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Grammar in the Composition Classroom: Rewriting the Tradition

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Grammar in the Composition Classroom: Rewriting the Tradition

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In the last 50 years, the trend in the field of composition pedagogy has turned away from traditional grammar instruction, condemning pedagogical practices that focus on preventing and remediating error. In the early 1960s, Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer invoked the death sentence on traditional grammar instruction: “The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (37-38). Having been enlightened by this scholarship, the field refocused instruction to emphasize elements like writing process, collaboration, modeling, and prewriting, pushing grammar instruction to the side. As a result of this shift in pedagogies, we are helping our students to see writing differently. We’re teaching them that “good writing” is more than correct spelling and well-placed commas, which is correct.

But grammar is still an important part of language, and an integral part of rhetoric. Recent scholars like Cheryl Glenn, Virginia Tufte, T.R. Johnson, Constance Weaver, Martha Kolln, and Nora Bacon have recognized this oversight in the sharp move away from grammar instruction, and have developed different strategies to rewrite the tradition so that grammar instruction can be an effective part of writing instruction. I will add to their efforts by identifying the shift in theoretical principles that makes what we refer to as traditional grammar instruction so ineffective, by using the Greco-Roman curriculum (specifically Quintilian’s *imitatio*) as a framework for understanding where these new grammar instructions come from, and by synthesizing this new understanding into a new curriculum for the writing classroom that more effectively integrates grammar instruction.

Keywords: grammar instruction, Quintilian, *imitatio*, first-year writing

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ..... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... iii

Grammar in the Composition Classroom: Rewriting the Tradition..... 1

The Failed Tradition ..... 6

The Lost Curriculum..... 15

Grammar as Rhetoric and Style ..... 17

Rewriting the Tradition..... 23

Conclusion ..... 31

Works Cited ..... 33

## Grammar in the Composition Classroom: Rewriting the Tradition

They called it the Punctuation Apocalypse. One day. Five short mini-lessons focused on common errors. A quick pep talk: Hooray for functional punctuation! Only no one was very peppy after that day.

I started the class with a discussion about why punctuation is important. We talked about the difference between *A woman without her man is nothing* and *A woman; without her, man is nothing*. We talked about how punctuation in writing can take the place of voice inflection and dramatic pauses in speech. At this point, I was getting excited—“This is great! They get it! Time to introduce the marks.”

The reading had grouped different punctuation marks according to their function and focused on the most common student errors—commas, comma splices, commas . . . . I taught it the way I had been shown: holding a class discussion about the different functions of each mark and having students correct errors. But our “class discussion” quickly devolved into me talking while my students’ eyes slowly glazed over. When our 50 minutes were up, I was hoarse and flustered. They were confused and frustrated. We all left the room with the same question: What do we do with this?

The open, engaging classroom environment we had worked hard to nurture came crashing down with my crash course in grammar. For my students, this *was* the Punctuation Apocalypse: it destroyed what confidence they had in their writing. It was time for me to find the answer to the question that my students and I shared: What do we do with grammar?

So I began searching, and here is what I found. I found a failed tradition of grammar instruction that relies heavily on the correction of error. I found new scholarship that makes an effort to rewrite that tradition, but falls short of developing a framework to integrate the new

grammar instruction into the existing curriculum for first-year writing. But, I also found an ancient pedagogy that gives us a framework to teach students how to use effective grammatical judgment in their writing. I found that a new tradition of grammar instruction—a tradition in which grammar is taught in the context of reading, writing, and good judgment—can be integrated effectively into the first-year writing course by using the pedagogical model set up by Quintilian: the six-step process of *imitatio*.

My initial research led me to the famous study completed in the 1960s by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer. In a bold and uncompromising statement, these scholars invoke the death sentence on formal, or traditional, grammar instruction: “The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (37-38). George Hillocks’ compilation of research, published twenty years later, shows study after study demonstrating the ineffectiveness of traditional grammar instruction. Hillocks is adamant that if “schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional school grammar (as many still do), they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing” (138). With such scathing indictments against them, it is no wonder the methods of traditional grammar instruction have been shunned by contemporary pedagogies.

Having been enlightened by the experts, we have refocused our instruction to emphasize elements like writing process, collaboration, modeling, and prewriting. These are the principles included in Steven Graham and Dolores Perin’s *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* as key elements of writing that will help our students develop the important rhetorical skills they need to be able to write effectively. As a

result of this shift in pedagogies, we are helping our students to see writing differently. We are teaching them that “good writing” is more than correct spelling and well-placed commas. We are teaching them that writing is a way to create, share, and influence, rather than an empty exercise in sentence structure and paragraph composition.

Why, then, do we feel the need to include that crash-course in grammar? Why not just say goodbye to grammar instruction altogether? We feel the need to include some grammar instruction because without it, students and teachers alike recognize that something is missing. Teachers have a responsibility to their students to equip them with the rhetorical knowledge and skill to take command of their writing, inside and outside of the classroom. How can we be successful in this endeavor if we fill their knapsacks with rhetorical skills, such as arranging an argument and working collaboratively with peers, but do not include essential grammatical skills, such as structuring an effective sentence or using a semicolon to break up long, complicated lists?

These grammatical skills cannot on their own make a writer effective; a well-constructed sentence means nothing unless it has something to say. But take these skills away, and no matter how clever the argument or arrangement, the writer will find it difficult to reach any audience—professional, academic, or otherwise. In 2004, the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges (NCW) surveyed “120 major American corporations employing nearly 8 million people” on the effect that writing skills have in the employee selection and promotion process (“Ticket to Work” 3). The results show that “writing is a ticket to professional opportunity, while poorly written job applications are a figurative kiss of death” (3). The survey also indicated that employers are spending a lot of money annually to remediate



grammatical deficiencies in their employees (3). Another report in 2005, focusing on state government jobs, showed similar results (NCW, “Powerful Message” 3).

Clearly, employers and businessmen in America value grammatical writing skills in their employees. And as Larry Beason argues in “Ethos and Error: How Business People React to Errors,” “Our effectiveness [as writing instructors], perhaps our ethos, can be impeded if we . . . trivialize points [other professionals] deem consequential” (34). Beason’s goal in conducting the study he presents in this article was to discover what business professionals saw in grammatical errors. What he found after analyzing the results of his interviews with fourteen business men and women was that their responses to errors came from two separate contexts: the readability of the text (seeing error as a roadblock to communication) and the ethos for the writer (seeing error as evidence that a writer is incompetent). He cautions, “the extent to which errors harm the writer’s image is more serious and far-reaching than many students and teachers might realize” (48). In an article describing her personal shifts in perspective regarding grammar instruction in her classes, Deborah Dean makes a similar observation. She asserts that as technology opens up new writing spaces for student writers and brings them closer to their readers, the negative effects of error on the writer’s ethos are amplified. Dean paraphrases the attitudes of reader-commenters attacking the language of online news articles: “How can anything you say be valid if you can’t even use language effectively?” (24).

More important, even, than the professional ethos created by a working knowledge of grammar, our students need to be familiar with the way language works at the sentence level in order to broaden their understanding of the way their thoughts can be organized into language. Writing is a combination of both grammatical and rhetorical (e.g. invention, argument, arrangement, etc.) skills. Like the human body, it is a miraculous conglomeration of different

systems and elements that work together to create a living, breathing being. The lungs without the heart cannot function. Nor can the fingers operate without the nerves. Writing rhetorically requires a knowledge of grammatical principles. The current curriculum model of the writing course already excels at teaching students the global rhetorical skills students need, but we lack a way to integrate grammar instruction into this curriculum. I do not think that grammar should take precedent over higher-priority writing skills, but I do believe that there is a need and a place for grammar instruction in the existing curriculum model. And I am not the only one with this opinion.

Martha Kolln in “Closing the Books on Alchemy” directly challenges the claims made by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, and Dean Memering regarding the utility of grammar instruction. Directing us to the many problems involved in the research methods available to these scholars, Kolln states squarely that these claims are invalid, partly because of poor execution in the studies, partly because of undefined terms like “formal” or “traditional” grammar instruction, and partly because of the “‘strong and unqualified’ language” (140) used in Braddock, et al.’s claim that traditional grammar instruction “has a negligible or . . . even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (qtd. in Kolln 139), or in Memering’s similar claim: “The evidence is incontestable that grammar teaching achieves nothing useful in composition” (qtd. in Kolln 141). I will show that the traditional grammar these scholars refer to arose from the need to catalog and prescribe the use of the English language. As we come to a better understanding of the methodological and pedagogical principles behind this failed tradition of grammar instruction, we will see that the solution is in restoring and adapting an earlier tradition of instruction, one that was adopted and recorded by the Roman pedagogue Quintilian. As I will demonstrate, we can see elements of Quintilian’s curricular methodology in

the recent efforts of Cheryl Glenn, Virginia Tufte, T.R. Johnson, Constance Weaver, Martha Kolln, and Nora Bacon, who rewrite the current tradition of grammar instruction, whether or not these scholars are consciously aware of their adoption of Quintilian pedagogy. However, I have yet to find a curriculum set forth that includes all of these elements in a pragmatic framework for integrating grammar instruction into the first-year writing classroom. Therefore, I will use Quintilian's most foundational teaching method—*imitatio*—as a framework and a model for bringing these different elements together into a cohesive writing and grammar curriculum for the first-year composition classroom.

### The Failed Tradition

In order to determine the methodological and pedagogical foundations for this failed tradition of grammar instruction, I have analyzed a sampling of grammar and English textbooks from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century through the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, some few of which I have selected to discuss here for their representative qualities. Looking at texts from both England and America, I have come to the conclusion that there are three major flaws common across the Atlantic throughout this time period. The first is a preoccupation with the correction of error. The second is an isolation of grammar from composition. The third is a refusal to accept and demonstrate to students the changing nature of language.

The earliest British texts, from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, were largely concerned with distinguishing the English language and setting it apart from Latin, which up to that time was the first grammar taught to English pupils. Richard S. Johnson shows this transition in his study, "The English Grammar School Curriculum in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century: A Reappraisal." Johnson displays tables showing the growing numbers of grammar schools that include English grammar in the curriculum, as opposed to those schools that teach classical Latin grammar only. His graphs

show that “in the small number of new grammar foundations, there was a definite preponderance in the eighteenth century of the school combining grammar and non-classical instruction” (35). At the same time, the American colonies had very few grammar schools, but Rollo LaVerne Lyman records in his 1922 dissertation, *English Grammar in American Schools Before 1850*, that these early schools were also transitioning from Latin grammar, and those that did use textbooks, mostly used books imported from England (21-36). This suggests that the pedagogical principles found in the British texts from this time will have also been adhered to in the colonies.

James Greenwood, in his *Practical English Grammar* (published in England, 1711) complains that the English grammarians of his time have forced “our English tongue too much to the Latin method,” and “delivered many useless precepts . . . which our language hath nothing at all to do with” (35). As a result, Greenwood and his contemporaries sought to catalog the English language as it was used and present grammars that portrayed their interpretation of the language as it ought to be. Because these efforts were founded in the setting up of the correct way to speak, without acknowledging nuances of the language that allow its users to make rhetorical choices in their use of it, they were written with a prescriptive turn and a heightened concern with error. In his preface, Greenwood claims that one of the main goals of his project is to encourage English speakers and writers to learn their “mother tongue” in order to speak and write correctly (A3). Greenwood’s text consists of a succession of chapters delineating grammatical principles, along with some tables and lists of irregularities, each ending with a list of review questions and answers. For example, after the chapter on pronouns, which is seven pages long, Greenwood gives two and a half pages of question-and-answer sets like this one: “*Q. What Pronouns are of the First Person? A. I is of the first Person Singular; We of the first Person Plural [sic]*” (110, emphasis in original). There is no mention in the text of any teaching method

beyond the memorization or recitation of this review material, and no connection made between these grammatical principles and their application in writing.

About two generations later, scholars like James Gough and James Buchanan tried to develop grammars that were more geared toward the classroom, with more explicit instruction for teaching. But while Gough claims to go against the established practice of teaching by rote and to establish a practical grammar system for schools (vi), both his *Practical Grammar* (England, 1754) and Buchanan's *British Grammar* (England, 1762) are remarkably similar in format to Greenwood's text, with the addition of exercises in identifying and correcting false syntax and spelling. Buchanan explains his pedagogical strategy thus: "A sagacious master knows that it will redound to the scholar's advantage to begin the repetition of the grammar as soon as he can read it . . . . When he has got by heart all the master judges proper, he may easily retain it, by repeting [sic] the whole in portions once a month at least" (iii). It would seem that grammarians and pedagogues of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century were bound so tightly by the tradition of teaching by recitation and correction that even those who professed a desire to break out of that tradition failed to establish an alternative method. Even John Fell's *English Grammar* (England, 1784), written another thirty years after Gough's text, seems to be working within the same tradition. His preface describes the same frustrations and goals claimed by his predecessors: that the English language has been too heavily overshadowed and altered by Latin, and that an effective curriculum for teaching the practical and correct use of English grammar has yet to be found (vi-xiv). And yet, while Fell does introduce the use of literary models, his format still relies on rote memorization and the correction of errors.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, we start to see texts like Allen H. Weld's *Parsing Book* (America, 1847) and Peter Bullions' *Principles of English Grammar* (America, 1863). While these are

certainly not the first grammar books being written and published on this side of the Atlantic, they do mark a slight shift in pedagogies. In these texts, students are taught and asked to give a detailed account of the grammar involved in passages of literature or other texts. This is a marked improvement from the rote methodology of the previous century, but it still holds to a strict standard of correctness and demonstrates a preoccupation with error. While the exercises in these texts are more involved, asking students to identify and analyze the different parts of speech in sample sentences or to construct sentences using different parts of speech, there is still no discussion of the rhetorical effects of different principles, nor is there any application to real composition. William Swinton's *A Progressive Grammar* (America, 1880) does separate a little from this tradition, putting less emphasis on parsing and adding some suggestions for teachers to teach composition by having students write several compositions throughout the course and by holding students accountable for the grammatical principles taught (179-180). Still, Swinton relies on much the same types of exercises used in the parsing books: picking out the parts of speech (6-7), answering generic questions (39), correcting mistakes (108), modifying and transposing material (115), and even parsing (119).

As we move into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the practice of parsing and diagramming sentences becomes less and less popular, and the use of literary examples becomes more prominent. James Milne explains in the preface of his *An English Grammar* (America, 1900), "Bringing the pupils face to face with numerous examples from literature . . . leads them . . . to an understanding of how grammatical statements are formulated and applied. The aim . . . is to . . . place the emphasis on the process of reaching conclusions rather than in memorizing them; to magnify the spirit of power rather than the spirit of acquisition" (iv). While Milne and his contemporaries still depend on parsing, analyzing, and correcting exercises, more texts, such as William Webster's *The*

*Essentials of Grammar and Composition* (America, 1909), are making the move toward composition, having students complete exercises such as this one: “Write five sentences, with copulas and predicate attributes, and with nouns as subjects. Write five more with groups of words as subjects. Be ready to separate these sentences into their three elements” (Webster 11). Webster even includes lessons in letter writing (197-205), story and description (205-206), and composition writing (210-211).

In fact, we get the sense that these scholars are trying to simplify grammar and relegate it to the corner of the classroom, so to speak. In 1915, the Survey Committee of the Cleveland Foundation conducted the Educational Survey of Cleveland, which was published in 25 sections. The report entitled “What the Schools Teach and Might Teach” includes a brief chapter on language, composition, and grammar, which states that “a limited amount of systematic grammatical teaching is a necessary preliminary step. . . . This preliminary training . . . need not be either so extensive or so intensive as it is at present. An altogether disproportionate amount of time is now given to it. The time saved ought to go to oral and written expression” (Bobbit 43). John T. Prince speaks to the same effect in his *Practical English Grammar* (America, 1910): “The reason for [grammar instruction’s] failure lies in the fact that too much has been attempted in the learning of many principles and forms, and too little in their application to what is useful and comprehensible to the pupils” (iii). In response, his own text is supposedly streamlined to teach only the most important principles, though to my eye, it looks much the same as the other texts from the period, and it still lacks a direct application of grammatical principles in composition. So, while scholars in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century recognized the need for change, they were still bound by the conventions of the earlier period. Even later texts, like Harry Huffman and Syrell Rogovin’s *Programmed College English* (America, 1968), still rely on isolated

exercises and drills to teach grammar separate from composition. In many ways, we are still bound by the set rules, the preoccupation with error, and the separation from composition with which the earliest English pedagogues struggled.

Having analyzed these primary texts, I turned to scholars like Thomas Friedmann, Richard Haswell, and Edgar H. Schuster to see what they had to say about this tradition of grammar instruction as they have witnessed it in their own experiences. I found that these scholars, contemporaries of Braddock et al, single out the same three problems that are demonstrated in the textbooks: a preoccupation with the correction of error, an isolation of grammar from composition, and a refusal to accept and demonstrate to students the changing nature of language.

Richard Haswell identifies the fatal flaw in the tradition's preoccupation with error in a 1988 study. Haswell took his data from writing samples gathered from college freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, and from a selection of employees in the work place. As Haswell looked deeper into the different contexts of error, he observed that errors in the more experienced writers' samples often coincided with more mature styles of language, more sophisticated vocabulary, and longer, more complex sentence structures. As Haswell states, using a phrase from Albert Kitzhaber's earlier study (the results of which Haswell contests), "The evidence seems to portray less a slump, less an 'increasing carelessness,' and more an awkwardness in handling something new" (495). These students were not being lazy, nor were they ignorant of language structures. On the contrary, they were working strategically toward mastering the language of written, academic discourse. The fact that these students made some natural mistakes in the process shows that students learn better by experimenting with language. The



current tradition of focusing on remediating error by enforcing grammatical rules only discourages students from the experimentation they need to improve as writers.

In “Teaching Error, Nurturing Confusion,” Thomas Friedmann applies pedagogical strategies that emphasize error and rely on repetitive, rule-based lecture (the same pedagogical strategies we’ve seen in textbooks from earlier centuries) to other fields of instruction, showing how ineffective these methods really are. A basketball coach has the poorest player on the team demonstrate how to shoot the ball, with the rest of the team “carefully observ[ing] the details of his failure” (390). A piano teacher tries to teach her student a certain note by playing four different notes and asking the student to pick the right one. These methods are ridiculous, and yet much of traditional grammar instruction involves having students select from a variety of errors the correct item, instead of demonstrating and practicing effective uses of grammar principles. Friedmann calls for grammar instruction to instead train students in the use of language by practice, like a forward on the basketball team learns by shooting the ball and playing skirmishes with the team, like a pianist learns by playing songs on the piano.

In 2011 Edgar H. Schuster also argued for a change in grammar instruction based on his observation that successful writers often intentionally violate the rules of grammar. In his article “Beyond Grammar,” Schuster has compiled and examined samples of successful writing from both professional and student writers. In each sample, the writer chose not to follow certain traditional grammar rules, and Schuster’s analysis shows that the writing is actually more effective than it would have been had the writer not broken the rules. Schuster’s observations show that the traditional reliance on rigid, catalogued language rules is fallacious because language changes. Good writers are those who can recognize when going against the reader’s expectations and playing with language can be effective.

These scholars have not sought to condemn grammar instruction per se. Instead, they recognize that there is a gap between the rules and the functions of grammar, between teaching the rules and helping students learn how to use grammar effectively in their writing. As Schuster says, “Effective writers—professionals and students—break traditionally taught rules frequently. So why teach students rules that writers don’t actually follow?” (71). Clearly the tradition that critics are declaiming is the tradition that fixates on error and teaches grammar in isolation from composition as a fixed system of unbreakable rules. This is the catalogued approach to teaching grammar that we have inherited from earlier centuries. Is it any wonder that students have a hard time applying to their writing what they learn under this tradition of grammar instruction?

As the English pedagogues were adjusting their teaching of Latin grammar in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, they were also distancing themselves from the larger, more complex curriculum adhered to by earlier generations. This curriculum was developed first in Greece by Isocrates, then adapted in Rome with Cicero and later practiced and recorded by Quintilian. Based on a more complex understanding of rhetoric and its relationship to other disciplines, this Greco-Roman curriculum did not seek merely to produce marketable employees in the different disciplines, but to develop well-rounded, disciplined, moral citizens with good judgment. And the one art that has the power to accomplish this task is rhetoric—rhetoric being not merely colorful words, but smart invention, sufficient content, appropriate style, and above all, true moral character and judgment. According to this philosophy, rhetoric is the all-encompassing art, and therefore, while the different elements and principles of rhetoric can be discussed separately, they can never truly be isolated from one another. Among those elements and principles, of course, is grammar. According to Quintilian, grammar cannot be separated from the study of

literature or the practice of declamation (for most contemporary curricula, and for the purpose of this essay, we may substitute writing for declamation here).

From the classical tradition to the tradition that we now know is a change in the way we understand grammar. Quintilian defines the study of the *grammatici* as “the study of correct speech and the interpretation of the poets,” but qualifies that “there is more of it behind the scenes than meets the eye. The principles of writing are closely connected with those of speaking, correct reading is a prerequisite of interpretation, and judgment is involved in all these” (103). Here, Quintilian directly relates the principles of grammar and writing with the principles of good judgment. Later, Quintilian claims that “as we draw near to the inner shrine of this mystery [grammar], the great intricacy of the subject will be apparent, for it [grammar] is capable not only of sharpening childish minds but of exercising the most profound knowledge and erudition” (107). Quintilian’s grammar—the study of reading, speaking, and writing—is capable of instructing students in much more than remediating error. Quintilian’s grammar teaches students to make good judgments in their interpretations of and interactions with texts of all genres, which suggests that a working knowledge of grammatical principles can help students in all five classical canons of rhetoric (invention, arrangement, memory, style, and delivery). Most of the early English grammar texts give a much reduced definition for grammar, such as the one given by John Fell: “English grammar is the art of speaking and writing the English language, agreeably to the established usage of the best and most approved speakers and writers” (3). We know that the pedagogies built on this definition of grammar do not work in the writing classroom, because they are too focused on error and rules, and they do not allow for the application of principles in composition. But, with Quintilian’s understanding of grammar as the

study of reading and writing with the application of appropriate judgment, could we find our solution in his curriculum?

### The Lost Curriculum

Quintilian's *imitatio* offers a framework that can be adapted to the modern first-year writing classroom. In Quintilian's curriculum, primary-age students would study under the *grammaticus*, an instructor trained to teach both grammar and literature. Students would memorize passages of literature and use them as models for writing as they were instructed in the proper usage of Latin and Greek. Nancy Christiansen, in her essay "The Master Double Frame," explains in detail the six steps to this critical process of *imitatio*. First, either the instructor or an advanced student would perform a reading of a selected text. Texts from all genres were selected based on the age of the students and the principles being taught, because according to Quintilian, "every type of literature must be thoroughly combed, and not only for learned information, but for words" (105). The performer would focus on not only the meaning of the text (enunciating and pronouncing words correctly), but also the emphasis added with voice inflection, gesture, posture, breathing. All of these principles were affected by the motivations behind the text and the character of the speaker, but made evident through the grammar of the text. In other words, the judgments made by the speaker in the invention and arrangement of the text were visible in the style and delivery of the text. Second, students would be led by their instructor through a detailed analysis of the text, focusing on the principles being taught (which, for the *grammaticus* would include "grammar, style, usage, etymology, orthography, meter, rhythm, and narrative" [Christiansen 74]). Here, the *grammaticus* would ask students questions about the text, encouraging the students to flex their analytical muscles until they were able to analyze texts independently, making their own judgments on the effectiveness of different elements. Quintilian

puts pressure on the instructor, here, to be inquisitive not only of the students' knowledge, but also of the conventional knowledge with which he is familiar. Unlike the early English grammar curriculums which require the instructor to merely drill and enforce the standards without question, Quintilian's *grammaticus* would be expected to be aware of the way the language was changing and the different rhetorical choices available with grammar: "Every *grammaticus* will surely go into minute questions like the following" (109). Quintilian goes on to list questions specific to Latin and Greek spelling, but the principle demonstrated by each question is the same—teachers of grammar must be willing to question the standards by comparing them to what "usage has accepted" (109). He tells the *grammaticus* to have the students "give the parts of speech and the qualities of the metrical feet" (205), and to point out flaws in the text, not for the purpose of correction, but for discussion and inquiry, and for the cultivation of good judgment (205). Third, students would commit to memory the best models in order to accumulate in their minds the language, style, and other rhetorical tools they needed to be successful orators. The Greeks call this accumulation *copia*, or abundance, and it leads to the ultimate goal of Quintilian's curriculum, which is *facilitas*, or the metacognitive ability to make good judgments fairly quickly, both in speech performance and in life. Fourth, students would transform the text by translation, paraphrase, metaphrase (translating between verse and prose), or imitation proper (writing a second speech that copies the whole form or content of the model). In this step, the students transformed the text to make it their own, putting to practice the grammatical principles and rhetorical judgment learned in their analysis of the text. Fifth, each student would review and self-correct his work, developing the invaluable skill of self-evaluation and further internalizing grammatical principles in the process. And finally, students would perform their transformation of the model before the class for the purpose of public correction. Here, the performer practiced

and experienced the text in its most complete form—the performance—and also received feedback from the instructor and his peers, which would help him to improve his skill in transformation, oratory, and self-evaluation. The classroom audience also benefitted from this final stage by playing the role of the critic and learning to evaluate the work (and the grammar) of their peers.

This process of *imitatio* taps into the fundamental learning processes of modeling, analyzing, applying, and evaluating knowledge. Under Quintilian’s curriculum, grammar is not separated from composition; it is not reduced to a set of catalogued rules; and it is not taught for the sole purpose of correcting error. It’s clear from this pedagogical strategy that grammar meant something different for Quintilian than it meant for early English grammarians and their critics. For Quintilian, grammar was integrally connected with the principles of style and rhetoric, and therefore governed by the same law of good judgment.

#### Grammar as Rhetoric and Style

As new theories of grammar instruction have been brought forth by teachers and scholars dedicated to improving student learning in the composition classroom, the common trend has been to return to this broader definition of grammar. Nancy Laurel-Pettersen, in her essay “Grammar Instruction in the Land of Curiosity and Delight,” gives a succinct overview of this change in definitions: “Grammar is rhetoric (Kolln). Grammar is information management (Mann). Grammar is style (Tufte). Grammar can be taught in context and thus retain its connection with living, breathing language (Weaver)” (392). Scholars like Cheryl Glenn, Virginia Tufte, T.R. Johnson, Constance Weaver, Martha Kolln and Nora Bacon have developed new pedagogies that successfully break away from the failed tradition of grammar instruction. In these newer approaches to grammar, we can see the beginning of the rebirth of Quintilian’s

pedagogy. What is lacking is a cohesive framework to integrate this instruction into the classroom. Let us investigate what these scholars have done for our pedagogy and how we can use Quintilian's *imitatio* to provide the missing link in these pedagogies.

Cheryl Glenn encourages a return to these Greco-Roman ideals explicitly in "When Grammar was a Language Art." Glenn establishes a history of grammar education from the Greco-Roman period through the Renaissance, where Quintilian's ideas were rediscovered and reinstated in the schoolroom. She emphasizes that the programs that were most successful were the programs that integrated grammar instruction as the "most powerful means of immersing students in the skillful use of language" (27). "When grammar was a language art," she affirms, students "took care with their language, wrote and spoke in the style of the masters, and realized the importance of close language study. When grammar was a language art, it was presented in a complex, step-wise progression that demanded students analyze, understand, imitate, and generate. Such students were nourished and supported by the conventions of language use and could develop their language arts . . ." (27). But while Glenn describes perfectly the goals and methods of Quintilian's *imitatio*, she does not offer any kind of framework for implementing this kind of teaching and learning model in the classroom.

In a much less explicit and less conscious way, Virginia Tufte also suggests a more Quintilian-like view of grammar. She looks at grammar, or more accurately, syntax, as an element of style. Tufte's philosophy very closely resembles that of Quintilian—that syntax and style are one because content and form are one. Because syntax, or "an account of the formation of words and of the structures for putting them together in sentences" (Tufte, *Grammar* 1-2), is what gives meaning to text, it belongs to the realm of content. But because syntax also develops the form and rhythm of text, it also belongs to the realm of style. This idea of rhythm is

incredibly important to Quintilian, because his curriculum is based on the declamation, or the performance of the text. Tufte recognizes the importance of this element in adding meaning and beauty to the text: “The indispensable quality of prose that is met by the ear in reading, that must be heard as passing sounds and stresses and ideas, that must be listened to as much as understood, followed though as a sequence rather than grasped whole as a structure: it is this quality that brings style and syntax closest together” (*Grammar* 9).

In both *Grammar as Style* and *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, Tufte goes through the different elements and principles of style, describing the definition, function, and context of each, and including a large variety of examples from history and literature. For example, under the heading “*Short sentences as topic sentences and as syntactic punctuation of a paragraph*” (emphasis in original), Tufte gives about eight pages of instruction, but that instruction is punctuated with twenty-four literary passages—some single sentences, some larger paragraphs—illustrating each point (*Artful* 23-31). While this method of instruction does follow Quintilian’s use of models and his emphasis on sound, Tufte does not offer any further exercise for students. Again, we are left without a complete framework for integrating grammar instruction into our classrooms.

Other scholars also understand grammar to be intimately connected with style. T.R. Johnson and Tom Pace’s *Refiguring Prose Style: Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy* laments the separation of style itself from composition pedagogy: “We want to move the field beyond the dichotomies that have impoverished its understanding of style” (ix), the idea that style “belongs with so much current-traditional old-hat, rather than the future; empty, tedious classroom exercises rather than complex, rhetorical experimentation; a sign of pedantry rather than an exciting tool for meaning making and a focus for critical thinking” (x). In a section of the book



entitled “Teaching Prose Style,” three contributors discuss the implications of teaching style. Nicole Amare argues for the teaching of grammar as style in “Style: The New Grammar in Composition Studies?” (Johnson and Pace 153); Lisa Baird explores the relationship between style and thought, explaining that paying attention to style can help students develop their thinking as well as their writing, in “Balancing Thought and Expression: A Short Course in Style” (Johnson and Pace 167); and William J. Carpenter emphasizes the importance of stylistic analysis in the composition classroom in “Rethinking Stylistic Analysis in the Writing Class” (Johnson and Pace 181). Clearly, Johnson, Pace, and their fellow style scholars recognize a need to develop a curriculum that includes grammar and style as integral elements of rhetoric and composition. Yet, once again, we are left to wonder what that curriculum would look like in practice.

Constance Weaver gives us an example of rhetorical grammar taught in the context of student writing. Weaver makes the same claim that grammar taught in isolation from style and composition does not work. For pedagogical purposes, Weaver restricts the teaching of grammar to the minimal understanding required to write effectively. She defines this minimal understanding as including the “concepts of subject, verb, sentence, clause, phrase, and related concepts for editing” (21); “teaching style through sentence combining and sentence generating” (22); “teaching sentence sense and style through the manipulation of syntactic elements” (22); “teaching the power of dialects and the dialects of power” (22); and “teaching punctuation and mechanics for convention, clarity, and style” (23). Weaver has set her pedagogy up in this way so that she can develop simple, short lessons that lead to fruitful class discussion and student experimentation.

This focus on experimentation is what Weaver feels is the most important aspect of student learning. She contrasts the traditional “behaviorist, transmission theory of learning and teaching” (24), where the teacher lectures and assigns exercises in isolation from real application, with “the constructivist, transactional theory that better reflects how people learn” (24). For Weaver, the ideal classroom acts as a forum in which students and teachers explore different ways to use language. She encourages student-learning through extensive reading and practice, which are fundamental aspects of Quintilian’s curriculum, as well. However, her general suggestions for teaching grammar remain just that—general: “The kinds of grammar lessons I suggest . . . are incidental lessons, wherein (for example) grammatical terms are used casually, in the course of discussing literature and students’ writing; inductive lessons, wherein students may be guided to notice grammatical patterns and derive generalizations themselves” (26). While Weaver does give us a few case studies with different lesson options, there is no framework for consistently integrating grammar instruction into the classroom.

Martha Kolln and Loretta Gray go into more detail in their textbook *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*. They preface the work with this statement: “Grammatical choices. Rhetorical effects. These two phrases tell the story of rhetorical grammar, the marriage of grammar and rhetoric for the composition classroom. Writers who recognize the choices available to them will be well-equipped for controlling the effects of their words” (xii). Kolln and Gray see, as Quintilian does, the potential for student growth and learning in the exercising of agency. As students are given the tools necessary to understand what language and grammar can do, and at the same time are encouraged to make their own choices as they put grammatical principles to use in their own writing, they develop the ability not only to speak and write well, but also to think well, to make good judgments.

Kolln and Gray's *Rhetorical Grammar* adheres to this philosophy by providing students with the background knowledge of different grammatical elements and principles, demonstrating their use with models (both short, isolated sentences and larger passages from literature and history texts), and instructing students in the analysis and practice of these principles, elements, and models through individual and group exercises. Kolln and Gray keep their discussion of the background and function of different principles clear and direct while also directing students' attention to the complexities and exceptions involved. They constantly remind their readers that there is a multiplicity of grammatical choices that they can make when they have the knowledge of the different options available and how each element or principle functions in the larger rhetorical situation.

The use of models in this text is reminiscent of Quintilian, incorporating passages from other genres. However, these models aren't used as extensively as those in Quintilian's classroom. Students are asked to analyze passages, to glean from them examples of the principles being taught, and often to transpose or in some other way imitate passages according to those principles. For example, after learning about obscure agents, students are asked to complete this exercise: "Identify the passive verbs in the following passage from *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* by Euell Gibbons. Why do you think he chose the passive instead of the active voice? Can you improve the passage by revising some or all of the sentences?" (Kolln and Gray 50). This is a great exercise, but not all of the exercises in the book are as thorough, and most stop short of having students evaluate their work and the work of their peers.

Instead, at the end of each chapter, students are given reflective questions to ask themselves, evaluating their application of the principles taught in the chapter. Here is an example from Chapter 2, "Sentence Patterns": "Have I made use of short sentences to focus the

reader's attention? Have I made use of short paragraphs where needed for transition or other special effects? . . . Have I made sure that a comma does not separate the required units of my sentences?" (Kolln and Gray 37). This pedagogical strategy does perform two important functions that are also part of Quintilian's curriculum: It directly states the connection between principle and application, implying that students are writing as they learn; and it encourages self-correction. But, how do we incorporate this instruction into a first-year writing syllabus that is already filled with other rhetorical principles? Kolln and Gray anticipate this question in their preface, but do not answer it.

Nora Bacon makes a similar attempt in *The Well-Crafted Sentence: A Guide to Style*. Bacon uses a small set of contemporary model texts, all short enough to read in one sitting but rich in syntactic style, to give her readers examples of specific grammar principles. Along the way, she instructs readers to conduct analytical, editorial, and writing exercises that help solidify their learning. This idea of introducing and reinforcing grammatical principles through the analyzing and transforming of models is exactly the idea upon which Quintilian's *imitatio* was developed. But, like Kolln and Gray's text, Bacon's guidebook leaves us wondering how to fit these lessons into a comprehensive study of writing and rhetoric.

### Rewriting the Tradition

What would a grammar lesson look like if it were drawn up with the understanding that grammar is an important system of learning and thinking, the principles of which can be used to aid all five canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery? We know that by reading, analyzing, and transforming texts from different genres, students can become engaged with the ideas and principles of rhetoric and grammar in a very intimate and tangible way. We want our students to become active agents in their learning, instead of passive listeners

in a lecture hall. So, how do we integrate active grammar instruction into the curriculum without losing time and instruction in other rhetorical principles?

Since first-year composition instructors do not have the luxury of teaching our students every day for hours at a time as Quintilian did, we cannot make this dream a reality without making some difficult decisions about which grammatical principles to teach, to what depth, and in what context. In order to teach students powerful ways to construct and use basic grammatical structures, I will use the generative sentence model developed by Francis Christensen to provide the content for the new grammar curriculum. Christensen's model is based on four principles: addition, direction of modification, levels of generality, and texture. The goal of this generative model is to provide a "rhetoric of the sentence that will do more than combine the ideas of primer sentences[,] . . . one that will generate ideas" (26). Like Quintilian's grammar, this model seeks to show the relationship between our thought processes, the way we form ideas and judgments, and our sentence structures. Christensen accomplishes this goal by focusing on the structural principles that guide our thinking. The first is addition, or modification. Christensen quotes Erskine: "What you say is found not in the noun but in what you add to qualify the noun. . . . The modifier is the essential part of any sentence" (qtd. in Christensen 26). The second principle is the direction of that modification. Students can explore this principle more fully within the cumulative sentence, playing with sentence modifiers that can move backward as well as forward, "so that the sentence has a flowing and ebbing movement" (Christensen 27). Christensen describes this type of sentence as "dynamic rather than static, representing the mind thinking. . . . The additions stay with the [main] idea, probing its bearing and implications, exemplifying it or seeking an analogy or metaphor for it, or reducing it to details. . . . It serves the needs of both the writer and the reader, the writer by compelling him to examine his thought,

the reader by letting him into the writer's thought" (28). Under these two principles of addition and direction of modification, Christensen includes "primarily sentence modifiers, including nonrestrictive relative and subordinate clauses, but far more important, the array of noun, verb, and adjective clusters" (29).

Thus far, Christensen's model is successful in teaching not only the grammatical principles students use in their writing, but also in using those principles and structures to teach students how their thoughts and judgments are reflected in their grammar choices. The third principle in Christensen's generative model is the level of generality. This principle assumes that the main clause in a sentence is most often "stated in general or abstract or plural terms" and that any modifiers included after the main clause will naturally shift to more specific, concrete, or singular terms (Christensen 29), which constitutes a shift in the level of generality. Again, the focus is on the relationship between form and content, and on the writer's prerogative in structuring a sentence to reflect his or her reasoning. The fourth and final principle in Christensen's model is texture. Christensen describes this principle thus: "If a writer adds to few of his nouns or verbs or main clauses and adds little, the texture may be said to be thin. . . . But if he adds frequently or much or both, then the texture may be said to be dense or rich" (30). Texture, then, is the measurement of a writer's use of modification, which is another reflection of the writer's judgment. We can see where content that requires more thought may also require more modification, whereas simple or concrete messages may be stated with little or no modification. Christensen goes on to emphasize that variety in texture is an important rhetorical aspect of all writing, suggesting again that the writer's judgment plays an active role in the crafting and texturing of grammatical structures. Not only does Christensen's model achieve its goal of highlighting the grammatical principles that relate to thought and judgment, but it also

includes within it all of the basic grammatical structures that students need to be familiar with in order to write. We can use this model to determine which grammatical principles to focus on and in which order to discuss them in our classrooms.

Now that we know *what* principles to teach (addition, direction of modification, levels of generality, and texture), *how* do we fold those principles in to our regular curriculum?

Quintilian's *imitatio* provides us with a framework with which we can integrate Christensen's generative sentence model into the existing rhetorical curriculum one principle at a time.

Teaching from models, having students experiment with and evaluate their writing, conducting peer review—we're doing these things already when we talk about global issues in writing. By adapting each step in the *imitatio* process to the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century classroom, we can get students analyzing, modeling, and transforming grammatical principles at the same time as they are seeing and experimenting with larger rhetorical principles.

The first step in Quintilian's *imitatio* is performing or reading the model text aloud. This oral performance seems alien to us (and our students) because our modern understanding of written texts is that they are to be read silently, not performed publicly. For Quintilian, the oration was king, partly because writing was still new, but as we learn from Tufte and Johnson, there is value in recognizing the oral quality of writing. Reading an entire work aloud is probably too much for 21<sup>st</sup>-Century college students. Because they are used to reading a text privately, with the option to re-read passages and pause to make notes in the margins, our students could get lost and miss out on important content. Spending twenty minutes in class to read a full model text together is not an option for a class that only lasts fifty minutes total either. But, if we focus on smaller passages, like those included in Tufte's books, or Bacon's, or Kolln's, we can hone in on specific, sentence-level examples of grammatical principles at work relatively easily without

taking up too much classtime. For example, Kolln and Gray include a short passage (just a few sentences long) from Jeff Shaara's *The Last Full Measure* to illustrate participial phrases (177). By reading this short passage aloud before analyzing, students can hear, as well as see, the difference in the pace of the passage that is created by inserting modifiers in the form of participial phrases.

After the performance comes the analysis. We already have our students analyze texts for rhetorical situation, rhetorical appeals, argument, and other important principles. The trick to adding grammatical principles here is to be selective in which principles we introduce together. Rather than organizing a course with a grammar unit that focuses on different grammar principles, the better way would be to introduce one or two grammar principles into each lesson. In my writing class, for example, the course is split into four units based on the four major portfolio assignments: an opinion editorial, a rhetorical analysis, a researched argument, and a multimodal project. I could see each of these units sharing a grammar unit, as well: one unit for each of Christensen's four principles. We look at modification while students work on their opinion editorials. We play with direction of modification while they work on their rhetorical analyses. We explore levels of generalization while they work on their researched arguments. And we practice varying texture while they create their multimodal projects. Each day of each unit includes an analysis of a model text during which we first pull out the larger rhetorical principles covered in class, and then use the same passages to pull out one or two grammatical principles to explore.

In Quintilian's classroom, once the class had analyzed the model text according to the rhetorical and grammatical principles highlighted by the *grammaticus*, each student would memorize the text. Like the oration, memorizing passages is not something modern students are



familiar with, and there is not time in a typical class session to hold students accountable for their memorization by having them perform each text. Quintilian required his students to memorize in order to build up a store of vocabulary and rhetorical devices in their minds, so that they would be ready in any rhetorical situation to select the appropriate words and phrases. We can help our students achieve the same goal in different ways by having them write up a separate analysis of each model text and keep a journal of phrases, sentences, and rhetorical devices that they can refer to as they write their own texts, both inside and outside of the writing classroom.

From there, we move on to the fourth step of *imitatio*: transformation. Since, again, we face different time constraints in the modern university than Quintilian did in his time, we can't realistically expect our students to do a full transforming of every text we look at in class. But we can have students work with smaller passages that demonstrate particular grammatical principles. Bacon uses passages to good effect in her guidebook. She uses nine model texts from different genres, but instead of reading through the texts one at a time and pulling out all of the different principles used in each one, Bacon places the full texts in the back of her book and uses examples from different texts as they apply to the units of grammar instruction she's set out for her readers. For example, to show the different functions of appositives, Bacon has selected sentences from Drew Gilpin Faust's "We Should Grow Too Fond of It," Oliver Sacks's essay "Papa Blows His Nose in G," and Louise Erdrich's short story "Shamengwa." She then has students underline appositives in one paragraph and combine another group of sentences using different appositives (125-130). We can use similar sentence-combining and sentence-modifying activities to help our students practice playing with different grammatical choices in their own writing.

We can also have students take specific strategies and elements from each text and apply them in editing and drafting their own larger texts. For example, as my students this semester worked on their first writing assignment (an opinion editorial for the university newspaper), we looked at several different opinion editorials (or opinion-editorial-like papers), observing and analyzing specific rhetorical and grammatical principles along the way. With each text we treated in class, I had my students use some particular strategy or element from the text to add to or edit their drafts.

Once students have experimented with the language in the model texts and applied the principles taught in their own writing, their learning can be solidified in the fifth step, which is self-evaluation. In my class, I had my students report to each other, sharing their experiments and recognizing their successes and failures. I also had students evaluate their own opinion editorial drafts in a more formal setting. Before meeting with me in a one-on-one conference, students were to use the rubric for the assignment to evaluate their work and write a short reflective essay explaining why they assigned the grade they did and setting specific goals for revision. This practice of self-evaluation is an important part of the learning process. When students can accurately use principles taught in class to identify strengths and weaknesses in their own writing, those principles are solidified in their minds, and they can more readily turn to those same principles when they find themselves in other rhetorical situations outside of the classroom. We can use this process in teaching grammar principles by having students perform a similar reflective assignment evaluating their successes and failures both in an informal setting in class for small transposing assignments and in this more formal setting, accounting for their grammatical choices in larger compositions.

Quintilian's *imitatio* ends with another performance, this time of the students' transformed texts. Quintilian's students would perform for their classmates, who would then give feedback to each performer in his turn. Once again, oral performance presents a time problem. For smaller in-class exercises like sentence-combining, students can give each other feedback at the same time that they report their own evaluation of their work. But for assignments like the opinion editorial, it is a bit harder to follow the same format that Quintilian would. Still, peer review is not a foreign concept. We recognize that it is important for our students to be well prepared and guided in the process of giving valuable feedback to their peers. If, when we conduct smaller analysis and transforming exercises in class, we split the class up into small groups and give students a chance to perform or read aloud their transformations within their groups and receive feedback from other members of the group, then we can allow for a form of performance and public evaluation that fits this final step in Quintilian's *imitatio*.

With this pattern of learning, our students can see an example of a sentence or passage in the active voice, analyze the effect that this construction has on the meaning and rhythm of the passage, play with changing the passage back and forth between active and passive, and then use the active voice in a passage of their own writing and evaluate how it works based on their own observation and that of their peers. Having followed this pattern through to the end, our students will have an applied and internalized knowledge of the active and passive voice that they could not get by editing out isolated passive constructions based on a lecture. By making small changes in the way we currently structure our first-year composition courses to include grammatical principles as we go, we can implement an instructional framework that brings all of the different elements of rhetoric together into a cohesive writing and grammar curriculum.

## Conclusion

Teaching student error in isolation from rhetorical principles and writing application has proven a failed tradition. It keeps students from learning by experiment and experience. This tradition comes from the false idea that grammar is somehow separate from writing and rhetoric, and that it is a system of rules and forms that must be followed, not necessarily understood. But if we look to the example of Kolln, Johnson, Tufte, and their partners in the effort to rewrite that tradition, we see that the trivium of rhetoric, logic, and grammar should not be treated as three separate entities, but as three parts of a unified whole.

Rhetoric is not rhetoric without grammar. Our students need to have a functional, rhetorical understanding of grammar—an understanding that the constructions of grammar are reflective of thought processes, and that they can make effective choices in the way they construct their thoughts on paper—in order to be successful in the world outside of academia, not just professionally, but socially and intellectually.

In “Speaking Matters,” Carl G. Herndl and Danny A. Bauer talk about the challenge of achieving “rhetorical agency in the face of . . . oppression” (560). Of course, they are writing about the power words can have against human rights violations, a much heavier form of oppression than any which can be found in the average composition classroom. But their work shows that the principle of rhetorical agency is an important one. Agency is the power to act. The defining factor in agency is the power to independently choose and pursue a course of action. But without a working knowledge of the choices available, how can we make an effective choice? Ultimately, our students will only achieve the freedom to write the truth as they see it when they have the knowledge and skill to make effective rhetorical decisions about their writing. That knowledge includes grammatical knowledge. Our students need to know what to

do with grammar. When we teach our students to act, or perform, rhetorically, we are teaching them how to think critically about the world around them, to choose how they will respond to it and how they want to change it. We are giving them the agency and the power to make the world their own.

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