

# Down and dirty with grammar

by Lindsay Williams

## **Preface: before we start...**

The following is written by a Year 3 student. While there are lots of positives about the piece, I want you to read it carefully and think about what follow-up is required to help the student to write (even?) more effectively.

### FROGS

Frogs jump and croke a lot. Ther skin is slippery and wet. They hide sometimes and ther big eyes blink. I no some poepel who are scerd of them. I am not scerd of them. I think they are vere cute. Thats what I think.

So, what did you think?

Spelling is an obvious area of continuing need – and we could identify some possible patterns in the misspellings. For example, while there seems to be a fairly good awareness of sound-letter relationships, the student does not always make the correct choices (e.g. croke instead of croak, vere instead of very, scerd instead of scared). Use of apostrophes is another immediately identifiable area of possible need – see ‘Thats’ in the last sentence.

However, as important as these aspects of language might be, they are surface errors easily fixed. More significantly, the student appears uncertain about his purpose in writing about frogs: is it to inform readers about ‘the facts’ or to reflect on how he feels about them? Consequently, he is uncertain about the genre in which he should be writing, and subject matter is chosen and organized seemingly randomly. Additionally, at a more micro-level, the student has difficulty in choosing the appropriate person (first or third?) and with patterning his sentence beginnings (Theme) and endings (Rheme). The result is a piece that demonstrates competent control of basic sentence structure, but a need to develop competence in stringing sentences together so that they create a cohesive, coherent text.

This brief example illustrates two points which underpin this article. Firstly, while it is important for student to get ‘the basics’ of spelling and punctuation right, it is not sufficient to enable students to become competent writers. Secondly, teachers require a deep understanding of language and how it functions within particular contexts in order to help students reach their potential – as readers, as well as writers.

## **Introduction**

Recent events such as the release of the results of the first National Assessment Plan Literacy And Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing and consultation regarding a

National English Curriculum have propelled grammar on to the front pages. However, for reasons that will be demonstrated soon, the NAPLAN Language Conventions test and much of the current media discussion about grammar are dangerously limiting.

Originally, this paper was presented as the keynote address at a Meanjin seminar on the Gold Coast. My brief was simple and broad: enthuse teachers about grammar. Consequently, the address was designed as an informal, interactive, dynamic session and so posed some problems when translating it to written form. In the end, I decided to retain as much of the informality and spontaneity as possible; it is not intended as a formal, comprehensive survey of how grammar should (or could be taught). Instead, this paper aims to:

- encourage you to use grammar in creative, practical ways to help students read and write more effectively
- consider grammar as a resource for meaning making and text analysis, rather than simply a set of formal rules to be learned
- inspire your own experimentation with the vast possibilities of grammar.

### **So, what's wrong with NAPLAN?**

In the preamble, I indicated that, while the student did indeed have some problems with spelling and punctuation and require some improvement, these were not the main problems with the piece. Rather, the student really needs explicit help in identifying the purpose of his writing and then choosing appropriate genre, structure and language features in order to achieve that purpose.

It is an issue that Dr Lenore Ferguson (2001) has raised in her analysis of 700 samples of the work produced as part of the Queensland Core Skills Test Writing Task. Although she was examining work produced by Year 12 students, she discovered that many students still needed help (after twelve years of schooling) in the 'matching of micro-text features with the socio-cultural elements of a discourse' (p277). Furthermore, a recent research-based policy on writing commissioned by the National Council for Teachers of English (2008, p4) declares that: 'Students need to understand how language works in order to become effective writers, and this is best accomplished by instruction that focuses on a context based functional approach that illustrates how parts of language work together to create meaning.'

It is disappointing then to turn to the NAPLAN Language Conventions Test (2008) and find that of the 50 multiple choice questions:

- 28 focus on spelling
- 9 on punctuation
- and only 6 on matters that are properly grammatical.

(The other questions are focused on a strange mix of identifying poetic devices, graphic elements in text and vocabulary choice).

The six grammar questions ask students to simply **identify**:

- tense
- first, second or third person
- and word class (verb, noun, adverb, adjective).

While students should be able to identify these aspects of grammar, with enough time you could probably train a monkey to answer most of the grammar questions on the paper. A token gesture is made towards contextualizing the questions by relating them to a short piece of text. The real problem here is that students (and teachers preparing students for the test) are encouraged to believe that labeling and identifying a few, isolated and basic grammatical concepts is enough. At no point are students asked to consider why particular features are being used or how they are functioning within the text.

That has not stopped the media becoming hysterical about student results on the test, with at least one commentator devoting almost an entire article to bemoaning the inability of people she knows to identify a noun! No doubt a shared language about language between teachers and their students is important. However, as Ilana Snyder (2008, p32) points out: “even though there exists a substantial body of experimental research evidence demonstrating that there is little value in the formal teaching of grammar as a mean of improving students’ writing, many people continue to believe that knowledge of traditional grammar is essential to becoming a good writer.’ And this is the real problem in the current public debate – a debate which has the potential to encourage teachers to return to a superficial and largely discredited approach to teaching grammar. We need to remember that, actually, the NAPLAN language conventions test doesn’t tell us much at all and it probably masks what may be a bigger problem: can students use a wide variety of language features in a range of contexts in order to achieve particular purposes and effects.

The rest of this article illustrates three ways that a functional approach to grammar<sup>1</sup> can be used to enhance both reading and writing practices of students. It suggests some practical and productive ways that grammar can (and should) be used in the classroom.

### **Using grammar to improve punctuation**

When students are taught to use fullstops at the end of a sentence, it is not uncommon to hear them told to put it ‘at the end of a complete idea’, the ‘complete idea’ being the definition given for a sentence. Alternatively, it might be suggested that they read their draft aloud and listen for where they take a ‘long’ pause. In her waspish book about punctuation, Lynne Truss (2003, p113) quotes advice given by Cecil Hartley in 1818:

At ev’ry comma, stop while *one* you count;  
At semicolon, *two* is the amount;  
A colon doth require the time of *three*;  
The period *four*, as learned men agree.

Lynne Truss goes on to say, 'I think it's rubbish. Complete nonsense.' And much the same could be said for the other advice as well<sup>ii</sup>.

The problem with saying that a fullstop is put at the end of a 'complete thought' is that it begs the question: what *is* a 'complete thought'? Let's go back to basics and assume that students have used what is frequently termed a run-on sentence where a comma is used between two sentences rather than a fullstop, e.g.:

We had a storm last night, the garden is a mess.

So, what are the 'complete thoughts' here? Fortunately, Functional Grammar provides us with three very useful terms to help out:

- **Process:** this tells us what's 'happening' in the sentence; it is the group of one or more verbs (doing, being, thinking and saying words). Always identify this first.
- **Participant:** a word or group of words that answers who or what is taking part in the 'happenings' of the sentence? (These usually occur immediately before or after the Process or verb group.)
- **Circumstance:** a word or group of words that answers how, when, where or why about the Process. (This can come at the very beginning or later in a sentence.)

In standard English, a sentence must contain a Process (made up of **at least** one verb) and may also contain Participants and Circumstances. So, to determine where a sentence boundary occurs, more concrete advice is to identify all the words/word groups associated with a particular Process. When you run out of words/word groups, then you have a 'complete idea' and, therefore, the end of a sentence.

In the example above, we could ask a number of questions. Firstly, what's the first being, doing, thinking or saying word? *Had* (a being Process). Who or what 'had'? *We*. We had who or what? *A storm*. We had a storm how, when, where or why? *Last night*.

At this point, we still have five words left: the garden is a mess. These words don't seem to 'belong' to the Process 'had'. So, can we identify another Process? Yes: *is* (another being Process). Who or what is? *The garden*. The garden is who or what? *A mess*. At this point, there are no more words, so there is no Circumstance.

Here's the same analysis in table form:

Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstance
We	had	a storm	last night
The garden	is	a mess	

What this tells us is that is that there are two ‘complete thoughts’ here and, therefore, there needs to be two fullstops (and another capital letter):

We had a storm last night. The garden is a mess.<sup>iii</sup>

While the initial explanation takes a bit of time, with modeling and guided practice this technique becomes a very quick and easy way to check the use of fullstops. And although these are simple sentences, the technique works very well with complex sentences, i.e. sentences with embedded clauses such as: We had a storm **which blew in unexpectedly from the west**. When you ask the question *We had who or what?*, the answer is *a storm which blew in unexpectedly from the west*. Even though there is another clause in there, all the extra words are treated as part of the second Participant so it keeps everything simple and tidy.

The final point to make is that practice in using this technique does not have to be dry, limited to endless skill and drill exercises. For example, I have developed a game that is based loosely on the childhood game of ‘Cat and Mouse’ and that reinforces the idea of using grammatical knowledge to help make decisions about punctuation. Before the game begins, the teacher devises or finds a sequence of sentences containing the same number of words and punctuation marks as students in the class. The following example would suit 16 students.

the day before	, (comma) <sup>iv</sup>	there	had been
two plane crashes	. (fullstop)	one	was
the plane that Claire had been on	. (fullstop)	she	was shocked to read
that she had been the only survivor	. (fullstop)	; (semicolon)	, (comma)

Each word and punctuation mark is printed on its own A4 sized cards. To add challenge to the activity, create cards for more punctuation marks than needed. All the students are given either a word or punctuation mark card. Students with word cards sort themselves into the correct order and then stand in a circle, facing inwards and holding their cards face outward and at about chest height. (To speed up this part of the activity, the word cards can be numbered.)

Meanwhile, the students with punctuation cards watch from outside the circle. Once the word cards are in correct order, students take turns reading their card aloud. As soon as they finish, the teacher signals the students with punctuation cards to race to find a spot. As there are more punctuation marks than required, not all students will find a spot. Once students have a spot, they must be able to explain why they are in the correct place. (In the early stages of using this technique, the explanations can be scaffolded by having the Participants, Processes and Circumstances printed on different coloured cards and the word group labels printed on the reverse side.) If successful, they stay where they are. If unsuccessful, students who missed a place have a go. When all punctuation

cards are appropriately placed, students should read their cards aloud – at the punctuation marks, an appropriate pause or voice inflection should occur.

There are obviously all sorts of exceptions and issues surrounding the use of fullstops and this technique certainly doesn't cover them all. However, it provides a concrete way of talking about and reinforcing the conventional use of fullstops before students move on to other, less conventional uses.

### Using grammar to write more cohesive stories...and more

One of the important language skills students need to learn is cohesion, that is: how are ideas in texts linked together in a cohesive and coherent manner? There are four main 'systems' (or structured ways) of doing this: reference, ellipsis and substitution, lexical cohesion and text connectives. In this paper, I will be focussing on reference.

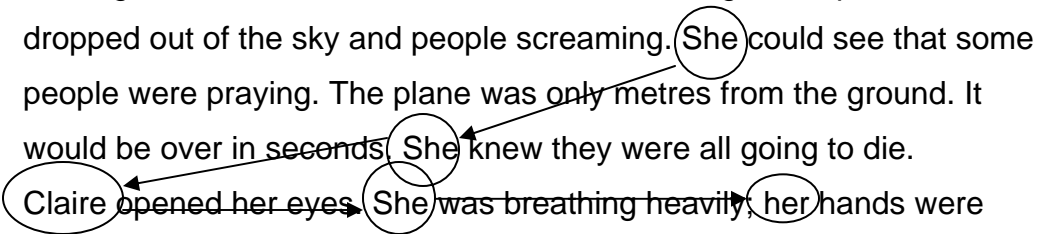
As the name suggest, reference is the way that we refer to things in texts. We can do this with demonstratives (e.g. **That** is mine) or comparatives (e.g. I want **the same** as her). The focus here, though, is on pronoun reference; that is, instead of continually repeating a particular noun, we can use a substitute pronoun e.g. Where is Jim? There **he** is under the tree. **It** looks like **it** is a Jacaranda. In this example, *he* refers back to *Jim* and *it* refers back to *the tree*. The links can be made even more evident to students through a technique called word chaining (although, I also like to use the metaphor of a 'river of words').

The following extract is the orientation to a short story:

The plane was plummeting towards the ground. Smoke streamed from the engine. The cabin filled with sound: the roaring of the plane as it dropped out of the sky and people screaming. She could see that some people were praying. The plane was only metres from the ground. It would be over in seconds. She knew they were all going to die. Claire opened her eyes. She was breathing heavily; her hands were sweating.'

There are a number of pronoun reference chains occurring here, but let's focus on one of these:

The plane was plummeting towards the ground. Smoke streamed from the engine. The cabin filled with sound: the roaring of the plane as it dropped out of the sky and people screaming. (She) could see that some people were praying. The plane was only metres from the ground. It would be over in seconds. (She) knew they were all going to die. (Claire) opened her eyes. (She) was breathing heavily; (her) hands were sweating.'



Word chaining of this type could be modeled to students using an overhead projector or whiteboard. Students could then be given the opportunity to do some guided practice. However, as was pointed out earlier, this sort of identification work is really ‘trained monkey’ stuff. Its importance lies in discussing the implications of what is being identified.

In this text, the use of ‘she’ helps the writer avoid repeating *Claire*, the proper noun to which the pronouns appear to refer. However, conventional wisdom would tell us that before a pronoun is used (at least in written texts), the referent noun needs to be mentioned first. Thus, you would typically expect the first use of *she* to be replaced with the noun: ***Claire could see that some people were praying.*** In this way, the reader is more easily able to determine to whom *she* is referring. So, does this constitute an error or sloppiness on the part of the writer? In fact, there is another explanation for this anomaly.

In the second paragraph, the author tells us that *Claire opened her eyes*. It would appear that the opening paragraph is the description of a dream that she has been having. However, it is actually unclear whether or not the *she* in the first paragraph is in fact Claire (and, therefore, the same *she* mentioned after Claire’s name). Later in the story, Claire is involved in a plane crash that she survives against overwhelming odds – and she discovers, while recovering in hospital, that there was another plane crash an hour before hers. Angelica, a girl her age, was killed in that first crash. The twist is that the ghost (or angel?) of the killed girl appears to have been responsible for Claire’s miraculous survival. So, the question can be asked: was Angelica the *she* of Claire’s dream? Indeed, was the first paragraph some type of premonition on Claire’s part or a description of the plane crash that killed Angelica? In other words, the use of pronoun referencing in the orientation of the story was a deliberate<sup>v</sup> strategy (at the grammatical level) to create ambiguity and mystery in the story.

Even a very technical aspect of grammar, then, can be exploited to help students read and write more effectively. In the final section, we turn to a strategy for helping students be better text analysts.

### **Using grammar to critically examine texts**

According to James Gee (1990, p78):

The function of language is not just (as is often assumed) to communicate information. Language is, in addition, also a device to think and feel with, **as well as a device with which to signal and negotiate social identity.**  
[my emphasis]

We have already seen something of that with the story of Claire and Angelica. In this section, I will further demonstrate the part grammar plays in constructing differing identities for groups of people and, therefore, how unequal power

relationships can be 'encoded' through the selective use of this grammar. To do this, I am using extracts from four texts that provide a recount of Australian history at the time of Lieutenant James Cook's 'discovery' of the East Coast of Australia<sup>vi</sup>. Texts one and two are from history text books specifically written for older children and school students. Texts three and four are extracted from general interest books with a mainly adult audience in mind. All are Australian publications for Australian readers.

**Text 1:** from 'Captain James Cook *Discovering the East Coast*' in A and S Sampson (1979) *Explorers of Australia*, Lloyd O'Neill Pty Ltd: Australia, p15, ISBN 0 85550 824 8

Several attempts made by Cook to contact the aborigines camped on the bay proved unsuccessful. Fortunately the natives were not warlike and it was possible for Cook to make several excursions inland. He comments that 'the Natives do not appear to be numerous neither do they seem to live in large bodies, but dispersed in small parties along the water side; those I saw were about as tall as Europeans, of a very dark brown colour, but not black...nor had they woolly frizzled hair, but black and lank much like ours, no sort of clothing or ornaments were ever seen by any of us upon any one of them – some we saw that had their faces and bodies painted with a sort of white paint. The shellfish is their chief support, yet they catch other sorts of fish, some of which we found roasting on the fire the first time we landed.'

A week passed before Cook decided to move on. Within a few hours he had noted Port Jackson as 'a safe anchorage' but he did not stop to explore it. As he sailed north, mapping and naming points, bays and rivers, he noted Moreton Bay, the future site of the city of Brisbane. Not long after, Cook entered the passage which he names Endeavour Passage.

**Text 2:** from 'A convict settlement' in C. Crisswell and T. Deoki (1982) *Junior Secondary History for Queensland*, Longman and Cheshire: Brisbane, p147, ISBN 0 582 66330 X *Note: The account of Cook's arrival in Australia re-produced below is the complete and unabridged version presented in this particular school history textbook.*

Captain Cook had sailed up the east coast of Australia in 1770. Joseph Banks was a botanist who sailed with Cook. He made careful study of the coast and he suggested a settlement could be made in New South Wales. The bay where they landed was called Botany Bay because Banks found many new plants there.

**Text 3:** from 'White man say we have no history' in Ros Bowden and Bill Bunbury (1990) *Being Aboriginal: comments, observations and stories from Aboriginal Australians*, ABC Enterprises: Australia, p28, ISBN 0 7333 0023 5

'We've still got our culture, we've still got our old ways of living. We might live in a white man's home but we still live our life. My tribe is Morowori, my father's tribe, and I take after my father, because my father's name is Muri Goodegebah and that means a flower or a tree. This is my land. We own this land, us Aboriginals. We were first here, before Captain Cook came. This is me land, here, where I look. We own all this, every little bush, every little tree, every log, every stick, every little bit of flower. You see those big flowers? Emus are getting fat now and they're ready to lay. We tell by the flowers because they're getting near springtime. This is our land. This is not your land.' Jimmy Barker

**Text 4:** from 'Cook, J' in Dr David Horton (ed.) (1994) *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press: Australia, Volume 1, p224

James Cook (1728-79) reaches eastern Australia from New Zealand aboard the Endeavour on 19 April 1770, first sighting land at Point Hicks in present-day Vic. The first Aborigines the ship's company saw were probably five Yuin people, viewed distantly through a telescope on the beach near present-day Batemans Bay on 22 April. The first face-to-face contact occurred at Botany Bay on 29 April, during which two men painted with broad white bands across the face, chest and thighs made 'threatening and menacing' gestures with 'pikes' and 'scimitars'. Cook eventually fired a musket to frighten them, peppering with light shot the legs of one man, who then picked up a shield to defend himself. 'All they seemed to want was for us to be gone', he wrote.

On 11 June the Endeavour struck a coral reef at present-day Cooktown, leading to the sailors' most prolonged contact with Aboriginal people. To make repairs Cook beached the ship in the first safe harbour and fresh water he could find. On 10 July four men approached them in a small canoe fitted with outriggers. Their bodies were painted with red and white stripes and, Cook observed, 'their features were far from being disagreeable, the voices were soft and tunable and they could easily repeat many words after us, but neither us nor Tupia could understand one word they said'.

There are a number of possible entry points for an analysis and critical evaluation of these texts. However, my interest here is in what 'actions' the British (represented by Cook and his sailors) are allowed to do, and what the indigenous Australians are allowed to do. I use the word *allowed* because people (real or fictional) in texts don't get to decide what they do for the obvious reason that they are not alive or real. Instead, 'actions' are given to them by the author<sup>vii</sup>. Thus,

the texts below do not give us some factual, uncontested 'record' of what happened, but particular writers' versions of those events.

In order to get at what the British and indigenous Australians are 'allowed' to do in the accounts, it seemed natural to identify and categorise the Processes (verb groups) associated with these two groups of people. Tabulated below are the results<sup>viii</sup>.

**Table 1: What the British get to do**

<b>Text</b>	<b>Doing</b>	<b>Being</b>	<b>Thinking/Perceiving</b>	<b>Saying</b>
<b>1: Captain Cook</b>	made to contact to make found landed noted sailed made could be made entered names	(Proved)	Saw Were seen Saw Decided	Comments suggested
<b>2: Convict</b>	Had sailed Sailed Landed found	was		
<b>3: White man</b>	came			
<b>4: Encyclopaedia</b>	Reaches Fired Peppering Wrote Beached Could find	To be	Sighting Saw Viewed Could (not) understand	observed

**Table 2: What Indigenous Australians get to do**

<b>Text</b>	<b>Doing</b>	<b>Being</b>	<b>Thinking/Perceiving</b>	<b>Saying</b>
<b>1: Captain Cook</b>	Camped Dispersed catch	were not were nor had	do not appear do they seem to live	
<b>2: Convict</b>				
<b>3: White man</b>	Live Live Take Own Own	Have got Have got Is is were is is is	Look Tell (i.e. discern)	
<b>4: Encyclopaedia</b>	Made (gestures etc)	Was were	Seemed to want Could (not)	Could repeat

	Picked (up) To defend approached		understand said	
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When working with students, unless you have a particular reason for wanting them to identify and categorize the Processes (verb groups), I would provide students with the completed tables. Not only does that avoid calls of boredom, but also frees students to concentrate on the higher order thinking needed to critically evaluate the portrayals of the British and Indigenous Australians.

And a few things are immediately apparent. The British, for a start, get to 'do' a lot more than the indigenous Australians and the types of things that the latter groups 'do' are of a quite different order, being much more passive than the British actions. In addition, there are a large number of 'being' verbs associated with the Indigenous Australians, suggesting that they simply exist; the British on the other hand are associated with very few 'being' Processes, but are given more to 'say' than the indigenous Australians who are allowed only to repeat. While there are a similar number of 'thinking' Processes associated with both groups, note that more of these are in the negative form for the indigenous Australians than for the British.

Thus, we can see that a binary is constructed between the active British and the passive indigenous Australians. In other words, there is a discernible link between the use of Processes and the way that the two racial groups are portrayed. This is even more evident when these texts are compared to others that construct the original Australians as active; Barangaroo's story in *My Place* by Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlins is useful to read in this regard. Students could, in fact, be asked to re-write one or more of the earlier texts giving the indigenous Australians a more active role in the accounts.

Grammar, then, can be much more than just a set of musty, prescriptive rules to help us write in a more educated manner. It has the potential to be a powerful, concrete tool for helping students read more closely, reflectively and critically.

### **Conclusion**

This article has illustrated just three ways that a functional approach to grammar might be used to help students write and read more effectively. While students need to know and be able to control conventional usage of Standard Australian English, it is not sufficient. So, don't be misled by the current media debates or the content of the NAPLAN testing. As a teacher, you owe it to your students to acquire a rich, working knowledge of grammar and how it functions in a wide variety of contexts and texts.

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<sup>i</sup> If you are new to Functional Grammar, I recommend: Droga, L and Humphrey, S. (2003). *Grammar and meaning: an introduction for primary teachers*. Berry, NSW: Target Texts.

<sup>ii</sup> My enjoyment of Truss's book and agreement with her on this point does not mean that I endorse her zero tolerance approach. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2007/jul/12/punctuationisnoplaceforze> for Professor David Crystal's refutation of Truss's position.

<sup>iii</sup> Of course, a coordinating conjunction such as *and* could have been added instead of putting in a fullstop,

<sup>iv</sup> The grammar is also useful with some comma rules. When a Circumstance begins a sentence, it is often bracketed off from the main part of the sentence through the use of a comma, e.g.: The day before, there had been...

<sup>v</sup> How do I know it was intended? I wrote the story.

<sup>vi</sup> A version of this work was published as part of a professional development package about grammar that I produced for Education Queensland.

<sup>vii</sup> This happens through both conscious selections of language features and subject matter and *unconsciously* through the influence of Discourses (historical and cultural ways of doing things and being). As Gee (1990) also says, 'It is sometimes helpful to say that it is not individuals who speak and act, but rather that historically and socially defined Discourses speak to each other through individuals.'

<sup>viii</sup> We could probably quibble over some of my categorizations, but that doesn't really change the overall pattern that emerges. Also, the emphasis here is not on a perfect, theoretically pure use of the grammar, but rather how the grammar can be used as a useful, concrete tool for critically analytical work.