

# ***Review of Grammar Rants: How a Backstage Tour of Writing Complaints Can Help Students Make Informed, Savvy Choices About Their Writing***

by Karen Kleppe Graham, The University of Georgia

On the surface, it may seem as though *Grammar Rants: How a Backstage Tour of Writing Complaints Can Help Students Make Informed, Savvy Choices about Their Writing* (Dunn & Lindblom, 2011) addresses non-traditional grammar choices authors make and the ways in which these choices can affect their writing. However, this short handbook goes deeper into language use than simply explaining potential reasons behind word choices independent from societal identity politics (Crenshaw, 1993). Dunn and Lindblom begin with defining grammar rants as, “published complaints about other people’s language use... [which mostly] do not focus on grammar per se, but rather on minute stylistic features” (p.x), and then, briefly explain their purposes behind writing the book. In the following chapters, they go on to suggest ways in which teachers could use the provided authentic grammar rants culled from various newspaper articles and editorials in conjunction with the companion lessons, and then explores societal assumptions and categorizations of perceived grammar “errors.” Although traditional language usage texts are typically concerned with “what is correct, or acceptable, in the use of English” (Strunk & White, 2000, p.66), which tends to limit language choices, Dunn and Lindblom (2011) restated Joseph Williams’ (1981) ideas from *The Phenomenology of Error* that “correctness is often a function of who is writing what for whom: who the reader is, who the writer is, and the power difference between them” (p.xi). Overall, the authors focused not on

teaching traditional grammar lessons, but on the ways in which language was used, how this usage was perceived by grammar ranters, and how teachers could transform grammar rants into viable learning experiences for all students.

The Introduction defined grammar rants and ranters, explained why the authors chose to analyze them, delineated how to effectively use the book for the purposes it was designed, and took a proactive stand for raising standards and expectations for all students. In the outline of their purposes for writing this handbook, Dunn and Lindblom stated:

This book is not an attack on proper grammar. Nor is it a suggestion that standards in writing or speaking should be lowered. Quite the contrary: language is a rich, multifaceted tool for effective communication, and to use it well, writers and speakers must attend to conventions of genre, expectations of audience, organization, use of evidence, and much, much more...We believe exposing students to grammar rants can be an effective way of helping them actually learn more about grammar, writing, reading, and critical thinking. (p.x)

The authors ambitiously set out to identify grammar rants, meanings behind these rants, and ways to analyze them in order to help students learn grammatical concepts, improve their language choices, and enhance their writing confidence.

Chapter 1, “Grammar Rants and Morality,” began with two polarizing statements, “those who use good grammar are good people” and “those who use bad grammar are bad people” (p.1), followed by the admission that both statements are “absurd” even though most grammar ranters weave into their rants these very ideas. The authors connected language use to morality through Calvinistic ideas of “good” and “evil” based on religious notions of predestination. Calvinists believed people were predestined for their afterlife – societal standings on earth directly correlated to

an afterlife in heaven or in hell. The overarching idea was that wealth equaled “goodness” and heavenly riches, while poverty was equated to “evilness” and an afterlife spent in the desolation of hell. The authors concluded “lapses in grammar rules are associated with lapses in morality” (p.6). To end the chapter, a reprinted short grammar rant news article, “Gramme(a)r: Using Its and It’s” (Bergen, 2004), with accompanying “mark-ups,” as well as two lessons “designed to build students’ reading and critical thinking skills” (p. 10) were included. The authors finished this portion with the statement, “Making moral judgments about people based upon the kind of English they use or deviations they make from standardized English is logically flawed (philosophically and grammatically) and perpetuates prejudice” (p.9). Language is fluid and the “correct” language choice is often dictated by the context in which it is used. Incorrect grammar usage does not mean a student is “bad.” Rather, incorrect grammar choices infer a person is learning.

Chapter 2, “Grammar and Intelligence,” looked at students’ reluctance to speak up in class if they believe their intelligence is pigeon-holed by their grammar choices. The authors made the valid point that “correct” language use is often determined by location – what is perfectly acceptable in one place may be considered “poor” grammar in another. Featured ranters called for writing that was “clear,” completely ignoring the idea that what was clear for one writer may not be so for another, due in part to language background, academic experiences, and exposure to “good” writing instruction. In fact, Dunn and Lindblom argued that once an error is perceived, actual or not, grammar ranters often make assumptions about a writer’s intelligence, preventing the content to shine through. They wrote, “If writing is not a mirror on the brain’s workings but a tool to help the brain work, then it is counterproductive and harmful to use writing as a measure of intelligence” (p.34). As in the previous chapter, the authors concluded this one with two short grammar rant news

articles, “Schools in N.Y. Give Grammar Short Shrift” (Weiner, 2004), and “Baseball and Correct Grammar Don’t Always Mix” (Nelson, 2004), complete with mark-ups and two lessons which could be used to encourage careful proofreading and to develop close reading skills.

In Chapter 3, “Grammar Rants on Spelling,” the authors stated, “Contrary to popular opinion, spelling ability is an indication of neither intelligence nor morality” (p.50). It is simply an indication of a good memory for spelling patterns, generally accepted spelling rules, and access to spell-check programs. One of the inadvertent aspects of insistence on perfect spelling is to “distract writers from more important skills” (p.53), often leading to writing avoidance instead of language explorations. The chapter went on to analyze spelling bees and their importance in our modern culture. Even though the culminating event, [Scripps National Spelling Bee](#) (2014), is televised each year and viewers watch as adolescents spell increasingly harder words until they make a mistake, there is little practical application for these spelling skills. They concluded with a grammar rant news article, “It’s a Crime Grammar Means Little to Robber” (Heyl, 2003) with the mark-ups, and two lessons that “help students read for details and draw inferences” (p.62) as they read.

The 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, “Grammar Rants on Texting/Email Language,” began with an explanation of initial concerns in academia that texting was an “attack on English grammar” with worries coming down on two sides – “those who see texting as a bad influence on...writing... and those who see it as simply another genre with its own conventions” (p.75). However, after a recent Pew Internet study (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008), popular media perceived texting as a crisis and worried that “teen writing for school was being unduly influenced by text-messaging language” (p.75). Dunn and Lindblom countered with information from the Pew Report that adolescents did not consider texting to be the

same as writing, but they believed writing well was important and even offered specific ideas about ways to improve writing instruction. The authors made the point that students needed to hone their skills in determining fact and opinion – the Pew Internet Report stated findings while the news medias’ perceived “crisis” involving text language usage were opinions. The chapter ended with a grammar rant news article entitled “The Pitfalls of Text-Messaging” (2007, *The Western Courier*), mark-ups, and “activities designed to develop students’ close reading and inference skills, as well as...media literacy” (p.80). As students delve deeply into texts in order to better understand intended meanings, they become familiar with multiple forms of media genres and the literacy necessary to successfully interpret those meanings.

In the final installment, Chapter 5, “The Grammar Trap: What’s a Writer to Do?” Dunn and Lindblom addressed writing “traps” in which more than one pronoun could conceivably fit into a sentence depending on context, the writer’s preferences, and even traditional writing conventions. An example given in the text:

Fill in the correct possessive pronoun in the blank below:

Each student should bring \_\_\_\_\_ book to class. (p.94)

The authors give possible answers as: *his, her, his or her, her or his, his/her, their*. However, they state that none of the provided possibilities are unequivocally correct because the question is a “grammar trap,” defined as a grammar situation in which the “reader has more power than you and that reader expects one of the above answers, you will be wrong if you don’t select it” (p.94). The authors recommended that students become familiar with most used conventions but to also “adjust their style to fit the context and conventions of the genre they’re writing in” (p.95-96). To this end, in a bit of self-promotion, Dunn and Lindblom argued “by having a chance to research and investigate the ranters’ claims, students will build the knowledge and authority they need to take control of their language choices” and to “acquire the

background in language to judge the judges” (p.96). This chapter further detailed use and misuse of pronouns, serial commas, apostrophes, run-ons, and sentence fragments. It then recommended that teachers introduce various writing style guides, but for ease of use, to choose one as a guide for classroom writing assignments so that students “see that language rules are not some abstract notion” and to allow them to “research and find useful answers to their language usage and style issues” (p.108). The final chapter ended with a news article grammar rant, “Good Grammar Gets Its Day” (Dunn, 2008), mark-ups, and lessons to help students identify the “confusing state of some grammar rules” (p.108-109), while applying skills learned in negotiating grammar traps.

This handbook offers novel, refreshing ideas and activities concerning grammar and written language use for secondary classroom teachers and their students. The authors approach the topic with a sense of humor and a determination to guide readers towards critical analysis of language use. Dunn and Lindblom passionately believe in their methods and recommend them for “young writers” without reservation. As a former middle school teacher, I believe this book would best suit high school settings due to the advanced nature of the content. The lesson topics include connotation, word choice, writing assumptions and implications, style guide research, inferences, critical analysis of authorial intentions, genre conventions, debate, and grammar traps – all advanced writing strategies, with the exception of word choice.

*Grammar Rants* is an interesting way to approach using “correct” written grammar, what happens when writers use non-traditional word choices, and the assumptions self-identified grammar “experts” make about writers based on these choices. Critical analysis of the ways in which ranters opt to call out perceived errors can not only help teachers and students navigate language

use but can also point out societal expectations for published writing. As the authors state, “Grammar rants both reflect and perpetuate society’s views of English and the people who use it” (p.xvi).

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**Karen Kleppe Graham** is a graduate teaching assistant and doctoral student at the University of Georgia. She taught middle grades language arts for six years, is a National Writing Project Fellow, and subsequently conducted writing workshops for in-service teachers. Her research interests include adolescent literacy practices, teacher education, and their convergence. She is currently researching the ways in which education majors with learning disabilities negotiate literacy practices.