Contemplating Grammar

First appeared in Finishing the Race, *The Old Schoolhouse® Magazine*—June 2012

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It seems that the pattern of the Trinity permeates creation: body, mind, soul; harmony, melody, rhythm; truth, goodness, beauty; ethos, pathos, logos. The illustrations could continue. Therefore it should not surprise us that the thing called "grammar" can also be understood in three parts—integrated and organically connected but in three aspects, which when understood individually, strengthen our understanding of the whole.

I first began thinking about the question of grammar more than ten years ago, when I met a professional author—a man who had for decades earned his daily bread by writing. We were working together on a project, and he mentioned to me, somewhat casually, "I don't know any grammar." Though he was being candid, I was surprised and even confused. How was it that a professional writer didn't know much grammar? And the obvious extrapolation was this: if it's not necessary to know grammar to write well, why do we pile year after year of grammar workbooks on our children? Are we missing something here?

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Around that same time, I came to realize a very interesting thing about people and writing skills: there's a clear correlation between confidence and ability as an adult, how much the person was read to (out loud) as a child, and how much poetry and/or Scripture he or she had memorized. Writing ability in later life is almost always directly connected with how much language has entered the brain through the ear in early life. This caused me to formulate some basic principles of nurturing competent communicators, which I have explained in another article, "One Myth and Two Truths," available at IEW.com/articles (or on p. 167 of this e-book).

However, I continued to contemplate the idea of grammar. What is it? How do we learn it? Is it important? These questions led me to develop a tripartite view of grammar, which I am happy to share with you now, especially as we head into convention season, when many curriculum choices are made. So let me propose that there are three aspects of the grammar of a language: inherent (or inherited) grammar, applied grammar, and formal (or analytical) grammar.

INHERENT GRAMMAR is by far the most important for good writing and in a way the easiest to teach. This is our language as we know it. If I say to you, "Me go to the store," you know this is wrong. You may not know exactly why, nor could you explain why it's wrong, but you know it is incorrect because of the database of correct English you carry around in your brain. Generally it is "inherited" from our parents, which underscores the extreme importance of correct language in the environment (and the perilous consequences of a deficient or incorrect language environment). If we speak and write correctly, it's probably not because we studied years of grammar; it's probably because we heard our parents and teachers speaking correctly and reading good books to us during our early years. This creates our database of language patterns and forms our inherent or instinctive grammar. We know right expression from wrong expression because we subconsciously and instantaneously compare it against the database of correct language stored in the brain.

The next aspect of grammar we often encounter is what I would call **APPLIED GRAMMAR**. This is the grammar we use to fix stuff. We hear, "Me go to the store," and we know it's wrong, and we know how to fix it: "I will go to the store." Again, we don't know why it's wrong or how we fixed it; we just know that one is wrong and the other is correct. This aspect of grammar knowledge develops in tandem with inherent grammar and can be practiced intentionally with various editing skills programs.

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The third aspect of the thing called grammar is what might be called formal or **ANALYTICAL GRAMMAR**. This consists of knowing "what those things are called" and "what are the rules governing their behavior." This is the type of grammar practice we often find in grammar or language arts workbooks. And what's so ironic is that this is the least relevant (and therefore hardest to teach) part of grammar, at least to a native speaker of the language.

When you say to a young English-speaking child, "You have to learn English grammar," it's a bit like saying: "Son, sit down. I need to explain to you how you ride a bike." The child, of course, knows how to ride a bike and says, "Dad, I know how to ride a bike." But the father responds: "Yes, you do. But you don't know how you do it; you need to know all the biology and physics that make bike riding possible!" The child, of course, is thinking (or saying): "Ummm, can I just go ride my bike? What's the point?" So when we try to explain to a child how to use English—something he already does perfectly or at least believes he does—the relevancy is low. Consequently, learning it is difficult.

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Now I'm not saying we shouldn't teach formal grammar, but what I would suggest is that it's most easily learned by studying a foreign language, because when you study a language you don't already know, that's when you need to know what those things are called and what the rules that govern their behavior are. When I meet a student who actually knows a bit of formal grammar ("That's an infinitive!"), and I ask him where he learned it, the answer is never "From my _____ _____ Grammar Program." It's always "From Latin" or "From French." I meet countless adults who say something like "I never understood English grammar until I took German in college." It makes so much sense.

So, my approach to grammar is this: Don't worry much about formal grammar in the elementary grades; teach writing and mechanics as needs arise, read out loud in huge quantity to your children, and have them memorize a lot of poetry, Scripture, and speeches. Build their inherent grammar, because that's by far the most important thing. As they get a bit older, introduce some editing practice materials; several options are available. (My favorite is the one we publish: *Fix-It! Grammar*.) Study formal grammar later (middle or high school age), preferably within the context of a foreign language (and Latin is the best!). And if by tenth grade or so you perceive a weakness in your student's understanding of grammar, then maybe pick up an analytical grammar program to fill in the gaps, even while realizing it's not the most vital thing you're doing.

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Grammar is important. Language should be precise. We must teach it well. However, let us not be confused or distracted by feeling a need to teach formal grammar too soon to children who are too young. First build the database of language patterns (inherent grammar), practice applying that database to writing and editing (applied grammar), and finally study formal grammar by learning Latin. By these means we will nurture excellent writers who can effectively self-edit and even know what they're doing and how they do it.