Teaching Grammar in the Writing Workshop
(Grades 3 – 8)

Vicki Vinton
vvinton@nyc.rr.com

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Vicki Vinton is a literacy consultant and writer. Her books include What Readers Really Do: Teaching the Process of Meaning Making (2012) and The Power of Grammar: Unconventional Approaches to the Conventions of Language (2005). She is also the voice behind the literacy blog To Make a Prairie.
Key Understandings of Grammar Instruction

It is more important to try to use grammatical forms and conventions than to identify them.

Students need to understand the purpose behind grammatical conventions and punctuation and how they’re connected to meaning—especially in a world where rules are constantly changing.

Command of punctuation and grammar happens when students have many opportunities to practice usage in authentic, meaningful writing projects and mentor themselves to masterful writers.

As students stretch themselves as writers, they’re bound to make mistakes. Think of these as approximations rather than errors.
Punctuation for Meaning: Dawkins’s Hierarchy

Maximum Separation (the period, the question mark, and the exclamation mark)
Example: I looked up. And there she stood.

Medium Separation, Emphatic (the dash)
Example: I looked up—and there she stood.

Medium Separation, Anticipatory (the colon)
Example: I looked up: And there she stood.

Medium Separation (the semicolon)
Example: I looked up; and there she stood.

Minimum Separation (the comma)
Example: I looked up, and there she stood.

Zero Separation:
Example: I looked up and there she stood.
We read and studied out of doors preferring the sunlit woods to the house all my early lessons have in them the breath of the woods the fine resinous odor of pine needles blended with the perfume of wild grapes seated in the gracious shade of a tulip tree I learned to think that everything has a lesson and a suggestion the loveliness of things taught me all their use indeed everything that could hum or buzz or sing or bloom had a part in my education noisy-throated frogs katydids and crickets held in my hand I felt the bursting cotton-bolls and fingered their soft fiber and fuzzy seeds I felt the low soughing of the wind through the cornstalks the silky rustling of the long leaves and the indignant snort of my pony as we caught him in the pasture and put the bit in his mouth ah me how well I remember the spicy clovery smell of his breath

From *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller
i couldn’t believe it the door opened in the middle of math class and the principal pushed the older raggedy kid in mrs cordell said boys and girls we have a new students in our class starting today his name is rufus fry now I know all of you will help make rufus feel welcome wont you someone giggled good rufus say hello to your new classmates please he didnt smile or wave or anything he just looked down and said real quiet hi a couple of girls thought he was cute because they said hi rufus why dont you sit next to kenny and he can help you catch up with what were doing mrs cordel said

- Christopher Paul Curtis
From *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*
Writers break long chunks of writing into paragraphs to help their readers stay engaged and be aware of shifts in the text. You always begin a piece of writing by indenting a paragraph, and you usually make a new paragraph when someone starts speaking in dialogue or the speaker changes. Other times you might insert a new paragraph are when:

- A new character enters a narrative
- The setting changes
- The time changes (from morning to evening, one day to another, every day to one day)
- The writer shifts from a scene or specific moment to provide background information
- The writer wants to create a dramatic effect by isolating a single sentence.
In January, a puppy wandered onto the property of Mr. Amos Lacey and his wife, Mamie, and their daughter, Doris. Icicles hung three feet or more from the eaves of houses, snowdrifts swallowed up automobiles and the birds were so fluffed up their looked comic. The puppy had been abandoned, and it made its way down the road toward the Laceys’ small house, its ears tucked, its tail between its legs, shivering. Doris, whose school had been called off because of the snow, was out shoveling the cinderblock front steps when she spotted the pup on the road. She set down the shovel. “Hey! Come on!” she called. The puppy stopped in the road, wagging its tail timidly, trembling with shyness and cold. Doris trudged through the yard, went up the shoveled drive and met the dog. “Come on, Pooch.” “Where did that come from?” Mrs. Lacey asked as soon as Doris put the dog down in the kitchen. Mr. Lacey was at the table, cleaning his fingernails with his pocketknife. The snow was keeping him home from his job at the warehouse. “I don’t know where it came from,” he said mildly, “but I know for sure where it’s going.” Doris hugged the puppy hard again her. She said nothing.
a youth grabbed an old woman’s purse fat with tissues and aspirin and such sundries as old women carry in sagging purses a desperate youth nice enough not to beat her head bloody into the sidewalk as muggers of the feeble often do for the fun of it i suppose and he ran up the hill but one of the perennial watchers watched it all from her window the purseless old woman in slow pursuit yelling such curses as it takes old women a lifetime to learn but it was too dangerous too futile the silent watcher knew to call the police who might come and rough up someone they did not like just for the fun of it i suppose or who would talk polite and feel mad inside and roll their eyes because there was really nothing they could do and there were murders and assaults to handle so this silent angry watcher carelessly but carefully dropped flower pots from her fourth floor windowsill garden one crashing before one behind and the third hitting him on the head a geranium i suppose and closed her window while the huffing grateful old woman looked up at the heavens to thank the lord and walked off with her purse laughing when she finally calmed down and leaving the youth to awaken in the blue arms of the law and do you know two smiling cops walked up all those stairs to warn the watcher that if she weren’t more careful with her plants she would get a ticket for littering i suppose

From Welcome to Your Life
Getting Ready

i’m the thousand-change girl, getting ready for school, standing in my bedroom ripping pants and shirts from my body, trying dresses and skirts. father, at the bottom of the steps is yelling, the bus is coming, here comes the bus. i’m wriggling into jeans—zippers grinding their teeth, buttons refusing their holes. my brother, dressed-in-five-minutes, stands in the hall, t-shirt and bookbag, saying what’s the big problem. i’m kneeling in front of the closet, foraging for that great-lost-other-shoe. father, downstairs, offers advice. slacks, he’s yelling, just put on some slacks. i’m in the mirror, matching earrings, nervous fingers putting the back to the front. downstairs, the bus is fuming in the yard, farm kids with cowlicks sitting in rows. everything’s in a pile on the floor. after school, mother will scream, get upstairs and hang up that mess, but i don’t care, i’m the thousand-change girl, trotting downstairs now looking good, looking ready for school. father, pulling back from the steps with disgust, giving me the once over, says, is that what you’re wearing?

Debra Marquart
On Audience, Voice and Tone

It was a magical place, alive with music that spilled onto the busy streets from tenement windows and full of colors and smells that filled my senses and made my heart beat faster. The earliest memory I have is of a woman who picked me up on Sunday mornings to take me to Sunday school. She would have five to ten children with her when she rang our bell on 126th Street, and we would go through the streets holding hands and singing “Jesus Loves Me” on our way to Abyssinian Baptist. I remember being comforted by the fact that Jesus, whom I didn’t even know, thought so much of me. After church we would be brought home, again holding hands and singing our way through the streets of Harlem.

The way I see it, things happen on 145th Street that don’t happen anywhere else in the world. I’m not saying that 145th is weird or anything like that, but it’s, like, intense. So when I heard about Big Joe’s funeral it didn’t take me by surprise. It was something that I remember and that’s why I’m telling it. This is the way it went down.
### A Sample Unit of Study on Grammar, Voice & Craft

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week One</th>
<th>Teaching student writers ways to appreciate punctuation by seeing how it can alter meaning and serve artistic ends.</th>
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<td><strong>A First Look at Punctuation as Readers</strong></td>
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<th>Week Two</th>
<th>Exploring how writers break the rules of punctuation to create powerful effects and try to do it too.</th>
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<td><strong>Mentoring to Punctuation Texts as Writers: Experimenting in Notebooks</strong></td>
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<tr>
<th>Week Three</th>
<th>Looking at fragments to understand why they are fragments vs. full sentences and then explore how writers use them to achieve particular effects.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A Look at Fragments as Readers &amp; Writers: More Notebook Experimentation</strong></td>
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<th>Week Four</th>
<th>Looking at wild, wordy sentences and how they are different than run-ons, and then exploring how writers use them to achieve particular effects.</th>
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<td><strong>A Look at Wild, Wordy Sentences as Readers and Writers: More Notebook Experimentation</strong></td>
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<th>Week Five</th>
<th>Giving students their final project assignments and spending much class time working on them and conferring with peers and teachers</th>
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<td><strong>Introduction of Final Project: Drafting</strong></td>
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<th>Week Six</th>
<th>Students will continue working on their anthologies, revising and editing.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Final Projects: Revision and Editing</strong></td>
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A Grab Bag of Mentor Sentences

They both lay on the ground, fighting and clawing and yelling and struggling frantically to get up again, but before they could do this, the mighty peach was upon them.

There was a crunch.
And then there was silence.
The peach rolled on.

from *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl

With his eyes shut he seemed to see the whole occasion plainly – how she would look when she came down the path to the water, how calm and peaceful the river was going to be in the twilight, how graceful the canoe would seem, drawn up on the shore.

from *Stuart Little* by E.B. White

When the boat was finished, he loaded it with cheese, biscuits, acorns, honey, wheat germ, two barrels of fresh water, a compass, a sextant, a telescope, a saw, a hammer and nails and some wood in case repairs should be necessary, a needle and thread for the mending of torn sails, and various other necessities such as bandages and iodine, a yo-yo and playing cards.

from *Boris and Amos* by William Steig

One night, in a phosphorescent sea, he marveled at the sight of some whales spouting luminous water; and later, lying on the deck of his boat gazing at the immense, starry sky, the tiny mouse Amos, a little speck of a living thing in the vast living universe, felt thoroughly akin to it all.

from *Amos & Boris*, William Steig
1. As a baboon who grew up wild in the jungle, I realized that Wiki had special nutritional needs.

2. We saw many bears driving through Yellowstone Park.

3. He rode his horse across Highway 12 and up and down the sidewalk in front of the saloon a good half hour before deputies arrived, shouting obscenities and being obnoxious.

4. Locked in a vault for 50 years, the owner of the jewels has decided to sell them.

5. Breaking into the window of the girls’ dormitory, the dean of men surprised 10 members of the football team.

6. She watched as her father returned home with the horses all dressed in cowboy attire.

7. The bride was given in marriage by her father, wearing a Victorian style dress with cathedral length train.
Mini-Inquiry on Dashes

She never says good-bye and so I never know when she’ll be gone. It’s one of those things that you find out by its happening—like lightening, like the ring of a telephone, like the first small of chill in the air that announces summer’s over. Every time Mom doesn’t come home in time for supper, I begin by ignoring the clock. I don’t switch on the overhead light in whatever apartment we’re renting because that would be admitting it has gotten dark . . . I tell myself Mom has stopped at the store and will burst in with a surprise—lime Popsicles or a bag of popcorn or an ice-cold can of Tab—so I don’t fix anything for myself to eat because I don’t want to spoil my appetite.

Michael Dorris, from *The Window*

Charlie catches her breath and stops . . . This is what she has been afraid of, why she doesn’t walk this trail. She is here at the wild end of the lake, right in the middle of her mother’s world. Here, where her mother used to come day after day, season after season, year after year, to take the nature photographs that made her famous—the photographs that eventually took her away forever. Charlie shakes her head as if to shake the memory away.

Stephanie S. Tolan, from *Listen*

It felt good to walk in the shade of the two oak trees. Stanley wondered if this was how a condemned man felt on his way to the electric chair—appreciating all of the good things in life for the last time.

Louis Sachar, from *Holes*

Then what are people seeing at Area 51? James McGaha, a pilot who worked at the Nellis airforce base and is now an astronomer at two Arizona observatories, says it could be planets such as Venus, Jupiter or Mars. Satellites, weather balloons, meteor, fireballs, or even human aircraft also may be mistaken for flying saucers.

Not everyone agrees. When Judy Varns visited Area 51, she didn’t see a single UFO—until she developed her pictures.

Elisabeth Deffner, from “UFO Mysteries”
**Mini-Inquiry on Long Sentences**

William wanted a doll. He wanted to hug it and cradle it in his arms and give it a bottle and take it to the park and push it in the swing and bring it back home and undress it and put it to bed and pull down the shades and kiss it goodnight and watch its eyes close and then William wanted to wake it up in the morning when the sun came in and start all over again just as though he were its father and it were his child.

Charlotte Zolotow, from *Williams Doll*

I nodded, and when she was gone, I wrapped the belt and laces around my middle and gave it a good tug and began to spin and spin and slam into the lockers and I got going so good the gum I had under my tongue flew out and my Superball slipped out of my hand and went bouncing down the hall and I kept going and going like when you roll down a steep hill and before long I was bumping on the glass walls around the principal’s office like a dizzy fish in a tank.

Jack Gantos, from *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*

And away went the two boats for the north end of the pond, while the seagulls wheeled and cried overhead and the taxicabs tooted and honked from Seventy-second Street and the west wind (which had come halfway across America to get to Central Park) sang and whistled in the rigging and blew spray across the decks, stinging Stuart’s cheeks with tiny fragments of flying peanut shell tossed up from the foamy deep.

E. B. White, from *Stuart Little*
Lives on Mango, Rides the Whale

More than 8,000 miles of land and sea separate two seemingly contrasting young women. One young girl lives in the urban streets of Chicago, as depicted in *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (1984), while the other thrives in the countryside of New Zealand, as shown in the movie *Whale Rider*, directed by Niki Caro (2003). One girl is an immigrant from a foreign country and the other a native Maori descendent, but both struggle for change, fighting their own quiet wars. Despite the vast differences in lifestyle and culture, both Esperanza Cordero and Paikea Apirana are destined to be leaders of their generation in spite of the multitude of traditions and expectations that define them as individuals and their role as women in society. These two natural-born leaders are bridging the gap between the ancient customs and modern-day life.

While culture has a huge impact on the Cordero and Apirana families, the protagonists of are affected the most. In Esperanza's world, women are put down and locked inside their husband's houses, having no rights and absolutely no say in their own households. The patriarchal society overwhelms every aspect of life, and Esperanza demands change through rebelling in her own quiet war. "I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain." She plans to set her own example, to forge her own path, in the hopes that the oppressed women of Mango Street will realize alternative options. Desperately seeking an opportunity to flee Mango Street, Esperanza dreams of the day when she will leave just another crippled house to seek her own way in the world. However, she states, "They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out."

Paikea, on the other hand, is a native of New Zealand. According to legend, her ancestor and namesake rode on the back of a whale to this land and her family has been there ever since. Because of her rich and influential history, Pai is very proud of her culture. She wants the best for her people and she understands that the village and tribe must modernize and change with the times or else they may lose everything. For example, in *Whale Rider*, Pai walks into her kitchen to find three elder women smoking cigarettes. Hiding the evidence, the conversation dies as soon as she enters the room, but she says to them, "Maori women have got to stop smoking." Pai loves her culture and the significance of the whale, yet she, like Esperanza, demands change, starting with her grandfather Koro accepting the fact that Pai is destined to become the first female chief of the village. Both girls dream of the day when their women will be respected and treated as equals in their patriarchal societies.
The Inquiry Process
(based on and adapted from Diane Snowball’s *Spelling K-8*)

1. State the focus of the inquiry, relating it to what you have noticed about the children’s writing needs (for example, the need to think about verb tense or commas).

2. Use the class reading materials to find and list examples of the inquiry topic.

3. Have the children find further examples from material they read independently and add those to the list.

4. Guide children to notice ways to categorize the examples to see what can be learned from them (for example, paragraphs at the beginning of a text, paragraphs with dialogue, one sentence paragraphs). Children can continue to find further examples and place them in appropriate groups.

5. Guide children to form hypotheses based on their examples, to verbalize and write about their understanding, and to reflect on how their new understanding can be applied to their own writing.

6. Demonstrate how to use the new knowledge during writing workshop and conferences.
Apprenticeship Samples

Mentor Text:

Home, where she longed to be, where she and her mother could be warm together, was far behind.

*Brave Irene*, William Steig

Original Notebook Entry:

I lost my special Rabbit last year. I still miss him.

Lily, Grade 3

Notebook Entry Revised Following the Mentor Text:

Rabbit, who stayed with me in the dark, who never ever left me alone, got lost in the subway.

Lily, Grade 3

*Rabbit*

Rabbit, who stayed with me in the dark, who never ever left me alone, got lost in the subway.
Original Piece:

My brother woke up to blow his nose and then his nose started bleeding. It wouldn’t stop for a half an hour. My mom did everything she could and then my brother started crying. My mother called the ambulance and they drove us on the ambulance car to the hospital. When I got there I sat in the waiting room. I was so bored then my dad came I was so glad. He was at work. When we came back he bought me a muffin and then we were home. 30 minutes later my brother arrived I was so glad he was alright.

Revised Piece (using *Brave Irene* mentor text):

Brother, who takes care of me, who plays with me, his nose started to bleed. It wouldn’t stop for a half an hour. My brother started crying. His mouth was filled with blood.

Mom, who loved me, who fed me, did everything she could to help my brother. My mom called the ambulance. They drove us to the hospital. When we got there I sat in the waiting room. I was so bored. I was poking my finger in the holes of the chair. A few minutes later my dad came. I was so glad. He was at work.

Dad, who loves me, who pays the bills, bought me a muffin on the way home. When we got home we started to clean the house for my mom. 30 minutes later my mom and brother arrived. I was so glad. Me and my dad almost cried.

Thalia Calixto
4th Grade, PS 111
# AAAWWUBBIS and More!

## Common Subordinating Conjunctions

**After**

After what seemed like forever, Royal finally slowed the team to a trot and then to a walk.

—Jennifer Donnelly, *A Northern Light*, p. 78

**Although**

Although Vincent is gone, I can still have fun without him.

—Miguel Espinoza, sixth grader

**As**

As I walked outside for recess, he was almost certain there’d be a gold star next to his name when he returned.

—Louis Sachar, *There’s a Boy in the Girls’ Bathroom*, p. 97

**When**

Whenever Ms. Franny has one of her fits, it reminds me of Wima-Dixie in a thunderstorm.

—Kate DiCamillo, *Because of Winn-Dixie*

**While**

While he eats lunch, he talks about what he will eat for dinner.

—David Klass, *You Don’t Know Me*, p. 30

**Until**

Until then, Marian had never really thought much about vocal technique.

—Russell Freedman, *The Voice That Challenged a Nation*, p. 14

**Because**

Because she is holding the microphone so close to her face, each moment of contact sounds like a heavy blow.

—Myla Goldberg, *The Bee Season*, p. 276

**Before**

Before last summer, before the man ever came to town, I figure I was getting ready for him.

—Cynthia Rylant, *A Fine White Dust*, p. 4

**If**

If you don’t lie to anyone else in the world, you shouldn’t lie to yourself either.

—Gordon Korman, *No More Dead Dogs*, p. 28

**Since**

Since fourth grade, she’d kept a running list of them and liked to reread it to see if she could get the stories to go further in her head.


## Subordinating Conjunctions by Functions: Dependent Clause Causers Revealed

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Cause-Effect</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
<th>Condition</th>
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<tr>
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Three Basic Complex Sentence Pattern Visual Scaffolds

Use a comma to set off an *opener.*

**Opener, sentence.**

Use two commas to set off an *interrupter.*

**Sent, interrupter, ence.**

Use a comma to set off a *closer.*

**Sentence, closer.**


From *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer’s Workshop,* by Jeff Anderson
# 25 Irregular Verbs to Know

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<th>Present</th>
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This short list of some of the most common irregular verbs was made using Diana Hacker's list of common irregular verbs and correlating them with the 500 most frequently used words found in Kylee Beers' *When Kids Can't Read* and a few that I often see misspelled in students' papers.
### Pronoun Agreement: A *Kira-Kira* Cloze

Put a pronoun in every blank. Make sure that the pronoun matches its antecedent (what the pronoun refers back to or stands in for).

| ______ sister, Lynn, taught me ______ first word: kira-kira. I pronounced ______ ka-a-ahhh, but ______ knew what I meant. Kira-kira means “glittering” in Japanese. Lynn told ______ that when I was a baby, ______ used to take me onto our empty road at night, where we would lie on ______ backs and look at the stars while she said over and over, “Katie, say ‘kira-kira, kira-kira.’” ______ loved that word! When I grew older, ______ used kira-kira to describe ______ I liked: the beautiful blue sky, puppies, kittens, butterflies, colored Kleenex. |

My mother said ______ were misusing the word; you could not call a Kleenex kira-kira. ______ was dismayed over how un-Japanese we were and vowed to send ______ to Japan one day. I didn’t care where she sent me, so long as Lynn came along.

—Cynthia Kadohata, *Kira-Kira*

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Lesson Set 5: The Context

Fats Domino was another singer.

He sang rock and roll.

He put the sound of New Orleans in his music.

Fats Domino, another early rock & roll singer, put the sound of New Orleans in his music.


From *Revision Decisions: Talking Through Sentences and Beyond* by Jeff Anderson and Deborah Dean
APPENDIX 5.2 Lesson Set 5: The Practice

One day something happened.

It happened when Albert was sick.

He was sick in bed.

The happening was that his father brought him something.

It was a compass.

A compass was a small case.

It was a round case.

Inside was a magnetic needle.
Lesson Set 5: The Collaboration

5.1 Something didn’t matter.
It didn’t matter which way Albert turned the compass.
The needle always pointed north.
It was as if it were held.
The holding was by an invisible hand.

5.2 Albert was so amazed.
His amazement made his body tremble.

5.3 Suddenly he knew something.
He knew there were mysteries.
The mysteries were in the world.
The mysteries were hidden.
The mysteries were silent.
The mysteries were unknown.
The mysteries were unseen.

5.4 He wanted something.
He wanted it more than anything.
He wanted to understand those mysteries.

From Revision Decisions: Talking Through Sentences and Beyond by Jeff Anderson and Deborah Dean
The Affects of Verb Tense on Readers

Far beneath the surface of the ocean, a clam sits on the ocean floor. Fish swim back and forth. Behind a rock, a strange animal with eight “arms” is watching them. The animal slides out from hiding. Quickly, it grabs the clam. It opens up the clam’s shell. And the clam becomes dinner! What is this strange animal with eight arms?

It’s an octopus!

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It was an octopus!
In his plane, the *Spirit of St. Louis*, Charles Lindbergh took off from muddy Roosevelt Field at 7:52 a.m. on May 20, 1927. The plane’s strong engine could barely get him, his plane and the 450 gallons of gasoline off the ground. Charles cleared the telephone poles at the end of the airfield by only 20 feet. The crowd of about 500 people watched the plane bounce up and down the muddy path and somehow get into the air.

From *The Illustrated Life of Charles Lindberg*
By Charles River Editors

It is 1927, and his name is Charles Lindbergh. Later they will call him the Lone Eagle. Later they will call him Lucky Lindy. But not now.

Now it is May 20, 1927, and he is standing in the still-dark dawn. He watches rain drizzle down on the airfield. And on his small airplane. The airplane has a name painted on its side: *Spirit of St. Louis*.

Lindbergh is nearly as tall as the plane itself. And yet—he is about to attempt what no one has done before: To fly—without a stop—from New York to Paris, France. Over 3,600 miles away. Across the Atlantic Ocean. Alone.

From *Flight*
By Robert Burleigh
Inspirational Quotes

“To learn to write well, students need time living in and making decisions among a forest of sentences, manipulating syntactic parts and grouping thoughts, while they also juggle their ideas about content and organization.”

NCTE

“Beyond Grammar Drills: How Language Works in Learning to Write”

“What I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed.”

Joan Didion

“A writer is a reader who is moved to emulate.”

Saul Bellow

“No iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put at just the right place.”

Isaac Babel

“The purpose of Traditional School Grammar is analysis. Writing, in contrast, is a synthetic activity. Just as taking apart a clock that someone else designed and put together doesn’t mean that you can make a clock, taking apart and labeling sentences of some else’s construction doesn’t mean that you can construct comparable sentences on your own. Moreover, paying attention to grammatical forms and rules diverts attention from structuring coherent prose.”

Michael W. Smith & Jeffrey Wilhelm

Getting It Right: Fresh Approaches to Teaching