

Encyclopedic Article/Frequently Asked Questions

An encyclopedic article is one that gives a reader a concise resource that is source-based and rigorous. It should be short, academic, and well-researched. For our purposes, your article should be 400-500 words, single spaced, left-justified. (word count does not include works cited.) Please use MLA format.

Our encyclopedic articles are all in response to key questions about teaching grammar. The following is an example.

What about diagramming sentences? Does that have any value anymore? How does this fit into grammar instruction? How much? When?

The idea of diagramming sentences has its root in the concept that language analysis can be used as a way to develop thinking and writing skills. Although this, and the general concept of formal grammatical studies for this purpose has long been discounted (Weaver 1996; Hillocks and Smith 1991; NCTE), sentence diagramming still holds some ground in many English language arts classrooms.

Sentence diagramming was developed as an exercise in the late 19th century. It was meant to help students understand structure better by seeing it as a visual (Hausseman et al, 75). In sentence diagramming activities, student writers are expected to take existing sentences and map the various grammatical elements. For example, students would look at a sentence and, using a series of lines and other visual elements, map out the aspects of the sentence, including such elements as parts of speech, phrases, and clauses.

The underlying belief in sentence diagramming is that close analysis of language will lead to better understanding of the structures that guide language. This, in turn, then is meant to help students become better writers (Mulroy, 2003). This is consistent with Hausseman's description of one goal of teaching grammar as giving students "the ability to analyze the grammatical structures of sentences, using grammatical terminology correctly" (4). It has less direct connection to the use of grammar as a rhetorical tool, by which student writers use language and grammatical techniques in ways that make their writing more mature, as is advocated in such texts as Harry Noden's *Image Grammar* (1999) and others (Tchudi, 1999).

Perhaps the best summary of the value and limitations of sentence diagramming is the following:

Remember that sentence diagramming (like grammar study in general) is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Teach what will help students make sense of how actual sentences are organized. Sometimes the diagram of the sentence core – the head of subject phrase and the head of the main verb phrase – will help students see more clearly.

(Hausseman et al, 75)

Thus, the teaching of sentence diagramming does have value. That value, in relation to many other grammatical techniques, is often minimal. Although there is no moratorium on sentence diagramming activities, teachers must look at their goals of teaching grammar, in relation to the primary goal of helping student writers write better, and decide the best ways to use their time. Sentence diagramming may have a place, but it should be a small one, in relation to the teaching of grammar as a rhetorical tool for writers.

Works Cited

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