

Please cite the Published Version

Bell, Huw and Ainsworth, Stephanie (2017) Grammar's best kept secrets: what every primary teacher should know. Primary Matters, Spring. pp. 44-47.

Publisher: National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE)

Version: Accepted Version

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Grammar's best kept secrets: what every primary teacher should know

Hard times?

Mr Gradgrind and the English staff at Dotheboys Hall might well have celebrated the arrival of the new National Curriculum of 2014. If what you want is facts, the National Curriculum might be very much to your taste, at least with regards to knowledge about grammar. For the first time in two generations, primary school children are taught and tested on a substantial set of grammar terms.

This statutory re-evaluation of learning about grammar has caused considerable controversy. Many parents threatened to boycott the Y2 'SPaG' test in 2016, and only the leaking and subsequent cancellation of the test made this unnecessary. In blogs and letters to the press, Michael Rosen and others have heavily criticised the focus on grammar. In April 2016, *The Guardian* reported a speaker from the conference of the National Association of Head Teachers: "...it's all the different types of verbs: modal verbs, transitive verbs, intransitive verbs... I've managed to get by for 23 years without knowing what a transitive verb is." The speaker added that the grammatical concepts were "very difficult for children to understand" and that despite long experience as a teacher, "it took me two hours to plan a 30-minute lesson." This reflects two common perceptions – that knowledge about grammar is unnecessary and that it is too hard. Both these claims are worth examining. But more interesting is the idea that the speaker had 'got by' without knowing about transitive verbs. What does this mean? The speaker must know how to *use* transitive verbs, because transitive verbs (and all the other kinds mentioned) are used daily. What the speaker presumably meant was that the terminology was not useful in itself: if we can *use* these verbs, why learn what they are *called*?

This is not the place for a full discussion of this argument, although if it were applied across the board the entire curriculum might be considerably lighter: why *do* children learn about photosynthesis, or rainforests, or the Tudors? It seems unlikely that anyone would accept that children should only study topics which are immediately essential or entirely easy. And in much of the world, including most of Europe, formal grammar knowledge is largely accepted as part of basic education. However, many teachers in the UK have not learned about grammar before, and therefore do not themselves always have the content knowledge they need. Our work with in-service and pre-service teachers supports this supposition. However, it also shows that many are keen to learn about grammar, and in this article we examine ways in which teachers can start to make sense of the information they are required to teach.

Grammar terms in the National Curriculum

The National Curriculum specifies around 60 'terms for children.'

Terms for children (all)

Y1	letter, capital letter, word, singular, plural, sentence, punctuation, full stop, question mark, exclamation mark
Y2	noun, noun phrase , statement, question, exclamation, command, compound, suffix, adjective, adverb, verb, tense (past, present) , apostrophe, comma
Y3	preposition, conjunction , word family, prefix, clause, subordinate clause , direct speech, consonant, consonant letter, vowel, vowel letter, inverted commas (or 'speech marks')
Y4	determiner, pronoun, possessive pronoun, adverbial
Y5	modal verb, relative pronoun, relative clause , parenthesis, bracket, dash, cohesion, ambiguity
Y6	subject, object, active, passive , synonym, antonym, ellipsis, hyphen, colon, semi-colon, bullet points

While these all deal with language, not all are grammar terms, and not all present difficulties to teachers. If we remove widely-understood terms (*word*), those dealing with punctuation and communicative function (*comma, command*), those mostly about vocabulary (*prefix*) and those dealing with text structure (*cohesion*), we find just over 20 grammar terms – those highlighted in bold in the table above. The National Curriculum also provides teachers with a Glossary of about 90 language terms, of which around half deal with grammar, but these need not be taught to children.

What makes it difficult?

Depending on experience and training, some terms on this list can cause problems for teachers. The reasons behind this are worth considering:

- (i) The National Curriculum acknowledges that grammar terms form an interrelated conceptual network, and understanding one often depends on understanding others.
- (ii) Several useful terms are not on this list – for example, there are different types of *relative clause*, and that term alone does not allow us to distinguish them¹. The National Curriculum terms for pupils are not enough for teachers, and the Glossary helps somewhat here.
- (iii) Our research suggests teachers' knowledge is sometimes incomplete or based on rough rules of thumb (e.g. 'relative clauses start with a relative pronoun'). It can be hard to avoid these when talking about grammar, but teachers need to be aware of their limitations. Again, the Glossary helps to some extent here.
- (iv) The terminology itself is imperfect, which leads to disagreement and alternative interpretations. The National Curriculum terminology appears relatively theory-free, but many websites and books on the subject use terms in different ways, which can add to the confusion. In addition, language is far more subtle and varied than our system of grammatical terminology, and even expert grammarians will sometimes disagree on a particular interpretation.

Grouping the terms

So it is not surprising that some teachers struggle to understand what they have to teach, and to cope with the extra knowledge they need in order to teach it. From our experience working with teachers, it seems useful to have some idea of how these terms relate to each other, how they might be categorised. The outline below has worked fairly effectively for us.

Category	Terms to teach to children	Other useful terms for teachers
Word class – terms for individual words	Noun, verb, adjective, adverb, determiner, pronoun (possessive, relative), preposition, conjunction	Article, coordinating conjunction, subordinating conjunction
Parts of the clause	Subject, verb, object, adverbial	Complement
How clauses are related	Clause, subordinate clause, relative clause, relative pronoun, conjunction	Main clause
Types of phrase	Noun phrase	Verb phrase, preposition phrase, adjective phrase, adverb phrase
Terms related to the verb	Verb, tense, past, present, modal verb, active, passive	Verb phrase, auxiliary verb, lexical verb, present participle, past participle, infinitive, finite, non-finite

¹ Relative clauses can be defining or non-defining (also called restrictive and non-restrictive). These appear very similar but their function is different. In writing, the use of punctuation is crucial in marking the distinction between them.

The classification in the left-hand column is artificial and oversimplified: there is certainly more than one way to group these terms, and several fit (or could fit) into more than one category. The list also does not include some terms (e.g. *transitive verb*) which have caused problems and even some which have occurred in the SPaG test (e.g. *subjunctive*). We try to teach our trainee teachers around 40 terms – still quite a large number to learn, but once we break it down into the three categories it becomes much more manageable and allows trainees to see how these terms fit together.

Form and function

Learning about grammar is not always straightforward. It's not immediately obvious exactly why this is so, but many teachers and most of our trainee teachers appear to find it conceptually difficult. In particular, it seems especially difficult to understand what grammatical terminology is for – in particular, what it means to label a piece of language. The following anonymised extract is from a training session, where trainee teachers are discussing the first word in the sentence '*this is the reason she left.*'

- S1 It's a noun...a pronoun.
 S2 Mmm.
 S1 A pronoun.
 S3 Is it a determiner? Like in *this one*?
 S2 It's the subject. It's at the start of the sentence because it's not a question.
 S1 Can't adverbials be...? [hesitates] I think it's the subject. Oh.
 S3 It's a pronoun...

The exchange shows a very common confusion over the task. S1 is correct – '*this*' is a pronoun in the sentence being discussed; but S2 is also correct – '*this*' is the subject of the sentence; and S3 might also be correct in another context, because '*this*' is often a determiner, as her example ('*this one*') shows. So the extract illustrates uncertainty. But it also illustrates another serious difficulty, which is the distinction between grammatical form and grammatical function.

This is best illustrated by an analogy. Imagine that you find an old object at a car boot sale. You don't know what it is exactly, but you will probably recognise what it is made from, as well as the colour, weight and shape. In other words, you have a fair idea of the *form* of the object. However, you don't know what it is for – that is, you don't know its *function*. You might be able to guess, but the simplest way to find out would be to see the object being used in context. Grammatical analysis also depends on the notions of form and function, and can be thought of in a similar way. Let's use a one-clause sentence as an example²:

On Tuesday Erin bought a new car.

If we think about this in terms of its form, we describe its components. So we might say it has seven words; there is definitely a noun there (*car*), a verb (*bought*), a determiner (*a*), and some other words that are a bit harder (is *Tuesday* an adverb?³). If we think more, we might agree that the words in the sentence are in this sequence:

Analysis of form

On	Tuesday	Erin	bought	a	new	car
PREPOSITION	NOUN	NOUN	VERB	DETERMINER	ADJECTIVE	NOUN

² A good rule of thumb here is that if a sentence only has one verb phrase, it only has one clause.

³ No, it's a noun!

We have broken the sentence into words and named them – we have identified some aspects of form. But although this is relatively easy, it’s not particularly useful on its own. We have broken the analysis into individual words, but that ignores the close links between *new* and *car*, for example. There are also unanswered questions: don’t we need a subject or an object? are there any adverbials?

We also need, then, to think about this sentence in terms of the roles its components play – in other words, we need to think about *function*. Analysed by function, the structure looks like this:

Analysis of function

On Tuesday	Erin	bought	a new car
ADVERBIAL	SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT

Here we can see two major changes. First, we have stopped treating the words as separate items and are treating them as groups (e.g. *on Tuesday*, *a new car*) which operate together – these are really phrases⁴. Second, although there is some terminological overlap (*bought* is still labelled as a verb), we have changed many labels because we are now interested in the function of different parts rather than the form. We can go further and combine these analyses, so components of a clause can be labelled twice:

Analysis of form and function

	On Tuesday	Erin	bought	a new car
FUNCTION	ADVERBIAL	SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT
FORM	PREPOSITION PHRASE	NOUN PHRASE	VERB PHRASE	NOUN PHRASE

To do this effectively, we need to go back to our master list of terms. In the analysis above, we are really using two categories of terms – ‘types of phrase’ and ‘parts of the clause.’ Any clause can be broken down using the five terms *subject*, *verb*, *object*, *complement* and *adverbial*. And any sentences with more than one clause can be broken down in the same way, except now we might need a conjunction to link the clauses somehow.

Benefits to teachers and children

This double level of analysis, in which we think about both form and function, clears up some of the problem facing our trainees:

- S1 It’s a noun...a pronoun. [FORM]
- S2 Mmm.
- S1 A pronoun. [FORM]
- S3 Is it a determiner? Like in *this one*? [FORM]
- S2 It’s the subject. It’s at the start of the sentence because it’s not a question. [FUNCTION]
- S1 Can’t adverbials be...? [hesitates] I think it’s the subject. Oh. [FUNCTION]
- S3 It’s a pronoun... [FORM]

The trainee teachers have not clarified whether they are discussing form or function (or both): ‘*this*’ in ‘*this is the reason she left*’ is both a pronoun (the word class, or FORM) and the subject (its role, or FUNCTION, in the clause). There is more than one correct answer, but the trainees do not appear to realise this.

⁴ A phrase in grammar can be one word or several: [*John*], [*John’s mum*] and [*John’s elderly mum*] are all noun phrases.

Knowing about form and function helps us in several ways. First, we can now see that grammatical analysis does two labelling tasks, and therefore there can be two correct responses to a question. But it also helps us recognise levels of knowledge and potential problems in our pupils: a child might know that the underlined section below starts with a preposition (i.e. they can recognise the form) but not that it is also an adverbial (i.e. they have not understood its function).

In all environments, animals must compete for food.

Here, the underlined section is a preposition phrase (form) because its head is a preposition, but it is also an adverbial (function) which modifies the whole clause.

If as teachers we are not aware of this distinction between form and function then we might inadvertently confuse children and create misconceptions. This can happen when we mistakenly tell a child that they are wrong when they provide a grammatical label describing form when we are expecting a label describing function (or vice versa). We might also come unstuck if we are asked, for example, if an adverb and adverbial are the same thing⁵. Without a solid understanding of form and function we might flounder, or give a confident but misleading answer. As an example, we have heard teachers explain that “adverbs and adverbials both modify the verb, but adverbials are a phrase and adverbs are a single word ending in *-ly*.” While this rule of thumb applies in many cases, this particular explanation is misleading on three counts: 1) adverbs often do modify verbs, but they can also modify adjectives, another adverb or even a whole clause; 2) adverbs do not have to end in *-ly*; 3) the key distinction between the two terms is that *adverb* labels the form of a word and *adverbial* labels the function of a word/group of words. The explanation also misleadingly implies that a phrase must be more than one word. Sometimes an adverbial does have the form of an adverb, but there are also many other forms which can serve an adverbial function (e.g. a preposition phrase, noun phrase or subordinate clause).

When discussing the perils of teaching grammar to children, our trainees frequently talk about encountering problems when children ask questions and come up with their own examples. While trainees tend to be confident at planning and teaching a grammar lesson in a transmissive way, when forced to venture away from their prepared examples, they find themselves feeling uncertain and exposed. Much of this uncertainty comes from not fully appreciating the form-function distinction. Once teachers have mastered this conceptual hurdle, they are able to appreciate that there are often two right answers to a question and they are better prepared to engage in (and enjoy!) open discussion with children about grammar.

Even better, understanding form and function can help us make sense of the *purpose* of some of this learning. We need to know the word classes in order to describe the form of clause elements, because very often these clause elements are phrases⁶, and the phrases are named after their ‘head’, which will be named as a word class. In the examples below, the head is in bold:

<i>a big yellow car</i>	NOUN PHRASE
<i>quite jolly</i>	ADJECTIVE PHRASE
<i>fairly quickly</i>	ADVERB PHRASE

Understanding the form-function distinction is far from the be-all and end-all of grammar knowledge, and the terms in our list are not adequate for all purposes. Language is complex and our grammatical descriptions are inadequate, and the information in this article is only a start. But we think that having a clearer idea of the relationships between the different types of grammatical terms can help break

⁵ Answer: sometimes!

⁶ Not always, of course – a clause element can also be another clause.

down the learning task for teachers and children. Yes, you can get by very well without knowing what a transitive verb is. But there is a pleasure in knowledge for its own sake, and children take a natural pleasure in using and finding out about language. It would be a pity if the opportunity to extend this to knowing about grammar were missed.