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Honors Thesis

X-Word Grammar: A Useful Grammar to Teach Editing

Whenever some of my friends hear the words *math*, *science*, and *grammar*, they get very uncomfortable and start making excuses to go away. This is especially true for *grammar*. Many people—and it is not only students, even some teachers—seem not to like grammar. They think it is complicated, hard, or difficult to explain—and they feel it rarely translates into better writing. They do not realize that there is not just one grammar, but many grammars, and where one fails, another can succeed. In this paper I will talk about X-word grammar in relation to traditional grammar, and I will show that grammar does not necessarily have to be hard for either the person teaching it or the person learning it. Through X-word grammar some aspects of writing and editing can be accessible to almost everyone. It can be used to successfully address some of the most common writing problems of college students having to do with subject-verb agreement, fragments, run-on sentences and punctuation.

I myself did not realize that there are many types of grammar and many ways of teaching grammar. What I thought was the *only* grammar is called traditional grammar. That is the grammar that is usually taught in American schools, the one most grammar books use. It is Latinate, which means its core principles come from Latin grammatical rules. Traditional grammar is usually taught in a prescriptive manner: rules are given and students are expected to follow them. Some of these rules do not translate well into English, which is not a Latinate language. X-word grammar arises from a system of linguistic analysis called Sector Analysis, which describes English as the Germanic language that it really is. It was created by Dr. Robert

L. Allen of Columbia University. X-word grammar offers discovery techniques that enable students to find major features of English in their own writing. In his book *English Grammar and English Grammars*, Robert L. Allen writes:

If a new grammar of English is to have any real value for the teacher, it must be a grammar that—in its broad outlines at least—is teachable even to elementary school students and to those who many not already have had any formal study of traditional grammar. . . . The grammar must build upon what students already know and feel, consciously or unconsciously, about the structure of English; it must help them to recognize and categorize their knowledge, and then lead them inductively toward a constantly expanding recognition and mastery of the many resources of the language. (158)

That is precisely what X-word grammar does. John Haskell, in his prize-winning paper "X-word Grammar, A Grammar for the Classroom," says that X-word grammar is:

a means of discovering some of [the] basic principles [of English] as generally applied—principles which can easily and clearly be discussed and presented in the classroom. . . . It offers the most efficient and economical chance for students and teachers to gain the initial confidence necessary to succeed in their roles as teachers and learners. (226)

Discovering X-words

The name X-word grammar comes from the fact that this grammar identifies certain words that occur in every English sentence as X-words. An X-word is a first auxiliary verb. It can be defined for students as the first word of a question that can be answered yes or no. To discover X-words, students are asked to make up questions that can be answered yes or no, for example, "Are you a York College student?" The first word of this question, *are*, is an X-word.

Here are some typical questions students have asked as they are discovering X-words through yes/no questions:

- (a) *Have* you ever been to Haiti?
- (b) *Do* you celebrate Christmas?
- (c) *Are* you an athlete?
- (d) *Is* there a dog here?
- (e) *Has* it been raining?

There are twenty X-words: *do, does, did, am, is, are, was, were, have, has, had, can, could, shall, should, will, would, might, may, and must* (Kunz 30). Being able to find them, as I will show, helps students edit out the errors in their writing.

Not all X-words appear in both the statement and the yes/no question. The ones that do not appear in the statement form of the sentence are called "hidden" X-words. Finding them is not difficult. One way to find them is to turn a statement such as "People in private enterprise participate in this project" into a negative statement: "People in private enterprise *do* not participate in this project." Another way to find X-words that "hide" is to change the statement into a yes/no question: "*Do* people in private enterprise participate in this project?" *Do* is one of three X-words that can "hide." The other two are even easier to find. In the following examples, notice what changes when the statements are turned into negative statements and yes/no questions:

Statement: My culture treats women unfairly.

Negative: My culture *does* not treat women unfairly.

Question: *Does* my culture treat women unfairly?

Did you notice that the *s* in *treats* disappears when you pull out the "hidden" X-word, but appears as the *s* in the X-word *does*? Every English verb has this *does* form—and it "hides" in statements as the *s* at the end of the verb. It shows itself 100% of the time when you change the statement into a negative or a yes/no question. Here is the last X-word that "hides." Notice how easily you can pull it out of the statement by making a negative statement or a question:

Statement: This man liked my sister.

Negative: This man *did* not like my sister.

Question: *Did* this man like my sister?

The *d* in *liked* disappears—or moves—to reappear as the last *d* in *did* [the X-word that was "hiding" in *liked* all along]. *Do*, *did* and *does* are the only three X-words that can "hide."

Sometimes they "hide" in irregular verbs as in the following example:

Statement: Parents made their kids marry just because the woman got pregnant.

Negative: Parents *did* not make their kids marry just because the woman got pregnant.

Question: *Did* parents make their kids marry just because the woman got pregnant?

Sometimes they "hide" in sentences students find confusing:

Statement: Men believe they can do anything.

Negative: Men *do* not believe they can do anything.

Question: *Do* men believe they can do anything?

Students might see the word *can* in the above sentence and try to use it to begin the yes/no question, but as soon as they try, they see it will not work. One thing students like about X-word grammar is that they can count on the fact that there is an X-word in every English sentence, and they can discover it by turning the sentence into a yes/no question or a negative statement. Even

when the most common X-words (*do*, *did* and *does*) "hide," they do so in a very regular, predictable manner.

Finding the Subject of the Sentence

Knowing that X-words move to the front of a yes/no question makes finding the subject of a sentence easy. X-word grammar defines the subject of a sentence as the word or group of words that the X-word moves around when a statement is changed into a yes/no question. Look at the examples below:

Statement: *I am* a York College student.

Question: *Am* I a York College student.

The subject of the sentence, I, is what the X-word moves around. *Am* comes right after the *I* in the statement, and right before it in the question.

Statement: From old times, women *have* been subordinated by men.

Question: *Have* women been subordinated by men from old times?

In this example, the X-word, *have*, moves around the word women. Thus, women is the subject. Students automatically shift the opening phrase to the end of the question because that is what sounds right to them. Here is an example that students find more difficult:

Statement: The tradition which respects men and treats women with contempt *is* the conservative tradition handed down in family as well as society.

Question: *Is* the tradition which respects men and treats women with contempt the conservative tradition handed down in family as well as society?

The subject of the above sentence is much more complex, but students can easily find it by turning the statement into a yes/no question. The X-word *is* moves around the long subject, the tradition which respects men and treats women with contempt, in order to form the question.

In the next example, the subject might seem confusing:

Statement: Men believe they can do anything.

Negative: Men *do* not believe they can do anything.

Question: *Do* men believe they can do anything?

Students may not know whether *men* or *they* is the subject of this sentence, but as soon as they turn it into a yes/no question, it becomes clear: the subject men stands out as the word *do* moves around it from the statement to the question. Once students learn how to find X-words and the subject of a sentence, they can learn how to correct some of the most common writing problems of college students: subject-verb agreement, fragments, run-on sentences and punctuation.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Diana Hacker, in *Rules for Writers* (a traditional grammar handbook), defines subject-verb agreement as when "In the present tense, verbs agree with their subjects in number (singular or plural) and in person (first, second, or third)" (173). Traditional grammar has many rules to help students deal with the subject-verb agreement problem. These rules include "With subjects joined with *or* or *nor* (or by *either . . . or* or *neither . . . nor*), make the verb agree with the part of the subject nearer to the verb;" "Treat most indefinite pronouns as singular;" "Treat collective nouns as singular unless the meaning is clearly plural;" "Words such as *athletics*, *economics*, *mathematics* . . . are usually singular, despite their plural form;" and "Titles of works, company names, words mentioned as words, and gerund phrases are singular" (Hacker 177). Basically, using traditional grammar to correct a subject-verb agreement problem, a student would first identify the subject and determine its number and person and second, make the verb agree with the subject. To find the subject in traditional grammar, the rule says to ask the question "who?"

or "what?" before the verb. The problem is that many times it is not a simple task to identify the subject with this method.

Students, for example, can be confused when they come across a subject that is a long group of words. Some of them will decide that the word closest to the verb is the subject.

Example: *One of the reasons men have all the rights are their mothers' teachings.

Let us try the who-or-what-method of traditional grammar to find the subject. In traditional grammar, a student would ask, "What are their mother's teachings?" A logical answer would be that "men have all the rights," but that is not the subject of this sentence. The subject actually is One of the reasons men have all the rights. This is a difficult sentence; it has so many plurals, but as soon as you change it into a yes/no question, the subject is clear—and so is the student's mistake:

Question: *Are one of the reasons men have all the rights their mothers' teachings?

Students recognize that "*Are one*" sounds funny, and they correct their error:

Correction: One of the reasons men have all the rights *is* their mothers' teachings.

In my own experience as a tutor, I have noticed that many students have difficulty with their subject-verb agreement because they do not know where the subject ends and the verb begins. One of my tutees—a student who was taking English 125—had problems with subject-verb agreement. His sentence was, *"*The feathers worn by Juliet costs a lot of money.*" When I asked him to identify the subject, he asked, "What worn?" and answered "feathers." I asked him to identify the verb of the sentence. He identified two verbs: *worn* and *costs*. I thought, "Oh my God! There are so many rules to know (in traditional grammar) to identify the verb." I decided to point out to him that if I take away "worn by Juliet," the sentence will still have the same

* The asterisk is used before examples that are grammatically incorrect.

meaning ("The feathers . . . costs a lot of money"), but if I take "costs a lot of money" away, the sentence will no longer mean the same thing and will not even be a sentence ("The feathers worn by Juliet"). Fortunately, he got it, but with much greater difficulty than he would have had with X-word grammar. If I had known X-word grammar at the time, I could have asked him to make a yes/no question and the word *do* (not *does*) would have come up right before *the feathers*:

Question: Do the feathers worn by Juliet cost a lot of money?

If *do* is the X-word, the verb *costs* should have no *s* because every *s* ending on a verb represents *does*—and you would not say, "The feathers *does* cost a lot of money."

In order to fix subject-verb agreement problems, a student has to identify the subject. Since it is very easy to identify the subject using X-word grammar, a student will have an easier time making it agree with the verb.

Finding and Correcting Fragments

Traditional grammar defines a fragment as "a word group that pretends to be a sentence" (Hacker 156). The following example contains a fragment that a student might write:

"*Finances* refers to how choosing your career should affect your finances. Because you need to survive and take care of your self and your dependents." To fix a fragment, traditional grammar advises students to "attach" the fragment to a sentence or to "turn" it into a sentence (Hacker 158-60). A sentence is defined as a group of words that expresses a complete thought. The problem is that students often see the fragments they write as already expressing complete thoughts. Indeed, many students have trouble figuring out what "complete thought" means. As Dr. Robert L. Allen points out in *Working Sentences*, it is possible for a group of words to

"express a complete thought" and not be a sentence (3). For example, he says that "No taxation without representation" is not a sentence, but it expresses a complete thought (3).

If a student cannot identify a "complete thought," a sentence or a fragment, he will not be able to correct it. In X-word grammar, the yes/no question is a simple way to find out if a group of words is a sentence or a fragment. The rule says that a sentence can be turned into a yes/ no question without adding any words or leaving any out. Students are taught to use this test to find fragments in their own writing. Look at this example:

Example:

Statement: *Finances* refers to how choosing your career should affect your finances.

*Because you need to survive and take care of your self and your dependents.

Test Question 1: Does *finances* refer to how choosing your career should affect your finances?

The first part is a sentence because the student can turn it into a yes/no question that makes sense, but look what happens when he tries to make a yes/no question out of the next part:

Test Question 2: Do you need to survive and take care of your self and your dependents because?

Through trying to make a yes/no question, the student sees that this is not a sentence, but it could be if he dropped the word *because* or used it to attach this fragment to another sentence.

Identifying a fragment is the hardest thing about correcting it. Once a student discovers his fragment by making a yes/no question, he can, as both X-word and traditional grammar suggest, "attach" it to another sentence or turn it into a sentence.

Finding and Correcting Run-On Sentences

Run-on sentences have been defined in traditional grammar as "independent clauses that have not been joined correctly" (Hacker 164). An independent clause is "a word group that can stand alone as a sentence" (164). Many people also know run-on sentences as sentences that express two or more complete thoughts. Once again, the problem is identifying what a "complete thought" or an "independent clause" is. Here is a typical run-on sentence:

Example: *I determined my values and my personal mission, I set goals that will help me achieve my personal mission.

Very often students write run-on sentences because they want to put two closely related ideas into the same sentence, but they do not know how to punctuate it. X-word grammar uses the yes/no question approach to help students identify run-ons. If a student wrote the above example in tutoring, I would ask her if she could turn her "sentence" into two yes/no questions—and that if she can, she knows she has written a run-on.

Question 1: Did I determine my values and my personal mission?

Question 2: Did I set goals that will help me achieve my personal mission?

After she made the two yes/no questions, I would give her the X-word grammar rule: If you can make two yes/no questions where you have only one period and no connector (such as *,and ,but ,so* or a semicolon), you have a run-on sentence. Then, she can test all of her sentences and correct them if they are run-ons. To correct a run-on sentence like the one in the example above, both traditional and X-word grammar recommend breaking it into two sentences, or using a comma followed by *and, but, so* or a semicolon.

Correction: I determined my values and my personal mission; I set goals that will help me achieve my personal mission.

Both traditional and X-word grammar recommend the same solutions for correcting run-on sentences. The difference is that many students are not able to find run-on sentences when they use the definitions given by traditional grammar.

I did a small experiment in which I helped two students correct their run-on sentence problem. The students were a man I will call Joseph, who attended college in Haiti, and a man I will call Jean, who attended a community college in New York. I used traditional grammar to help Jean with his run-on sentences problem, and X-word grammar to help Joseph. Using traditional grammar took more time and energy with less satisfying results. I used sentences that I made up especially for the experiment:

Examples:

- (a) *I leave my house at ten I eat at twelve.
- (b) *I leave my house at ten, I eat at twelve.
- (c) *I leave my house at ten and I eat at twelve.

My first problem came from the fact that Jean saw "sentence" (a) as one sentence and not as two sentences closely put together. I asked him to identify the verbs and the subjects; he did it. I told him that a subject and a verb that can stand on their own is a sentence. He asked me if "he went" is a sentence. I thought, "Should I tell him about transitive and intransitive verbs?" but I answered that it was not a complete thought. Of course, we spent some time discussing the meaning of "complete thought." Then, we talked about how to get rid of run-on sentences.

Using X-word grammar, I spent less time with Joseph on his lesson. I told him about the yes/no question technique, and he got it right away. Then, I asked him to change the run-on sentences into yes/no questions, insisting that the yes/no questions have to make sense. He quickly saw that there was a problem in all the sentences. I explained to him why each sentence

was wrong and told him how to correct the mistakes. Not only did the whole session take less time, but he seemed to understand everything right away. He told me that since that day he has never written a run-on sentence.

Shifters and Punctuation

By the time students learn how to correct fragments and run-ons using X-word grammar techniques, they have already learned a lot about punctuation. They have learned some basic punctuation rules, including how to use commas with *and*, *but* and *so*, as well as how to use semicolons. There are many other punctuation rules for basic academic writing. Understanding what X-word grammar calls *shifters* can also help students improve their punctuation. A **shifter** is a word or a group of words that can shift from the beginning of a sentence to the end without changing the meaning of the sentence. Only X-word grammar talks about shifters. Linda Ann Kunz, author of *X-word Grammar for Public School Teachers*, gives this definition: "The word *shifter* . . . means just what it says: whatever you put in one of the two shifter positions outside the trunk [i.e., an independent clause] has to be able to shift to the other end--and still sound right" (44). Shifters can be at the beginning of a sentence or at the end, but shifting them should sound natural, and should not change the meaning of the sentence. Identify the shifters in the following examples:

Front Shifter: (a) In China girls used to get their feet bound.

End Shifter: (a) Girls used to get their feet bound in China.

Front Shifter: (b) Having the feet of their little girls bound, parents felt important.

End Shifter: (b) Parents felt important having the feet of their little girls bound.

Front Shifter: (c) When a girl's feet were small, rich men wanted to marry her.

End Shifter: (c) Rich men wanted to marry a girl when her feet were small.

When you shift the word or group of words in the sentences above, they still sound natural and the meaning does not change. That is how you know they are shifters. Notice, though, how the punctuation changes when you shift the longer examples in (b) and (c) from the front of the sentence to the end. Generally, long shifters (which happen to be participles and dependent clauses) use a comma after them when they are in the front position, but not when they are at the end.

Inserts and Punctuation

One of the most common features of academic writing is what X-word grammar calls inserts. Academic writers use them all the time. They are easy to identify whether they come in the middle of a sentence or at the end because they are *always* set between two punctuation marks.

Examples:

- (a) My mother, Mrs. Martin, is a fulltime businesswoman.
- (b) He needs at least two paragraphs as well—up to the birth and the time of birth—and we would have to decide where his mother's not fishing well belonged.
- (c) I'd ask him to find all the numbers in his story plus the word *a*, which always means "one."

In *X-Word Grammar for Public School Teachers*, Kunz explains what inserts do. She says, "[Inserts] really condense information and place it exactly where the writer wants it. They add information . . . , and they don't shift because they need to stay close to whatever it is they're adding extra information about" (46). Inserts are very important to good academic writing. College students like to use inserts, but they frequently omit one of the punctuation marks that

makes an insert an insert, and as a result, their punctuation is wrong and their sentences are less clear.

Example:

*The B section, the next level down where students read and do homework is very quiet.
Turning a sentence like this into a yes/no question helps a student see where the insert ends so he can correct his punctuation by putting the other comma in.

Question:

Is the B section, the next level down where students read and do homework, very quiet?

Correction:

The B section, the next level down where students read and do homework, is very quiet.

Conclusion

Both traditional and X-word grammar have their merits. Traditional grammar has many good rules that can help writers produce well-written works. So does X-word grammar. It is practical and efficient. It makes some things that are very difficult to explain in traditional grammar clear to the student who wants to stop writing run-ons and fragments. It has been used very successfully with students who want to improve their writing. In this paper I presented X-word grammar as a grammar with simple rules. By doing that I was not trying to say that traditional grammar's rules are difficult—although many people think they are. I just wanted to show that there are other grammars that can help students understand the grammatical rules they need to know. I personally prefer traditional grammar; I think it is really close to French grammar, which I learned for twelve years in my country, and that makes sense since traditional grammar is a Latinate grammar.

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