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Teaching and Learning Center
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON TACOMA

WHAT IS GRAMMAR?
A Sociolinguistic View from the Writing Center

Students who bring their assignments to the Teaching and Learning Center can mean several different things when they ask for writing consultants to check "grammar." Some are concerned about punctuation. But that is **mechanics**. Others are concerned about making their paper "flow," which probably refers to **cohesion**. A few writers show concern for the sound or feel of the writing, but that could be **word choice**, **tone**, or **formality/register**.

Writers make a grammar error when they are not cognizant of a particular language pattern, potentially resulting in a reader's misunderstanding of the writer's intended meaning. (Even so, correcting each error will likely NOT be the focus of a writing consultation.)

However common it is to see the criterion "perfect grammar" on a rubric or syllabus, "perfect grammar" simply does not exist. *Perfect grammar* is an idealistic construct that is unachievable; there will probably always be someone who finds fault in something you say or write. On the other hand, one could argue that native speakers always use perfect grammar as long as they are understood by another native speaker. The problem with a gold standard in grammar is that it is much like *El Dorado*, the mythical city of gold –– it exists only in our imaginations. Such a construct can result in a dubious "I know it when I see it" standard, and as humans, we tend to see things selectively.

So let's pause and consider which came first: English or the "rules" of English? If the language came first, how did the first English speakers communicate without rules? And why don't we speak now just as they did then? There are essentially two ways of thinking about grammar:

	View of Grammar	
	Prescriptive	**Descriptive**
What is grammar?	A collection of rules that govern how people use a language	Observable patterns in the ways people use a language
Where does grammar come from?	rule makers	communities of language users
Grammar is…	what I say it is	what we make it

Grammar is not everything. The famous example provided by Chomsky illustrates this point:

> *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*.

What does that mean? In a word––nothing––which is kind of Chomsky's point. The sentence is faithful to English syntax and form, but there isn't much there to make sense of. In Chomsky's example, "perfect" grammar doesn't help at all. On the other hand, imagine if this sentence were whispered from one spy to another. As a code, with these words taking on new meanings, it could mean something very important between those two language users. The point here is that people make meaning *together*, and that mutual understanding is not dependent on what a person outside that context deems "correct."

Four Implications for Academic Writing

1. **Writers must be able to move between registers of formality.** When you write at a university, you must be able to move between levels of formality (known in linguistics as *register*). In other words, you need to be able to move between different worlds of language, just as you do when you pause from writing a research paper to text your friend. Even if both the text message and the research paper are in English, the odds are that you are using different kinds of language to do each. Also, the recipient of the text message is probably less likely to call you out on "incorrect" grammar than a professor reading your paper.

2. **Know your audience.** Learn the grammar, mechanics, and style conventions for the discourse(s) in which you write. The style guides and manuals for your field(s) are the ultimate authorities in their respective discourses. Make a concerted effort to familiarize yourself with them.

3. **"Correctness" is negotiated––and sometimes negotiable.** Don't simply assume that a person who asks for "perfect grammar" or prescribes how to write (e.g. don't use first person, don't use passive voice) is representing a consensus on what constitutes "correct" or acceptable use of English. Such people are representing their preferences, which may or may not align closely with the conventions of the discourse in which you are writing.

4. **Your professors are right, even if they are wrong.** This is often said about umpires in baseball. In a writing assignment, you are engaged in making meaning with your professor. When professors take a prescriptive stance toward grammar, they may value aspects of language that may not be necessary for understanding, but are nonetheless important to them, and therefore, your grade. (An example of this could be the prescriptive rule against ending a sentence with a preposition, which was [injected into English by 18th Century grammarians obsessed with Latin grammar](.)