

# Study Guide

# Mechanically *Inclined*



Building Grammar, Usage, and  
Style into Writer's Workshop

*Jeff Anderson*

Foreword by Vicki Spandel

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## Summary

Some teachers love grammar and some hate it, but nearly all struggle with finding ways to make the mechanics of English meaningful to kids. As a middle school teacher, Jeff Anderson also discovered that his kids were not grasping the basics of grammar, and that it was preventing them from reaching their potential as writers.

In *Mechanically Inclined*, the culmination of years of experimentation, Jeff merges the best elements of writer’s workshop with relevant theory about how and why grammar skills should be taught. Jeff connects theory about using grammar in context with practical instructional strategies, explains why kids often don’t understand or apply grammar and mechanics correctly, focuses on attending to the “high payoff” (or most common errors in student writing), and shows how to carefully construct a workshop environment that can best support grammar and mechanics. Jeff emphasizes four key elements in his teaching:

- short daily instruction in grammar and mechanics within writer’s workshop;
- the use of high-quality mentor texts to teach grammar and mechanics in context;
- visual scaffolds, including wall charts and visual cues that can be pasted into writer’s notebooks; and
- regular, short routines, like “express-lane edits,” that help students spot and correct errors automatically.

Comprising an overview of the research-based context for grammar instruction, a series of more than thirty detailed lessons, and an appendix of helpful forms and instructional tools, *Mechanically Inclined* is a boon to teachers regardless of their level of grammar phobia. It transforms the negativity and rule-plagued rigidity of traditional grammar instruction into instruction that celebrates the power and beauty that grammar has to shape all forms of writing.

The suggestions in this guide are intended to help groups of educators read, discuss, and extend the ideas from *Mechanically Inclined* into their classrooms. These ideas will come to life as teachers are given opportunities to put them into practice with students. With that in mind, we have developed discussion questions, pulled provocative quotes, highlighted video clips, and offered professional development ideas from each chapter that will enable participants to reflect on the text.

The guide also includes video links so that readers can view video that complements the text. While viewing, readers are encouraged to jot down their thinking on a two-column note (What Do You Notice/What Do You Wonder). The notes can then be used to launch discussions around the video. If you are interested in seeing more of Jeff's videos on crafting grammar, check out his DVD, *The Craft of Grammar: Integrated Instruction in Writer's Workshop*.

This guide is formatted as a study group. It could be used either with a group of teachers or individually as a reflective structure for those reading the book alone. The suggestions offered in the guide are designed to foster collaboration, spark new thinking, and support the transfer of new ideas into the classroom.

## Part 1: Teaching Grammar and Mechanics in Context

### Chapter 1: Introduction

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

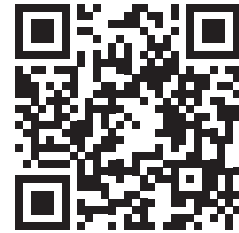
- What are you most happy with in your grammar instruction? What needs work?
- How confident are you about your own grammar and usage?
- How do you teach grammar and mechanics?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read "Introduction" on pages 3–6.
- How is this thinking about teaching grammar similar to yours? Different?

#### Video Viewing (15 Minutes)

- View “Our Histories as Grammar Teachers.” This is also an introduction to Jeff.
- As you view the video clip, jot down your thinking on a two-column note (What Do You Notice?/What Do You Wonder?).



#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*If parents don't understand why you're not marking up papers, take a piece of children's art and stick a transparency over it. Then, start marking all over it, crossing things out, redrawing other parts, putting notes on it. Of course, everyone gasps. Then ask, why would we do this to student writing (9)?*

*To incorporate this focused approach to teaching grammar and mechanics into my writer's workshop, I didn't have to throw out what I was already doing. I just tweaked the processes of my successful workshop (12).*

*The teaching of conventions is about what punctuation can do to enhance the writer's message (14).*

#### Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)

What is one idea/concept that you will continue to think about after today and might integrate into your writer's workshop?

**Part 1****Chapter 2: Moving from Correct-Alls to Mentor Texts****Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)**

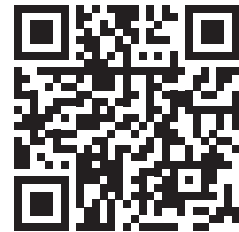
- What are your thoughts on canned daily correct-alls?
- Jeff starts each class with a well-crafted sentence from children’s or young adult literature as an alternative to Daily Oral Language (DOL). What do you think about this practice?
- How might you infuse grammar/mechanics instruction into your writing workshop?

**Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)**

- Read pages 16–17, “Mentor Texts: The Close-Up Lens of the Sentence.”
- How is this use of mentor texts in writing workshop similar to yours? Different?

**Video Viewing (15 Minutes)**

- View the segment on using the mentor text, “My Hair Wakes Up Stupid.”
- As you view the video, clip jot down your thinking on a two-column note (What Do You Notice?/What Do You Wonder?).

**Toolbox Strategy (15 Minutes)**

- Distribute copies of award-winning or recently published children’s and young adult novels.
- Have everyone in the group browse through the books and write down sentences that could serve as good mentor texts.
- As a group, talk about what makes a good mentor sentence and what grammar connections might be made to specific sentences that participants wrote down.

**Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

What is one idea/concept that you will continue to think about after today and might try out in your classroom?

**Part 1****Chapter 3: Weaving Grammar and Mechanics  
into Writer’s Workshop****Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)**

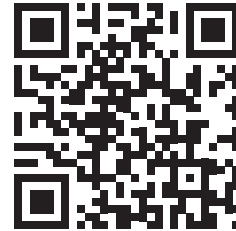
- How are writer’s notebooks used within your writer’s workshop?
- How can freewriting be used to build the craft-grammar connection?
- When and why do you use freewriting now in your writer’s workshop?

**Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)**

- Read pages 27–32.
- How is Jeff’s use of writer’s notebooks similar to yours? Different?

**Video Viewing (15 Minutes): Freewriting in Writer’s Notebook  
[Program One]**

- In Segment 2, view an example of Jeff using writer’s notebooks in the classroom.
- In Segment 3, view an example of students using their writer’s notebooks for a focused freewrite based on a mentor text shared in class.
- View “Express-Lane Edits” (Segment 4). Participants might also want to reference pages 46–49 in the book.
- As you view the video clips, jot down your thinking on a two-column note (What Do You Notice?/What Do You Wonder?).

**Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)**

*Writing is the life of the composition party. The best place to begin to make these connections is in the writer’s notebook (29).*

*Everything in the writer’s notebook is in the process all the time. It is a place to return—to mine and refine, polish and relish, reread and rewrite (29).*

*In Writing with Power, Peter Elbow writes, “Frequent freewriting exercises help you learn to simply get on with it and not be held back by worries about whether*

*these words are good words or right words” (29).*

### **Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

- What is one idea/concept that you will continue to think about after today and might try out in your classroom?
- Ask all participants to have their students add one grammar-related section to their writer’s notebooks or launch writer’s notebooks with a craft/grammar connection using Jeff’s suggestions. Bring sample student notebooks to a follow-up session and talk about what everyone tried. What worked? What adaptations were made?





**Part 1****Chapter 4: Off-the-Wall Grammar and Mechanics Instruction****Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)**

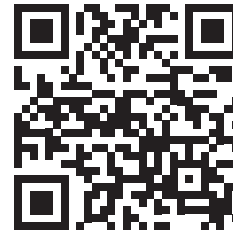
- Think about your wall displays. How do you use them as learning tools within the classroom?
- How do you decide what gets put on the wall as an anchor chart?

**Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)**

- Read pages 57–58, “Wall Charts That Work.”
- How is this thinking about wall charts similar to yours? Different?

**Video Viewing (15 Minutes)**

- View the segment on FANBOYS that shows an example of how Jeff integrates wall charts into instruction.
- As you view the video clip, jot down your thinking on a two-column note (What Do You Notice?/What Do You Wonder?).

**Toolbox Strategy (15 Minutes)**

- Review some examples of wall charts (Apostrophes, 115; Dialogue Rules, 57; Openers, 20; Serial Comma Sentences, 101; Two-Word Sentences, 67).
- Have everyone talk through one wall display they would like to add to their room to build the craft-grammar connection.
- Ask everyone to try out the change to their walls during the coming week, and return to the next workshop session ready to discuss what effect the change had on student discussion and writing.

**Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)**

*There are no prefab, purchased posters and wall charts—only organic, growing, changing charts that address what kids need to know to survive in the world of writing. And these wall charts are used, referred to, pointed at, moved, and*

*looked at. These wall charts are a living part of my class's meaning-making journey (51).*

*Addressing specifically the need for visuals, Caine and Caine state, "Learning involves both focused and peripheral perceptions" (1994, p. 91). So the stuff on the walls works even when our students are staring at the wall instead of us. A pattern is being visually imprinted (52).*

*Wall charts and posters should go up not all at once but one at a time over the first months of school and anytime you find a new need (59).*

### **Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

What is one idea/concept that you will continue to think about after today and might try out in your classroom?

## **Part 2**

### **Constructing Lessons: Background, Mentor Text, and Visual Scaffolds**

Part 2 of the text, “Construction Lessons,” serves as a scaffold. It is set up to provide you with several resources for teaching crucial grammar and mechanics. Each section identifies an error or concept and contains an operator’s manual, a mentor text, a lesson, and a visual scaffold.

#### **Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)**

- How has your thinking about grammar instruction changed through viewing the videos and trying out some of the activities with students?
- What tweaks have you made to your writer’s workshop?
- What’s the biggest adaptation you’ve made to Jeff’s ideas or methods?

#### **Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)**

- Read pages 61–62 that outline the layout of Part Two of the book.
- What do you notice? What do you wonder about in terms of the layout of the lessons that follow in the rest of the book?

### **Toolbox Strategies: Try Out Some Lessons**

#### **Section 1.1 Fragments**

- Read Section 1.1, “Fragments” (64–68).
- View “FANBOYS” (Program 2, Segment 1).
- As you view the video clip, jot down your thinking on a two-column note (What Do You Notice?/What Do You Wonder?).
- Try out the strategy. What went well? Were there any challenges?

#### **Section 2.2 Comma Splice**

- Read Section 2.2, “Comma Splice” (87–89).
- View “AAAWWUBBIS” (Bonus Clip).
- As you view the video clip, jot down



your thinking on a two-column note (What Do You Notice?/What Do You Wonder?).

- Try out the strategy. What went well? Were there any challenges?

### **Section 3.4 Possessive Apostrophe Error**

- Read Section 3.4, “Possessive Apostrophe Error” (113–116).
- View “Apostrophe-thon.”
- As you view the video clip, jot down your thinking on a two-column note (What Do You Notice?/What Do You Wonder?).
- Try out the strategy. What went well? Were there any challenges?



### **Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

What do you plan to try in the future but haven't attempted yet?