

## **The Sentence as Itself: Vivifying Grammar in Writing Classrooms**

### **Event Description:**

Say the word grammar and most students flee, but attention to the mechanics of the sentence as a dynamic form can illuminate new possibilities for writers in any genre. Four writer-teachers with experience from grade school to grad school will speak about the generative potential that conversations about grammar and syntax have in their classrooms and their own work. Challenging ideas of “correctness,” they engage students in understanding how grammar underpins voice, vernacular, and expression. Creative possibilities abound when students recognize that grammar can be understood not as good or bad, but as standard or stigmatized—as adaptable, evolving, and contingent on its reception in time and place. Launching from this understanding, this panel gathers both emerging and veteran educators—representing varied backgrounds, regions, school settings, and publishing histories—to share insights about how close language study enables their students to liberate their own ideas and voices.

### **Event Category: Pedagogy**

### **Event Organizer and Moderator:**

**B.K. Fischer:** B.K. Fischer teaches “The Comma Sutra,” a cross-genre seminar for MFA writers at Columbia University. Her most recent book is *Ceive*, which was a finalist for the 2021 National Book Critics Circle Award in poetry.

### **Event Participants:**

**Emily M. Suazo:** Emily Suazo is an instructor of University Writing at Columbia University and an MFA candidate in fiction and literary translation. She has served as the Adult Sensitive Populations Site Coordinator for Columbia Artists/Teachers.

**Bronwen Tate:** Bronwen Tate teaches in the School of Creative Writing at University of British Columbia, where her teaching ranges from optional-residency

fully asynchronous MFA workshops to 200-person undergraduate creative writing lectures.

**Jared Jackson:** Jared Jackson is a writer, teacher, and arts administrator born in Hartford, CT. He received an MFA in fiction from Columbia University, where he was awarded a Chair's Fellowship and Creative Writing Teaching Fellowship. His work has received support from the Tin House Winter Workshop and has appeared or is forthcoming in the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Yale Review*, *Guernica*, *Kenyon Review* and more. He has been awarded fellowships from MacDowell, Baldwin for the Arts, and the Center for Fiction. He is currently the Program Director of Literary Programs and Emerging Voices at PEN America.

**Camille Guthrie:** Camille Guthrie is the author of four books of poetry, including *DIAMONDS* (BOA Editions, 2021). She is Director of Undergraduate Writing Initiatives and Faculty at Bennington College. She lives in rural Vermont.

### **Opening Remarks (B.K. Fischer):**

Two things strike me every time I talk about sentence-making in a classroom: how fast the idea of talking about grammar makes students panic, and how much delight they take in rolling up their sleeves and tinkering with the sentence as itself. I teach a cross-genre seminar for MFA writers called *The Comma Sutra* that focuses on sentences—how they are put together, how other writers make them, how we can tap their energies and the endless possibilities of their variations and effects as vehicles for thought and art. Yet every time, mentioning grammar touches a raw nerve of insecurity in even these incredibly talented graduate student writers. On this panel today, we'll hear from four dynamic educators about how they address grammar (and/or related topics like editing, revising, and sentence craft) with their students.

Each presenter will give a 10-minute talk, and then we will invite questions from the audience for 20 minutes of discussion. Throughout, I will be keeping a list of ideas and resources that we can share.

### **Participant Initial Remarks/Summary:**

**Emily M. Suazo:**

A big part of my pedagogy right now and for the last few years has to do with meeting students where they are in their development as writers, and often my students are first generation or are in the process of acquiring English. I will present some strategies for including different kinds of Englishes and code-switching/meshing that I find useful as I endeavor to demystify writing and the way we interact with grammar's "rules."

**Bronwen Tate:**

I'm planning to talk about the relationship between the sentence and the line in poetry and share some strategies for heightening student awareness of the possibilities there. I might also talk about syntax as form/syntax as attitude/mood.

**Jared Jackson:**

Considering my background, folks I grew up with, and writers from somewhat similar backgrounds who have given thought to this topic, I'm interested in talking about language—grammar—and its relationship to intellectual and character judgement. From my experience, and considering one of your moderator questions about grammar cops, students I've come across hesitate when the subject comes up out of a sense of mild fear, or more so shame, they've experienced around their grammar on the page or in conversation. People remember how you make them feel. When you deny or make a student feel less than because of their oral expression, how do you expect them to feel brave and comfortable on the page? I'm interested in showing the value and beauty in stigmatized grammar while demonstrating the importance of mastering standard grammar, and how possibilities abound when harnessing both.

**Camille Guthrie:**

Thank you, Barbara, for inviting me to join this conversation. I've been teaching writing for more than twenty years now, and these past few years have changed my pedagogy. The pandemic has been quite a shock, and it has certainly affected how I teach. I've been teaching at Bennington College for 13 years; I used to teach literature, now I primarily teach critical essay writing as there is a great demand for it—a course that any student can take at any point in their time at the college. At Bennington, we don't have required courses; we prioritize individual Plans of

study, creative process, and interdisciplinary work. My series of critical writing courses is called “The Scriptorium,” named after the place in the abbey or monastery for writing, and I teach grammar, research, and other writing skills. Every year, I change the topic of the class—some topics include Beauty, Love, Borders and Boundaries, Visual Culture. We read a lot of Gender, Women’s and Sexuality Studies; Queer Theory; and Race Studies. Bennington is known for its wild years, the glamorous world of Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History*, but it’s quite different today. We are small—about 700 students—with a growing population of students who are first-generation, low-income or working class, multilingual, and/or international. I have more and more students who have had little to no experience with grammar skills or critical writing. Students who have never used a library or done research. And, students who—for many reasons—feel great anxiety about their writing skills, and some of them are still studying from home, on their laptops in their bedrooms, and doing their best to become better writers. I’d like to share some approaches and exercises that have worked very well with my students: the Worry is the Work; Drive-thru Grammar; Form Is Content; the Library Hunt; and, Practicing Anti-Perfectionism & Perfectionism.

### **Moderator Questions:**

In your classrooms (audience or panelists), how do grammar questions intersect with matters of class, race, gender, and other social categories? I often think of alternate grammars in relation to code-switching, vernaculars, and dialects, and I wonder how you navigate and explore this terrain with your students.

Years ago, in 2013, Sherman Alexie tweeted “Grammar cops are rarely good writers, imagination always disobeys.” Do you agree or disagree with that sweeping generalization? What do you think about its corollary—“Know the rules before you break them”? Have you had students who were “grammar cops,” adamant or even pedantic about correcting “errors,” or have you found this prescriptivist tendency in some measure in yourself or in colleagues, and how have you addressed it?

How has the pandemic shaped or changed your teaching practices around grammar? Have the new modes of teaching we’ve been required to use in difficult circumstances created any new possibilities for exploring grammar or sentence

structure? How have you managed sentence-making matters in synchronous or asynchronous student encounters?

You are all amazing writers yourselves: how do you approach sentence-level work—whether you think of it as craft, editing, revision, or otherwise—in your own creative practice?

How often do students' past experiences with grammar instruction in their schooling come up in your classrooms? What preconceived ideas about grammar or even outright bad experiences have you needed to address?

How do you keep the needs and perspectives of students from underserved populations—students who may be less “fluent” in conventional standard grammar—at the fore?