



T U T O R S ' T I P S

Why Teach Grammar to Literacy Students?



Why study grammar?

- ✓ Grammar is useful when learning a second language.
- ✓ It provides a framework for comparing language, and it allows a common terminology so grammar can be discussed.
- ✓ It is helpful when studying literature.
- ✓ Grammar assists when writing.
- ✓ Knowledge of grammar allows the writer to evaluate the choices to be made when proof reading and editing.

English is a living language and is constantly in a state of change. A study of English will demonstrate great variations across time, in different places, and in society. The age, sex, occupation, education and class of the user will dictate the style of language used. There is no one "English", rather a number of English dialects, all of which have their own rules and are good for their own purposes. However, Standard English is the most important English in terms of the way society operates, and there are rules that explain how this form operates. Be aware that there are degrees of acceptability of grammar, depending on the context in which it is used.



What is grammar?

Grammar can be defined as the structure of sentences and phrases, or the syntax.

Grammar includes:

- morphology, (the structure of words)
- semantics, (the meaning of words and how meanings combine when words are linked into phrases and sentences)
- the different lexical categories, (eg. noun, verb, adjective) and their roles
- the functions of the different parts of sentences (eg. subject, object, predicate, complement)
- an understanding of phrases and clauses
- knowledge of sentence types (eg. imperative, exclamation).





What role does grammar play in Adult Literacy tutoring?

Tutors need to understand enough grammar to help their students write clearly. The higher their level of literacy, the more likely it will be that discussions about grammar will be a part of the tutoring program. Students are often confused about grammar terminology and rules, so it is advisable to make grammar lessons as practical and accessible as possible.

Many native English speakers have limited knowledge of formal grammar rules. Even though they may intuitively know what sentence structure is right, they may not be able to explain why it is so. Tutors often find that they need to upgrade their own knowledge of grammar so they can explain the rules to their students.

Migrants who have learnt some English in their home country will often have a greater knowledge of grammar rules than native English speakers. These students generally rely heavily on grammar when learning English, because the rules provide the structure for the language they are trying to master.



How will I help my student improve grammar in writing?

- ✓ Start with the student's writing, especially the weaknesses he/she points out.
- ✓ Depend on the correctness of oral speech as much as possible (provided the student is really willing to change speech patterns).
- ✓ Provide examples, patterns, rules and practice.
- ✓ Use grammar books for ideas. Use the examples as a guide.
- ✓ Make up examples that are adult and relevant whenever possible.
- ✓ Apply the skill. Don't expect it to be automatic in the next piece of writing.
- ✓ Teach patterns rather than lots of terms.
- ✓ Students will often learn more effectively by imitation rather than the rule.

Common Problems

1

Sentence Structure

The most common grammatical problems relate to an understanding of what makes up a complete sentence. Students may use sentence fragments or run a series of sentences together. Other difficulties may be scrambled word order or the omission of words.

Sentence Fragment I have a cat. That is black and white.	<i>I have a cat that is black and white.</i>
Run on Sentence My friend is getting married, I am the bridesmaid. The wedding is in April it will be exciting.	<i>My friend is getting married and I am the bridesmaid. The wedding is in April. It will be exciting.</i>
Scrambled Word Order My friend very kind helps me.	<i>My very kind friend helps me.</i>
Omission of Words In morning I go shop.	<i>In the morning I will go to the shop.</i>

2 Style

Sentences may lack variety, or be short and jerky. Confusion may exist because the student writes in a casual, "verbal" style. In this case, they need to learn that written English often has a more formal structure.

Lack of Variety	
It was a very nice day.	<i>The day was sunny and hot.</i>
It was sunny and hot.	<i>It was perfect weather for swimming</i>
I had a nice time at the beach	<i>at the beach.</i>
Short and Jerky	
The meal was good. It was Chinese food.	<i>The Chinese food was delicious but filling.</i>
Rice is filling.	
Verbal Style	
There's a lot of people what doesn't have jobs.	<i>There are many people who don't have jobs.</i>

3 Verbs

Problems with tense, agreement with the subject in number and person, and helping verbs are likely to cause problems for students.

Tense	
The bell has <u>rang</u> already.	<i>The bell has rung already.</i>
I <u>done</u> it.	<i>I did it.</i>
Agreement With the Subject	
All the boys <u>is</u> coming over later.	<i>All the boys are coming over later.</i>
Helping Verbs	
He must <u>of</u> taken it.	<i>He must have taken it.</i>

4 Problems experienced by students from non-English speaking backgrounds

As well as many of the examples discussed previously, using the article, prepositions and conjunctions are often issues for non-English speaking background students.

The Article	
Pass me <u>a</u> apple please.	<i>Pass me an apple please.</i>
Can you come to my place for <u>the</u> dinner?	<i>Can you come to my place for dinner?</i>
Please buy me newspaper.	<i>Please buy me a newspaper.</i>
Prepositions	
The coffee cup is sitting <u>in</u> the table.	<i>The coffee cup is sitting on the table.</i>
A letter arrived <u>with</u> my sister in Japan.	<i>A letter arrived from my sister in Japan.</i>
Conjunctions	
It is cloudy today <u>but</u> it is going to rain.	<i>It is cloudy today because it is going to rain.</i>
The phone rang <u>because</u> I did not answer it.	<i>The phone rang but I did not answer it.</i>



Terms and Definitions

- ✓ Keep terms to the minimum and definitions simple.
- ✓ Use terms such as "describing word" (adjective) or "action word" (verb) to make the application easier to understand.
- ✓ Terminology should be used to make the student familiar with the concept rather than expecting them to always use the words.

These terms may be needed:

noun	a naming word: it refers to a person, place or thing (common, proper, collective, abstract)
pronoun	stands instead of a noun eg. I, me, we, ours, he, it, you, they, them (personal and possessive)
adjective	describes a person, place or thing, tells more about nouns and pronouns
adverb	adds information (how, when, where, why) to another word eg. verb, adjective or another adverb
verb	states what is done, shows action, describes state of being or ownership
preposition	connects noun or pronoun with another word, introduces a phrase eg. to, at, before, of
conjunction	joins together words, phrases or clauses, eg. and, but, because
article	distinguishing adjectives: "a, an" are indefinite, "the" is definite
tense	indicates the time the action took place eg. present, past and future
infinitive	form of the verb that has "to" in front of it
participle	present participle has "ing" on the end, past participle has "ed" on the end (note irregular verbs)
finite	all forms of the verb except infinitives and participles
phrase	group of words that does not contain a finite verb or subject
clause	main structure on which sentences are built (principal and subordinate)
subject	describes the "doer" of the action: is usually a noun phrase or a pronoun
predicate	what is said about the subject
object	part of the sentence which describes to what or whom the action is done
sentence	a group of words that make sense without help from other words, always has a verb (statement, command, question)

Grammar Books

Most tutors find they need a reference book for grammar at some stage. Check to see if the book is "user friendly" before purchasing. The most useful books will have explanations, rules and exercises with answers. Grammar books should be used to demonstrate a point, rather than worked through from cover to cover. Remember that students need to transfer the grammar skills learnt to their everyday writing, so exercises should be seen as a tool, rather than the solution.

Raymond Murphy	<i>Essential Grammar in Use</i>	(low - intermediate level)
David Crystal	<i>Rediscover Grammar</i>	(intermediate level)
Beisler, Scheeres & Pinner	<i>Communication Skills</i>	(intermediate - high level)
Borjars & Burridge	<i>Introducing English Grammar</i>	(very high level)

References

Ramsay, M. *The Complete Guide to English Usage* - Stern, G. *An Outline of English Grammar*
 Newby, M. *The Structure of English* - Leech, G., Deucher, M. & Hoogenraad, R. *English Grammar for Today*
 Norton, R. *Grammar Without Groans*