' determinations about writers' use of grammar, even while some decisions will surely be debatable and debated.

Our observations can all too easily become judgments about what the writer "ought" to have done, when we ourselves couldn't do it differently.

Though we aren't really interested in *labeling* whole papers as high, middle, or low with respect to the use of grammar, our guide nudges teachers in that direction. We also need to realize that our observations can all too easily become judgments about what the writer "ought" to have done, when we ourselves couldn't do it differently. We might notice, for example, that the writer has often used the verbs *is* and *are* or *was* and *were*. But in how many of these instances can we ourselves see a good way to replace the allegedly "weak" form of *to be* with a stronger action verb? Thus it may help to append explanations to some of our observations. We need to remember, too, that we are observing the writing, not trying to get inside the writer's head—though especially with the high-level papers, we couldn't resist at least drawing inferences about the writer's excellent or even exceptional writing abilities.

One more reminder: We recognize, of course, that teachers do not often have the time to do such thorough on-paper analyses. However, some experience working with other teachers to do more detailed descriptions and discuss where to go next instructionally can at least give us the means to more quickly group student writers for instruction and assistance.

Applying the guide

We'll now model how to use the guide by applying it to three eleventh-grade persuasive writing papers. We'll describe—objectively in some instances, but with inevitably personal judgments, too—what we particularly notice about the writers' use of grammar in these papers, followed in each case by some possible areas for what to teach next. With all but the

high-level paper, we've included specific instructional suggestions for each of the three categories—enriching writing through grammar, enriching writing through word choice, and enhancing writing through punctuation and usage—thus making it obvious that there are options for grouping this writer with others for future guidance.

Paper 1: The Silent Assassin

What's your favorite part about going to eat dinner at a neighborhood restaurant with your family and friends? Is it the cheerful chattering with friends? The juicy double bacon cheeseburger, which you cherished every bite of? The mountain of chocolate, which you shared with your date for dessert? Or was it maybe the lungful of nicotine you got from the kind, considerate people sitting a few tables away with a mound of cigarette butts in their ashtray? What's the point of a smoking section that is only five feet away from the "non smoking" section in some areas? Oh but some restaurants are kind enough to put up a little 4-foot "walls" to separate the two areas. WOW! Thank you so much for putting up a tiny fence for the deadly gas to easily travel over and go straight to work on blackening my lungs! And yes I did say deadly gas. Not only does smoking ruin your meal and experiences in public places but secondhand smoke from cigarettes is also very unhealthy and dangerous. Thousands of non-smokers die each year as a result of secondhand smoke. Smoking should not be allowed in public places, especially restaurants.

The first and most important reason why I believe smoking shouldn't be allowed in public places is the health problems caused by secondhand smoke. I don't think smokers realize that when they are smoking a cigarette they aren't just destroying their own lungs, but everyone's around them. The surprising fact is that side-stream smoke—secondhand smoke—has higher concentrations of noxious compounds than the mainstream smoke inhaled by the smoker (T. Raupach, p. 382). This shows that people who smoke in public places are putting others' health at risk even more than their own. Secondhand smoke is involuntarily inhaled by nonsmokers, lingers in the air for hours after cigarettes have been extinguished and can cause a wide range of adverse health effects, including cancer, respiratory infections, and asthma. And it doesn't just affect your lungs as most people think; it can also cause serious damage to your heart. Secondhand smoke causes approximately 3,000 lung cancer deaths and 35,000-62,000 heart disease deaths in adult nonsmokers in the United States each year (ALA,

p. 1). What's worse than dying from another person's pleasure and addiction? Secondhand smoke is like a silent assassin sent for you from all those people smoking around you. And it isn't just adults that fall victim to this killer. Is is especially harmful to young children. Secondhand smoke is responsible for between 150,000 and 300,000 lower respiratory tract infections in infants and children under 18 months of age, resulting in between 7,500 and 15,000 hospitalizations each year, and causes 1,900 to 2,700 sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) deaths in the united states annually (APA, p. 1). Secondhand smoke is not something that should be taken lightly any longer.

Nevertheless, smokers will say it's a free country and it's their right to smoke if they want to. It's just a "small pleasure" they need in life. And that's just fine with me if smokers want to sit at home and slowly destroy their own internal organs, but when they go to public places with tons of people around that's a totally different story. Smoking in public ruins everyone else's experience and is very unhealthy and dangerous. Who really wants smoke surrounding their table at lunch on Sunday after church? Or when they're pushing their daughter on a swing at the park? This "small pleasure", smoking, takes thousands of lives each year, and that's not including the actual smokers. Are a few puffs of chemicals and gases really worth this many lives?

I really hope I have opened your eyes to the dangers of secondhand smoking. With so many problems resulting from smoking and secondhand smoke, why is it still allowed in public places? When people's lives are at stake, there needs to be a change. There needs to be laws regarding smoking in public places and soon. How many more must fall victim to secondhand smoke before something is done? So the next time you go to a restaurant to eat with your friends or family, just think about what the guy puffing away at his fifth or sixth cigarette is doing to your health and, more importantly, your children's.

Applying the guide to paper 1

ENRICHING Writing Through Grammar

Definitely rates high. The writing includes varied sentence structures. A satirical tone in the first paragraph pulls us in as readers. The rhetorical use of question marks, the beginning of sentences with *and*, and the use of fragments reveal a writer who is comfortable with experimentation. Transitions and connectors are sometimes highly effective: *not only . . . but . . . .*

ENRICHING Writing Through Word Choice

Again, high. We are impressed with the writer's choice of "just right" words, particularly nouns and noun phrases: *the mountain of chocolate; deadly gas; the juicy double bacon cheeseburger*. The use of statistics rather than just generalities adds to the overall description.

ENHANCING Writing Through Punctuation and Usage

High, with effective use of parallelism as well as dashes and semicolons. Lapses from conventional punctuation are scarcely noticeable.

This is a very strong paper. We would group it among the highest within this set of writings. Instructionally, we would help the writer experiment with adjectival phrases as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. We would also offer examples of other organizational schemes that break out of the traditional introduction/body/conclusion mold.

Paper 2: Smelling Like a Dirty Ashtray

Have you ever walked into a restaurant and been so anxious to sit down and get dinner but there is a line? Then the waiter asks if you prefer smoking or non - and at this point you just want to eat as fast as you can - so you say first available. Then you try to enjoy your meal but there's one problem; your food now smells like a dirty ashtray, and there's no joy in spending thirty dollars on dinner that smells like tobacco.

Nowadays smokers have some restrictions on where they can light up at, for example: In Overland Park, Kansas they have now put a smoke free establishment rule into effect, where really only pubs, some restaurants and clubs are they only places where smoking is allowed inside. And to be quite honest, I feel that it is a good thing in our society to stamp out the use of tobacco once and for all. Here is why I think smoking in public should be banned.

First off, cigarette smoking is the leading cause of cancer, obviously in the lungs, and one of the leading causes of death in our country. I don't understand how someone can do something to their body, so often, when they know there will be long term consequences!! And another thing that makes me furious is the use of nicotine, that's how the head honchos make more of their money; people who start have a hard time putting them down. Personally, I think that smoking cigarettes should be banned totally. I can't stand the smell, and it has been proven to be a cause of global warming.

No one expects perfection

Even our high-rated examples have grammar errors and aspects of the writing that could benefit from some enriching. We remind teachers that high doesn't equal perfection, especially in timed situations. Rather, a high rating says that the writer is very effectively using grammar to enrich and enhance his or her work, using many of the available grammatical tools to craft sentences, paragraphs, and text for the desired audiences and purposes.

Global warming will probably not affect us in our life-time, but it will way on down the road, in the next 100,000 years or so, no one knows for sure. People who smoke cigarettes are actually being very selfish, because their actions will end our world that much sooner. Yes, a smoker would argue that driving cars or other use of petroleum products is just as bad, but gasoline doesn't kill people because they smoke it, cigarettes do. I have seen the long term effects, and it isn't good, this is a personal experience:

You're nearing 78 years of age, and living in a retirement home in Florida. It might not sound like the bad life right now, but it gets so much worse. You have to be hooked up to an oxygen machine twenty-two hours a day and you've been trying to rid yourself from smoking cigarettes for nearly two decades and you just cannot stop your addiction, its almost like there is no cure. You can't even lie off of the cancer stick for the four hours that your two nephews come from Missouri to visit, because you can't travel by yourself to the family reunions over the summer. You have to take your oxygen tank with you in public, and you constantly sound like you have a horrific sinus infection when you breathe.

That is what it was like visiting my Aunt Margaret, that's the main reason that I'm not in favor of smoking in public places. I feel that the Government should have regulations against it in all fifty states. I feel that first of all it would raise the life expectancy by a tremendous amount. Also, I think our environment would benefit greatly from the stoppage of the tobacco smog stinking up our planet. Besides, who really wants earth to turn into one big, giant ashtray anyways?

Applying the guide to paper 2

ENRICHING Writing Through Grammar

We see this piece of writing in the middle category. It includes some sentence variety, though few descriptive phrases. The writer has tried some rhetorical moves with his sentences—especially the use of questions. His use of transitions is competent, but not outstanding—*and to be quite honest, first of, also*. His use of *and* to begin a sentence isn't especially effective. The *you* in the fifth paragraph is confusing, at least until we realize that the writer is trying to get us to imagine ourselves in the situation of his aunt.

ENRICHING Writing Through Word Choice

Again, in the middle. The writing includes only a few strong words and phrases, notably *horrific sinus infection*, *head honchos*, and the

metaphorical concept of people as ashtrays. Though the writing includes a lot of *is* and *was* sentences, not many could be readily changed to action verbs. There are a lot of general, nondescriptive nouns and verbs.

ENHANCING Writing Through Punctuation and Usage

In the middle—maybe high-middle because of the rhetorical use of question marks and the use of semicolons, dashes (mistyped, though), and two colons (one not quite conventionally used). Includes no basic errors, but has a pattern of ineffective comma splices.

This is a classic "average" essay—the ones we tend to see that neither wow anyone nor drive readers to despair—essays that nevertheless leave the author with plenty of room for improvement, grammatically and otherwise. The guide helped us verbalize some things we want the author to work on:

Sentences: We'd help him use a greater variety of introductory phrases and clauses—attention to sentence openers can enhance the flow of his sentences. (The use of a range of adjectival modifiers can come later.)

Transitions/connectors: We'd teach more fluid and complex means of connecting ideas. The writer makes abrupt, unannounced transitions, such as the switch from global warming to the retirement home in Florida. We would focus specifically on giving clues to readers about upcoming points and expressing these through clear transitions.

Words: We'd focus on more "just right" nouns and active, descriptive verbs.

Punctuation: We'd teach using colons appropriately, while reinforcing the judicious use of semicolons.

Paper 3: Polygamy Good or Bad

A man with multiple wives maybe ranging from 14 to middle 20's. Men with 26 or more children mostly all from the different women they marry. The men that are marrying these very young girls are ages ranging from, 30 to 40's. Is this the right thing to do? Would you allow your young teenager to marry someone more than half there age? Well in some Mormon practices people find this to be ok. As it is known the Mormons banned this practice if multiple wives in 1890. It was a banned practice or so we think.

But in July or 2005 general officials say about 20,000 to 40,000 or more people still practice polygamy in the U.S. The only reason the LDS church banned the practice of polygamy was because they were under pressure from the government. But still some LDS churches teach polygamy and say they can't wait for the day when this practice is legalized.

The women of this religion sometimes say that they feel safe and that they have security with their one husband and big families. But most of the women find it degrading and wish to escape the life were you are not the only women in your husbands life. There is a polygamist cult in Colorado City. There many women say their husbands rape them all the time. They must have sex with there husbands whenever the husband says or they will be severally punished. They cannot read any books or they will be punished for that as well. They are also taught at an early age to fear outsiders. They also get taught that the only right women have is to be obedient to there husbands. The police in the city don't stop any of these things from happening. They are allowing under aged marriage and rape and other abuse to just happen. The sad thing is that they know about it and they say that they don't want to get involved with these people and interfere with there lives so instead they just let these horrible things happen to women.

So is this any way to live. I do not think that is way of life is right it puts men in complete control of all there wives and all the many children they may have. I think these women need to have choices and salvation. They need to be respected not degraded. I think the police should step up and help these poor women that have to go through these emotional horrors everyday. They will continue to go through this until someone steps up so why not do it now and help the women of polygamy?

Applying the guide to paper 3

Keep in mind that we are looking only at the writer's use of grammar and related punctuation, not at the accuracy of his information.

ENRICHING Writing Through Grammar

Middle/low. This paper doesn't exhibit throughout the classic low trait of relying primarily on the subject-verb-object sentence pattern, but there is one particular paragraph in which the author has strung together several sentences beginning with *they*. In his favor, there are also a few attempts to break from the basic sentence pattern. The use of *but* at the beginning of paragraph 2 doesn't convey the

meaning needed, though the sentence-opening *but* within that paragraph does work. Transitions between paragraphs are seldom supplied or effective, with the exception of the final paragraph's *So is this any way to live.*

ENRICHING Writing Through Word Choice

Low. A lot of bland, dull words. *Is*, *are*, and *was* could sometimes be changed to more specific verbs. *They* is overused.

ENHANCING Writing Through Punctuation and Usage

Low/middle. Use of *there* for *their* is frequent. There's some inconsistency in verb tense, too. Some patterns of using compound sentences without appropriate punctuation—none, or just a comma (run-on and comma splice sentences). There are some ineffective fragments.

Grammatically, this paper reflects low to middle characteristics in the use of grammar. How might we help the writer?

Sentences: As with the middle-level paper, this one suggests that the writer could benefit from assistance in learning to vary his sentence openers. We might guide the writer to use descriptive adjectives before some of his nouns, saving until later our instruction on using free modifying adjectival phrases.

Transitions/connectors: Focusing on using connectors that signal an appropriate meaning relationship may be helpful—at least if connectors are inappropriately chosen in other pieces of this student's writing.

Words: Definitely could benefit from help in choosing and revising for "just right" words, especially verbs conveying action. Might benefit from some help in revising sentences with *is*, *are*, or *was* as the verb when a stronger verb could be used instead.

Punctuation and usage: The writer needs to learn that *there* is not the right spelling to show that *they* own something. We'd help the writer avoid or correct run-on and comma splice sentences, showing that a coordinating conjunction needs to be used along with a comma to connect two independent clauses in a compound sentence.

Of course we would not work with the student on all these issues at once.

Further notes on using the guide

So far, we've used the guide to discuss three papers demonstrating a wide range of skills. However, the set was very limited in scope: They were all

eleventh-grade persuasive/argumentative essays. Can the guide be used for other genres and at other grade levels? Yes! We have used the guide with the writing of mid-elementary students and upper-level undergraduates. We have also used it with various genres, from fiction and creative nonfiction to technical documents to academic essays. In each case, the flexibility of the guide has made it applicable for understanding the skills and instructional needs of the writers.

The following personal narrative is taken from the Michigan Educational Assessment Program's sample anchor papers (1997):

Paper 4: The First Time I Got Bit by a Cat and Went to the Hospital

All of this happened when we were in Georgia to witness my cousin's marriage. That was over now and my family and I had a couple of days to have some fun!

That morning, my aunt and uncle had already been at work for about 1 hour. It was my family's job to let my aunt's cat out of the basement. This cat was very mean. It's name is Alley.

"Now girls," my mom said to my sister and I. "When Alley comes up, you stay away from her." There was fright in my mom's voice.

My mom slowly opened the creaky, wooden door. I suddenly saw two bright green eyes peering out from the door. Alley walked out, looked around, and started rubbing my mom's leg, purring.

Before anyone could say anything, I scampered to where the cat was, and sat on the floor next to her, with my legs spread.

Alley daintly walked over and curled up in my lap. I carefully pet her, checking to see if she was being good. When I thought that she was, I started petting her more quickely.

All of a sudden, SNAP! A twinge of pain sliced through my whole arm, like a knife. I cried out in pain, not knowing that it was me making the high pitched noise.

"AHH!" I screamed. I calmed down a while, then looking at my bloody hand, I started screaming again, with wet tears streaming down my face, tasting like salt. It was then, I realized, that Alley had bit me.

My dad came to me with a plate of ice. I put my hand on it, after my sister had taken me to the bathroom to wash it off. She had been crying too. My mom was too shocked to say anything.

At the same moment, Alley flung herself at my dad and started gnawing on his leg. My dad threw the cat on the wall. Alley slid down the wall, shook her head, and came charging back.

Who knows how we got out of that house, but we did.

My family and I tried to go an amusement park, but my hand hurt to hold it down.

Finally, I went to the doctor's office. They told me to go straight to the hospital.

Once there, my hand was the size of a small plate. I got a lot of presents, shots, too.

I found out that Alley had bitten into one of my veins.

I was in the hospital for two days and one night.

When I finally got out of the hospital, it was time to go back home.

So much for a vacation!

The End

Applying the guide to paper 4

We found lots of evidence of the writer's extraordinary skill in using grammar effectively to enrich writing.

ENRICHING Writing Through Grammar

This narrative clearly falls in the high category. The writing demonstrates highly effective sentence variety, with varied and appropriate transitions. We notice the writer's ability to change the pace of the writing by moving from long sentences to short and back to longer sentences. She's related ideas and concepts with different connecting devices at the beginning of new paragraphs—*all of a sudden, that morning, before,* and *who knows how we got out of that house, but we did*, among others. She's also used two effective fragments: *All of a sudden SNAP!* and, at the very end, *So much for a vacation!* Most notably, she has used set-off adjectivals, such as *purring* and three present participial phrases. She also has included two effective absolutes, if we accept Francis Christensen's notion that when *with* is put in front of an absolute construction, it's still an absolute: *with my legs spread* and *with wet tears streaming down my face, tasting like salt*.

ENRICHING Writing Through Word Choice

Word choices are also exceptionally strong—clearly deserves a high rating. The writer demonstrates skill in using "just right" words in place of less specific or dull ones. Some excellent word choices:

- Nouns and noun phrases—*the creaky, wooden door*; *two bright green eyes*; *high pitched voice*; *a twinge of pain*.

- Verbs and adverbials: *scampered, daintily walked, sliced, flung, streaming,* and *gnawing*.

ENHANCING Writing Through Punctuation and Usage

High. Makes effective use of parallelism; two fragments and two exclamation points contribute to a clear voice. Few errors in punctuation or usage, none of which interfere with meaning.

This writer's grammar skills clearly fall into the high categories. She generously used varied sentence structures, including cohesive devices—transitions and connectors. Perhaps most notable is the use of present participial phrases and the absolutes introduced by *with* to add details and create flow. The writer uses many kinds of rhetorical devices to enrich and flavor the writing—especially some fragments for effect.

Of course this is not a perfect paper. Written in a timed testing situation, it dwindles off with few details toward the end and probably has not been proofread. But as we've noted, grammatical perfection is not expected even for the highest score, and certainly not on these standardized tests. Such perfection is seldom expected of anyone, in fact, except copy editors and maybe secretaries—and they too occasionally make or don't notice lapses from the conventions of Edited American English.

Does it surprise you to learn that the student who wrote this narrative—in limited time, on a state writing assessment—was a fifth grader?

We suspect that such writing resulted not only from good teaching, but also from wide reading. In *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000), Stephen King devotes a couple of pages to grammar tips, but prefaces his advice this way: "One either absorbs the grammatical principles of one's native language in conversation and in reading or one does not" (p. 118). King exaggerates a little, we think—else he would not have given grammar tips, and we would not have written this book. In a softer tone, however, we echo his implication that well-written books are our greatest ally in teaching students to use grammar effectively to enrich and enhance writing. Those who read widely often pick up grammatical patterns unconsciously, as Connie's son revealed in his "War Death" poem, and as the fifth grader demonstrated in her essay. Thus promoting reading to strengthen writing is a positive, productive, and practical way to expand students' grammatical repertoire, along with providing guidance in using grammar throughout the writing process.

Well-written books are our greatest ally in teaching students to use grammar effectively to enrich and enhance writing.