

Lesson Plan: The Grammar of Necessity  
M. Nico Peck, MFA  
Department of Communication Studies  
San Jose State University

Lesson: Developing grammar awareness and writing skills with the experimental essay

Timeframe: multiple class periods, a minimum of three

Target Audience: College or university students at an upper-division writing level

Materials: Pens/pencils, video projector with sound, laptop, internet access, and blank paper.

Objectives: After this project students will be able to

- write a pantoum
- recognize 6 parts of speech
- use language with increased intentionality
- construct (and deconstruct) a dictionary
- write an experimental essay

Background: Students in this lesson should already know how to use a word processing program, in particular copy/paste functions, have basic grammar knowledge, and have mastery of the traditional five-paragraph essay.

Lesson Day 1: Parataxis 101

(50 min) Strategy: Loosen the grip on syntax with poetry

Teach the pantoum form using PoetryFoundation.org and Randell Mann's poem Boyfriend.

Small Group Activity: Pantoum

Form groups of five

Each group member must contribute two short phrases or sentences.

(Letters A through J.)

Construct the poem.

Share.

In-class writing: Individual Pantoums

Consider a word that you feel is not adequate, as Randell Mann does with the word "boyfriend." (For example, the word "owner" does not fit how I feel

about my relationship with my dog.) Write a 100- to 150-word paragraph critiquing the word. Give your thoughts about why it doesn't fit, what you would change, how you would change it, and personal experiences that support your feelings about the word. Then, pick 10 phrases or sentences (short ones work best) and construct a pantoum.

(10 min) Overview of Lexicon Essay Assignment.

(10 min) Offer tips on how to make the dictionary with a demonstration: Find/Replace a space with a paragraph. Alphabetize. Show an example.

Homework:

- Students should read the Gertrude Stein *How to Write* excerpt and S. Kirsch's article on Stein, "Suppose a Grammar Needs Invention, then conduct a thoughtful online discussion on the two readings, arriving in class ready to share responses.
- Find an article between 300 – 500 words in length.
- Begin making their dictionary.

Lesson Day 2:

Due: Lexicon Article (Canvas upload only – don't print out.)

Quiz on Kirsch and Stein (optional)

(10 min) Have students read Stein aloud, one sentence per person. See if they can feel into the humor and unique sense making.

(20 min) Large Group Conversation: What is language? What is grammar? Who makes grammar? What is a dictionary? What are the implications of Gertrude Stein's grammar of invention on how you might write? How would you change grammar rules? What is the value of bewilderment? Why would a writer deliberately confuse an audience? Have you ever deliberately confused someone? If so, why?

(10 min) Review the assignment overview. Field the numerous questions. Invite students to share their experiences finding the article, beginning the dictionary.

Remind them that they can use any prepositions, pronouns, or articles they want to, even if they aren't in the dictionary.

(30 min) Group Activity: prepositions, pronouns, and articles.

*N.B.: Although some grammarians consider articles to be adjectives, that is actually a gray area. In many languages, articles are a separate part of speech, so I teach them separately here. It helps folks from multilingual backgrounds to recognize their count*

*and non-count noun issues. If you are of the camp that sees articles as adjectives, there should be no problem, but I want to be completely transparent about my stance. Although in some ways they behave as an adjective, they also are unique and behave like something else entirely.*

Form six groups of 3 to 4 students, two groups for each part of speech. Have them research their assigned part of speech and come up with a way to teach the class. Then, have the groups that have the same part of speech merge and talk with each other about what they came up with. Then have each group teach the whole class.

(10 min) In-class writing:

Prompt: Now that you have your lexicon, begin to try to piece together sentences. Don't worry about the essay prompt right now, just trust that you will have it in the back of your mind, and allow sentences and phrases to suggest themselves to you, as you look at the words in your dictionary. Treat it like a game.

Share: Invite students to share sentences they came up with.

Homework:

- Finish Lexicon Dictionary
- Work on Lexicon Paper and bring in PRINTED OUT rough draft of essay

Lesson Day 3: Due: Lexicon Dictionary (Canvas upload only – don't print out.)

In-class support for the Lexicon Assignment  
Grammar Grid: Word Forms & Parts of Speech

Now that they are in the throes of the assignment, they will be arriving with many, many questions. Each question will give you clues about the kind of thinking they have around grammar. Try to listen for questions that point to the next level of awareness, which is what you will be looking for.

The question you are hoping they have is: "Can I change a word? Can I add an 's' or an '-ing' or something like that to a word?"

The short answer is YES. And the main learning can now happen, if they have that question. Now, they have a desire to know how grammar operates.

I will often say, "Words hold meaning in two different ways. When we think about the meaning of a word, we usually just think about the dictionary definition of a word, but each word also has a grammatical meaning, too. That grammatical meaning can change and the dictionary definition can change. Words are not solid entities, but fluid, bendy, and malleable."

Often, they will arrive to class with frustration and a bit of anxiety. Be prepared to do some morale boosting and housekeeping, encouraging them with the fact that

this assignment is about the process, that it is taking their writing to the next level, that it is a “stealth grammar assignment,” and that most students earn an A. You may want to bring treats on this day. Just saying. It can be a bit rough. This is great, though, because they really do bond with each other with this assignment.

Offer them a tool that will help them with their essay: The Grammar Grid.

This works best if you draw it on the board and build it with their suggestions from the ground up. Simply showing them the grid already formed has less of an educational value. They start to really see how grammar operates with this. This is a very important day of class, so you also want to make sure you encourage everyone to come to class. Use incentives to get them ALL there.

So, pose questions every step and write what they say onto the board.

The dialogue usually goes like this:

“Okay, name a part of speech.”

“Noun.”

“What’s a noun?”

“Person, place, thing, or idea.”

“Great. Now, someone else. What’s another part of speech?”

“Verb.”

“What’s a verb?”

“Action word.”

“Yes, it can be an action or it can be a state of being / linking verb, like ‘is.’”

You get the idea.

By the end, you will have a grid on the board that looks something like this. Sometimes, I have a column for gerunds and participles, but in general that has confused them. Depending on the grammar knowledge of the group, that would be helpful, though. With just four columns, I will indicate if a noun is a gerund with in the box, and I will do the same for a participle.

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb

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Okay, so, let’s see if we can change a word from one part of speech to another, so that you can expand your word choices for your lexicon essay.

Give me a word from your dictionary that you want to work with.

They will offer words. Pick one that will work well with the grid. This is key. You can pick harder words after they understand what you are doing. So try to pick a Latinate word first, if you can.

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
Occupation	Occupy	Occupying	Occupying-ly

Invite them to notice how the meaning of the word changes with the grammatical shift. Ask them if the adverb is “really a word.” Invite them to look it up. Ask, “If it’s not in a dictionary, can it still be a word?” This usually gets a bit of lively discussion. They will ask, “Can I do that? Can I use that in my essay?” I say, “Yes, this essay is experimental, so you are welcome to use new words as well as existing words in new and creative ways.” They tend to get excited, because they start to see the possibilities.

Do another word.

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
Occupation	Occupy	Occupying	Occupying-ly
Book	Book	Booked, bookish	bookishly

This is when they start to see the word-ending similarities with adverbs. You can then talk about how in English the grammatical meaning often lives in the word ending, if at times ambiguously.

Ask, “What part of speech is a word ending in -tion? What are other noun word endings?”

If they get stumped, do another word or two.

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
Occupation	Occupy	Occupying (present participle)	Occupationally
Book	Book	Booked, bookish	bookishly
Racism	Race	Racist, racial	Racially
Liberty	Liberate	Liberal	Liberally
Freedom	Free	Freed (past participle)	Freely
Dog	Dog	Dogged	Doggedly

Invite them to make a grammar grid and begin to form new words that they can use in their essay.

(20 min) Pair up students to share their rough drafts.

Homework:

Finish Lexicon Paper!