

Jeff Anderson

# Zooming In and Zooming Out: Putting Grammar in Context into Context

Jeff Anderson's lessons involve shifting focus between writing or reading and specific grammar problems inner-city middle school students encounter. Lessons or discussions on a topic are then applied to a larger context so that students see "the story of grammar's power to communicate meaning and beauty."

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each grammar and mechanics in context. We've all heard the advice, but what exactly does that mean?

Do I just cover the mistakes students make? Which ones? Where do I begin? Where does it end? What if I wanted my inner-city middle school students to look at one sentence as a whole class? Would that be teaching grammar *out* of context? What is context, anyway?

To develop a new sense of context, I cracked open *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition*, and read, "context *n.* 1. The parts of a sentence, paragraph or discourse, etc. immediately surrounding a specified word or passage that determine its exact meaning." Other dictionaries say similar things about the surrounding words "throwing light on its meaning" or "help explain its meaning."

So, context is about meaning. Any chunk of meaning is a context. The key is meaning, not length. This set me free.

This new vantage point allowed me to see that teaching grammar "in context" doesn't only mean using whole texts. I now felt permitted to cut away all the noise of

an entire essay to target one high-payoff grammar and mechanics concept or common error.

In writer's workshop I already taught one thing at a time, one thing students could easily

hold in their heads and apply. One thing we could scaffold. One shared experience. When students had the time to notice what effect the author's crafting had on the reader—to play around with what-ifs, imitation, and permutation—they began using those skills in the context of their writing to shape meaning. We could do that with a sentence or two.

Of course, looking at writing at the sentence level was nothing new (Christensen; Killgallon; Strong), but often the sentence work interrupted workshop processes rather than acting as an integral part of the meaning-making process of shaping text. Our teaching tells a story. Often sentence work didn't create a story of grammar that students could understand and connect over time in their writing. Most packaged editing programs only tell part of the story: Grammar is about fixing, not creating. Grammar is lifeless sentences riddled with multitudes of mistakes that would take hours to meaningfully process.

Why spend so much time mentoring young writers with weak writing? I want my students to learn the story of grammar's power to communicate meaning and beauty. I want to highlight effective writing, studying mentor texts and vivid student work, telling a story that revolves around making meaning in real writing and books.

I read the experts on teaching grammar in context (Noden; Strong; Weaver). I merged what they said with the best of writer's workshop (Atwell; Ray; Romano). I experimented in my classroom for the next five years discovering what worked.

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## The Context of an Inner-City Classroom

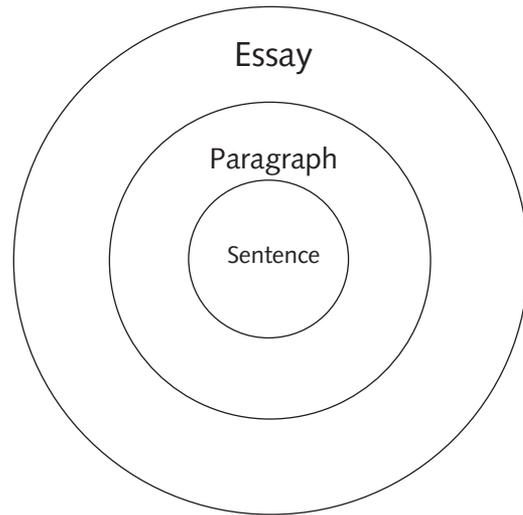
My sixth-grade English classroom is nestled in a Title I middle school in San Antonio, Texas. Many of my students have failed standardized tests and were placed in my English classroom, and most of them struggle with the conventions of Standard English. They see studying grammar and mechanics as just one more way to be told that they are wrong—so they need an approach that addresses their weaknesses by giving them power to make meaning. I found my first solution in Harry R. Noden's *Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing*. It was a watershed moment for me. I discovered I could stop using labels without stopping grammar. Students created images with their sentences, and they didn't even know they were using participles or writing complex sentences. Playing with the brush stroke of *-ing* verbs (participles), Eva wrote this sentence in her writer's notebook: "I stood in front of the door, staring at the splinters fanning out at the bottom of the door, listening to all the voices of my new classmates." But the biggest discovery was how accessible working with only a few sentences was for students. These playful forays into label-less grammar ended up in students' essays, enriching them with concrete details and craft—a grammar instruction that actually improved writing.

### Finding Contexts: How to Zoom In and Out

The metaphor of zooming in and out helps me structure my instruction (see fig. 1). Zooming in on a sentence or paragraph, I teach a concept such as commas in a series. We look at examples from books and students' writing. We play around with commas after introductions in students' writer's notebooks. Then we zoom back out to the essay level once students see the pattern and apply what they know. We zoom in and out as needed.

First, we zoom in on the smallest chunk of meaning. If I want to teach about apostrophes, the smallest context might be two words: Simmy's notebook, Javier's pen. We take relevant examples from the context of their world to expose students to patterns that possessive apostrophes follow.

FIGURE 1. Context: Zooming In and Out



Those two words provide a chunk of meaning and allow us to focus on the relationship between the two words. That's where we start.

To teach a comma rule, such as *use a comma after a long introduction*, the smallest unit of meaning would be a sentence such as this one from Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*: "When you look up 'hilarious' in the dictionary, there's a picture of you" (5). If we want to look at subject-verb agreement, we need more—perhaps a whole paragraph. Whatever is the smallest chunk of meaning, I start there, highlighting it. Students talk about what they notice, clarifying the concepts. Together we create visual scaffolds—little reminders of key concepts illuminated by examples. Whether scrawled on chart paper as a class or in cut-outs pasted in the writer's notebook, these scaffolds can be returned to repeatedly until the concept is owned. We fill the scaffolds with examples and discuss the relationships and patterns. Next, we zoom out a bit to play with those concepts in their writer's notebooks or in whole or small groups, again highlighting the key points and patterns from the visual scaffolds. The visual patterns make the concepts stick—no matter what the concept.

First, we have to figure out what concepts our students most need—where to start. I find that correlating students' usage with what is most often tested is a good place to start. I begin by listening.

“You call my mom last night,” Mercedes says as she enters the room. The English teacher’s Pavlovian response is to cringe: Mercedes has dropped the *-ed* (inflectional ending) of the verb *called*. Mercedes, an English language learner, is not alone with this problem. Numerous students struggle with this error. In fact, dropping inflectional endings such as *-ed*, *-es*, *-s*, or *-ing* is often at the root of subject-verb disagreement and tense problems, two of the top twenty errors students make (Connors and Lunsford).

**Students talk about what they notice, clarifying the concepts. Together we create visual scaffolds—little reminders of key concepts illuminated by examples.**

### A Contextualized Lesson on Verb Tense and Subject-Verb Agreement

So, verb tense is important, it needs to be highlighted, and we know an out-of-context workbook page won’t do: How do we integrate this tested concept into the context of our writer’s workshop?

To begin, I scavenge for great sentences to model the concept in the leads of books. Oftentimes, this is some of the best writing. I let the masters of writing teach my students.

Later, in the classroom, I write the lead from Paula Danziger’s novel, *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, on the board: “I hate my father. I hate school. I hate being fat” (1).

I ask, “What tense is this in?” Silence. “What does *tense* mean?” More silence.

To lighten the mood, I play the beginning lines of the song “Time Is on My Side” by Irma Thomas, and I point at the clock until someone states the not-so-obvious.

“Yes, brilliant. *Tense* means *time*.” I write this at the top of a piece of butcher paper. “Now, what tense is this in? Past or present?”

“Present?” Richard offers.

“How’d you know?” To capture our thinking, I fill in a chart on butcher paper taped on the whiteboard (see fig. 2). The discoveries we generate will serve as visual scaffolds that can be referred to often during the writing process. “So, Ms. Danziger left the verb ‘as is’ to show it was in the present—she didn’t change *hate* by adding an *-s* or an *-ed*.” I write *leave verbs as is* on the present-tense side of the butcher paper. “Suppose we want to put these three sentences in the past tense.” As a student yells it out, I write: *I hated my father. I hated school. I hated being fat*. “What changed?” We discuss that only the verb changed, how it changed, and we record *add -ed endings* to our chart.

I write the following on the board: *She \_\_\_\_\_ her father. She \_\_\_\_\_ school. She \_\_\_\_\_ being fat*. “How would you say this sentence?”

Jennifer yells out, “*Hates*. She *hates* her father.”

“How did you know to use *hates*?” We discuss the “right now” present tense, and how the *he/she/it* voice messes up the pattern by changing the verb; we can’t just leave the verb “as is” all the time thanks to the *he/she/it* voice. In the present tense, or “right now,” we must add an *-s* or sometimes an *-es* with the *he/she/it* voice. We

FIGURE 2. Wall Chart Illuminating Tense and Subject-Verb Agreement

Verb Tenses	Tense = Time
Present “Right now”	Past “Already happened”
Leave verbs “as is” unless you’re using the <i>he/she/it</i> voice.	Add <i>-ed</i> endings
<i>He/she/it</i> voice and all that would replace it like Patrick/Sarah/computer need an <i>-s</i> or <i>-es</i> in the present tense.	Add <i>-ed</i> to all regular verbs!
I limp. Stephen limps. She walks.	I limped. Stephen limped. She walked.

FIGURE 3. Verb Reminders for the Writer's Notebook

**"Right Now" or Present-Tense Verbs**

<i>Point of View (Person)</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
<i>I/we</i> voice (first)	I talk.	We talk.
<i>You</i> voice (second)	You talk.	You talk.
<i>He/she/it</i> voice (third)	He talks; she talks. Add -s or -es to the verb.	They talk.

Notice that the base verb every time, except when using the *he/she/it* voice, is the third-person singular.

**"Already Happened" or Past-Tense Verbs**

<i>Point of View (Person)</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
<i>I/we</i> voice (first)	I talked.	We talked.
<i>You</i> voice (second)	You talked.	You talked.
<i>He/she/it</i> voice (third)	He talked; she talked.	They talked.

Notice the pattern: We always add *-ed* to the base verb to show that the events already happened or are in the past.

continue our discussion and add our discovery to the chart. Next we "look back" to the past tense. Students are relieved to see the *-ed* ending is so consistent. Wait until they discover the irregular verbs!

I distribute "Verb Reminders for the Writer's Notebook" (see fig. 3) and ask, "What patterns do you see?"

When students notice the *he/she/it* voice is the only place where the verb changes in the present tense, they shade in that square. As students cut out their verb reminders and glue them in their writer's notebooks, I play "Time Is on My Side" again. As the song comes to an end, Sam observes, "So, you don't really have to know that much?"

"What do you mean, Sam?"

Pointing his scissors at the chart, he says, "Well, you only change the verb with the *he/she/it* voice. The past tense is always *-ed*, so that's easy."

Jericha squints, looking at the chart. I ask, "What's up, Jericha?"

"Well, it can't be that easy. I think there's something else."

"Hmmm, what do you say we look in the books you're reading to see if we can learn anything else from our writing mentors?"

Each student has a novel that he or she is currently reading in workshop. "We took the lead from *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* and played with the verbs. Now I want you to look at the lead or first paragraph in your books." After they have read their leads, students share leads with their groups. Afterward, groups complete the following:

- > Select one lead.
- > Identify and underline the verbs in the lead.
- > Identify the tense (present, past, or something else).
- > Copy the original lead on a transparency and write to the side if it's in past or present tense or something else. Beneath the original lead, rewrite the paragraph, changing the tense or point of view (see fig. 4).
- > Display transparencies and read them aloud, discussing the differences and adding useful information to the chart.

FIGURE 4. Group's Example from Andrew Clements's *Things Not Seen*

*Original: Present Tense*

It's a Tuesday morning in February, and I get up as usual, and I stumble into the bathroom to take a shower in the dark. Which is my school-day method because it's sort of like an extra ten minutes sleep (1).

*Tense Transformation: The Verbs They Are A-Changin'*

It **was** a Tuesday morning in February, and I **got** up as usual, and I **stumbled** into the bathroom to take a shower in the dark. Which **was** my school day method because it **was** sort of like an extra ten minutes sleep.

What's important in this collaboration is the talk, the sense-making, the ideas being heard and modified, the charts acting as scaffolds. All the students engage in a problem-solving discussion mediated by me.

We don't leave the concept in its smallest context. We target it just long enough to see the patterns. Then we zoom right back into our workshop pieces. I say, "Go back into your essay that you're working on. How did you use tense and subject-verb agreement?" Students highlight the spots where they used the concept correctly and make changes where needed. We talk about questions as we confer. If I see an issue worthy of stopping the workshop, I may imitate an error or ask for a volunteer to share, so together we can all address the issue. During these collaborations, I point to visual scaffolds on the wall, whatever it takes to move students toward correctness, reminding myself that students have to make errors to improve.

### Weaving Grammar and Mechanics into Context

I learned that I didn't have to throw out what I already did. I just tweaked the processes of my already successful writer's workshop. I intertwined the following strategies:

- > Use the shortest mentor text possible so students can cling to the craft and meaning without being overwhelmed with words and punctuation. Teach one thing at a time and apply it to our daily writing. Keep inventing and generating text while cueing students to targeted concepts and strategies.
- > Add quick daily doses of grammar and mechanics experiences with short mentor

texts and editing so that students have ongoing, shared experience playing with and understanding grammar and mechanics.

- > Provide rich experiences in the writer's notebook to apply and fool around with mentor sentences as new concepts are introduced.
- > Give students scaffolds with examples in the form of visual scaffolds or inserts for their writer's notebooks to help start and extend the collecting, categorizing, and imitation of mentor texts.
- > Saturate walls with charts that provide visual reinforcement of the concepts introduced and used by writers, reinforcing key concepts that students need to know.

### In the Context of Research on Effective Instruction

To keep my practice in check, I reflect on my teaching and read. Recently, using the lens of the research findings in *Guidelines for Teaching Middle and High School Students to Read and Write Well: Six Features of Effective Instruction* (Langer et al.), I put my ideas on teaching grammar in context to the test. I like Langer's report because it acknowledges that all teachers work hard planning and teaching but some are more successful than others. The researchers sought to find what made the difference. Langer and her colleagues found six features the more successful classrooms had in common (see fig. 5). Reading this illuminated for me why zooming in and out worked so well with my students.

The idea of zooming in and out instructionally is explicitly supported by the first feature of successful language arts classes: multiple lesson types. Successful classes combine three types of

**FIGURE 5.** Six Features of Effective Reading and Writing Instruction

<i>Research Findings</i>	<i>What It Looks Like in the Classroom</i>
1. Students learn skills and knowledge in multiple lesson types.	A combination of <i>separated</i> , <i>simulated</i> , and <i>integrated</i> lessons was found in classrooms that beat the odds. Teachers and students move in and out of all three types of experiences.
2. Teachers integrate test preparation into instruction.	The knowledge and skills needed to be successful on tests are made overt and students learn the knowledge in the context of the curriculum rather than a focus on the surface features of tests or test-taking skills.
3. Teachers make connections across instruction, curriculum, and life.	Teachers overtly “weave a web of connections within lessons, across lessons, and to students’ lives in and out of school” (8).
4. Students learn strategies for doing the work.	“[S]trategies are discussed and modeled, and teachers develop reminder sheets for students to use” (10). In short, students deeply understand the components they need to complete effective work.
5. Students are expected to be generative thinkers.	Students are asked to go beyond the immediate understanding of a skill, beyond the “right” answer, thinking and connecting at deeper levels.
6. Classrooms foster cognitive collaboration.	“[S]tudents participate in thoughtful dialogue” (14). Questions move beyond the superficial. Students generate problems and answers, working through these processes with each other. Students work together, “listening to and interacting with one another about the ideas at hand” (14).

Summarized from *Guidelines for Teaching Middle and High School Students to Read and Write Well: Six Features of Effective Instruction* by Judith Langer et al. (2000).

instruction: *separated*, *simulated*, and *integrated*. In *separated* instruction, teachers highlight a targeted skill. This feature supports using the smallest possible context to reveal grammar and mechanics patterns. When my students play around with concepts or patterns in their writer’s notebooks they are experiencing another type of lesson, *simulated*. With instruction zooming back into a whole text such as an essay, students apply the skill or knowledge for a purpose. These *integrated* experiences are necessary as well. I use all three types of instruction from zooming in to the smallest possible context (*separated*) to zooming out a little for quick spurts of practice (*simulated*), and zooming farther out to the essay and larger contexts (*integrated*).

How do I approach test preparation? I integrate test preparation into my instruction by making overt connections between what students need

to know to be successful writers and what is tested on their standardized tests. I have found that when skills are integrated into real writing, the students have a sense of writing’s purpose and how it fits into the larger picture of reading and writing, making it easier for them to connect the two processes. Zooming in and zooming out is about making connections between tests, work, and life.

Whether zooming in or zooming out on a concept, I model *strategies* (feature four) that students need to do the work they are expected to do. I hand the power over to them with “reminder sheets” or visual scaffolds, which also support test preparation. During a test, have you ever seen a student look at the wall where a poster used to be?

When teaching grammar in context effectively, I always look for opportunities to extend a concept or the meaning of a skill by asking the question that often remains unasked in grammar

instruction. I ask students why. “What makes you say that? Where have you seen this pattern before? Do you see this new pattern in this text?” Students look for examples, not just a right answer; they evaluate

**I have found that when skills are integrated into real writing, the students have a sense of writing's purpose and how it fits into the larger picture of reading and writing, making it easier for them to connect the two processes.**

*why* and *what effect* the concept or strategy has on the writer's message and craft. Students take a thinking stance rather than a right-wrong stance. In these ways I am expecting my students to be *generative thinkers* (feature five).

*Collaboration* (feature six) is not exclusively a small-group experience in my classroom; fostering cognitive collaboration can be done in whole-class dis-

cussions as well. When looking at errors, I model a problem-solving attitude, so students can see these cognitive processes. I encourage other students to share their thinking as well, cultivating a collaborative culture where ideas bump against one another. When students articulate their thinking processes, they own these concepts of grammar and mechanics.

### Creating Contexts, Creating Meaning

To create a context of meaning, we simply use a marker, a piece of butcher paper, and the books we already have in our room. Students do the work. They evaluate, analyze, and produce writing, zooming in and out, with the teacher as a helpful guide probing their thinking with questions. If I facilitate experiences for student writers, zooming in on important patterns and applying those with scaf-

folds of support, they will see grammar as a creational facility rather than a correctional one. And in the context of process, students will inevitably move toward correctness while toiling with creating meaning and beauty—what we wanted all along.

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