

York University

Liberal Arts & Professional Studies

AS/WRIT 2710 3.0

The Grammar Course

Fall 2023

Generally Useful Information

Seminar **R 8:45-11:20.** Face-to-face
035 HNE (Health, Nursing, Environment)

Instructor: Kim Ian Michasiw S359 Ross 416-736-2100 X 33997 michasiw@yorku.ca

Office Hours: Monday 1:00-2:30; Thursday 1-2:30. Other times by appointment

Course Website: <https://eclass.yorku.ca/course/view.php?id=97348>

Course Text:

Martha Kolln, Loretta Gray, & Joseph Salvatore, Understanding English Grammar 10th ed. (Pearson)

- *If you have access to an earlier edition, please feel free to use it. The text hasn't changed that much since edition 7.*

Method of Evaluation:

Traditionally, 2710 featured two in-class tests, a formal final examination, and four 500-word(-ish) assignments. Adapting to remote delivery underlined the fact that the structure of the tests privileged certain forms of short-term memory that have little to do with understanding English grammar.

The *first test* will remain test-like, as it will be written during the class probably starting that 9, but students will be permitted to employ whatever resources they choose (save hiring a ghost-writer) as they compose a coherent paragraph or two that display how well they understand and can employ to good effect the various resources afforded to writers by the system of the English verb.

The *second test* will be replaced by a 15-minute one-on-one Zoom session with your instructor during which the two participants will contemplate an error-riddled passage of prose and the student participant will suggest ways in which the passage may be corrected and in other ways improved. If you wish to do the test in person, we can adapt, but I will be very strict about the 15 minutes.

The *exam* will maintain its identity as an exercise written during the exam period, though it will more closely resemble an old-fashioned open-book, take-home exam. It will be constructed on the assumption that students will consult their textbook, their notes, and whatever online resources they wish. What will be examined is not the ability to memorize, but rather how well individual students are able to deploy the resources the grammatical structures of English afford.

Two test surrogates (Oct. 6 & the week of Nov. 13) 25% (10%, 15%)

Four two-page assignments (Sept. 28, Oct. 19,

	Nov. 9 & Nov. 30)	40% (10% each)
Final examination (exam period)		25%
Contribution to seminar		10%

Dates to remember:

Last day to enrol without instructor's permission	September 20
Last day to enrol with instructor's permission	September 28
Last day to drop without receiving a grade	November 8
Course withdrawal period	November 9-December 5
Last day to submit Fall term work	December 5

ORGANIZATION OF THE COURSE:

As 2710 has historically been a lecture + tutorial course, it will require some modification to operate affectively as a seminar. I will break up lecture materials into more assimilable forms, and there will be a good deal more work-shopping than has been the case.

I will, however, post fairly detailed "lecture" notes before class.

I'm assuming that we will find technologies, including pre-digital ones, that will allow us to share our sentences. A willingness to share our work will be a considerable aid to the course's achievement of its objectives.

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

The purpose of the course is to allow those students with relatively developed grammatical competencies in Standard Written English (SWE), also known—to Kolln and her collaborators, among others--as Edited American English (EAE), to refine and hone those competencies, and to provide those students whose competency in SWE is less developed a context in which they may catch up. We will also consider and try to think through the limitations of SWE and especially the ways in which it has been employed as an exclusionary and silencing device by the dominant culture.

Specific learning objectives:

It is hoped that students will

- learn to recognize, name, and work with the fundamental forms and structures of the English sentence;
- understand how those forms and structures are governed and made comprehensible by the set of rules called grammar;
- understand how and why SWE differs from other dialects of English;
- recognize in some small ways how the grammar of English differs from the grammars of other languages
- develop an awareness of the processes of language change, and some acceptance of/tolerance for its inevitability
- understand that, however vexed the correctness/error dyad may be, it remains a powerful one and learn to make a sort of peace with that power
- recognize common grammatical and usage "errors" in the work of others and in their own

- develop writing strategies that minimize opportunities for and invitations to error, while not interfering with clarity or inventiveness of written expression;
- cultivate feelings and expressions of deep anguish at the torments suffered by SWE in practically all media practically every day.

EN 2710 3.0 F 2023

Topics & Readings Schedule

Class 1--Sept. 7: Introductory and axiomatic. After the usual throat-clearing about texts and requirements and the process of the class, we will discover that almost everyone in the room already knows almost all that the course will teach. We'll take a quick look at theories of the word, of the communicative chain, and of discourse and discourse communities. This will set up the context for the course and will introduce a number of key vocabulary units. Depending on what courses students took at the 1000-level, some or most of these may be familiar. If that's the case, consider our quick tour--through signifiers and signifieds; langues and paroles; messages, contacts & codes &c.—a brief refresher, and an invitation to this course's discourse community.

Class 2--Sept. 14: Standard Written English and its ten foundational sentence patterns. We'll start with a brief consideration of the on-going contest between two linguistic approaches to understanding and studying grammar: descriptivism and prescriptivism. At issue here are the politics of grammar studies and the place of SWE within what various commentators have called the "usage wars." This discussion will serve, I hope, as a kind of programmatic, overarching apology for, and justification of, the occasionally prescriptivist deviations in the course. In the second phase of the class, consideration of grammar proper commences with a treatment of Kolln *et al's* ten basic sentences. There will be a good deal of sorting through of terminology here. Thus, those students who find themselves clue-deprived when trying to work through the differences among the ten should come armed with questions.

Readings: Kolln *et al*, Chapters 1, 2, and especially 3 (pp. 43-64).

Class 3--Sept. 21: Moving toward verbs. It's not entirely clear to me how far we will have made it through our sentence patterns, but we will certainly finish them and move on to the problems posed by verbs, their forms, their tenses, their aspects, their irregularities, their moods, their modes, their modalities, their auxiliaries, their voices. We will discuss strong and weak, which is to say irregular and regular forms. As an amusing by-way in this consideration, we'll take a look at the ever-fascinating possibilities of sentence diagrams, if only to develop some capacity to follow what Kolln & her collaborators are showing us.

Reading: Kolln *et al*, Chapter 4 (pp. 65-85).

Class 4—Sept. 28: Tarrying with the verb and transforming it. In this session we'll address whatever elements on the list for the 21st have been neglected, and we will move to the secure and fairly obvious ground of interrogatives, exclamations, and imperatives. We will consider the almost wholly outmoded "subjunctive" and the pseudo-auxiliary "do." We will answer the burning question: "What is an ergative verb?" We will also attend to English's (if not SWE's) unfortunate capacity to verbify more or less any word derived from what we'll by now be calling the "form" classes. We'll consider, wearing our most severe usage-druid expressions, whether or not this is a capacity that should be encouraged. We'll also ask if passives are always evil, if verbs ought always to be concrete, and if use of the verb "to be" contributes always to sentence flabbiness and flaccidity.

Reading: Kolln *et al*, Chapter 5 (pp. 86-107) & also sections on Verbs pp. 247-48, 305-10.

Sept. 28 is also Assignment 1 due date.

Class 5—October 5: The course's first test-like thing will be written in the lecture period. If it takes a student longer than an hour to write, something has gone seriously wrong.

For that reason, we'll reconvene after the test to review everything we ought to know about the English system of verbs, and we will look forward to some verb-like things that are not verbs, hence will not appear on the test. These will include participles, gerunds, and a wide variety of infinitives.

October 13 Fall Reading Week (October 7-13). No class.

Class 6--Oct 19: Adverbials and error: Here we encounter the root cause of many grammatical and (perhaps) most stylistic difficulties: adverbs and those phrases that serve adverbial purposes. We'll examine adverbials in all their roles of modifying verbs & sometimes adjectives. Particular attention will be paid to prepositional phrases, their difficulty, and their invasiveness, but we will not ignore the disconcerting capacity of other word classes—verbs and nouns—to serve adverbially. We will also begin our consideration of the eight fundamental categories of grammatical error: errors of agreement, case, completion, construction, modification, punctuation, reference, and usage (although, as we will see, the last-named is not, in any strict sense, grammatical).

Reading: Kolln *et al*, Chapter 6 (pp. 108-127), & also sections on Adverbs pp. 257-59, 310-14.

Oct. 19 is also Assignment 2 due date.

Class 7--Oct. 26: Adjectivals: As we all know, adjectives are to nouns what adverbs are to verbs. Adjectives and adjectivals do, however, relate to their nouns somewhat differently, involving, as often as not, such things as determiners, nouns dressed up as adjectives, and headwords. We'll ponder these wonders, revisit prepositional phrases, examine relative clauses, and then consider the participial phrase in its appropriate, misplaced, and especially dangling avatars. As participial phrases are a source of many crises in punctuation, we'll also, for more or less the first (though not the last) time, consider carefully the poor, much-misused comma.

We'll also return to and discuss issues arising from the test.

Reading: Kolln *et al*, Chapter 7 (pp. 128-162), & section on Adjectives pp. 248-52.

Class 8—Nov 2: Nouns, nominals, and their alternatives, especially the controversial pronoun.

Finally, we arrive at nouns, or at least noun phrases, only to discover that many words that are not nouns may fill what Kolln *et al*, with their characteristic lyric charm, call the "nominal slots." We'll attend particularly to gerunds and infinitives and marvel that, like the snake with her tail in her mouth, the structure of our textbook has led us back to verbs even if these are verbs acting as something else. Here too we will worry again over dangling things and ask what is perhaps the most pedantically militant grammarian's query: What's wrong with the

rule against splitting infinitives? We'll also consider the recently highly controversial personal pronoun in all its/her/his/their/vis/hirs/xys glory.

Reading: Kolln *et al*, Chapter 8 (163-188) & also sections on Nouns pp. 238-47.

Class 9—Nov. 9: Outliers & coordination/subordination & punctuation. We will conclude our consideration of nominals and address the issues arising from grammatical “outliers.” These include: adverbs that serve as “sentence modifiers”--including the formerly notorious “hopefully”—vocatives, absolute phrases, subordinate clauses, relative clauses, and appositives.

Having addressed outliers, we can fill up all the slots in Kolln & her collaborators' foundational sentence patterns, and we can go on to ask how we make our sentences cohere and coordinate internally? We'll consider particularly coordination (agreement) between subject and verb; parallel constructions; appropriate use of conjunctions (the ones specifically labelled coordinating and others); elements of punctuation, with a particular focus on the oft-maligned semi-colon

Reading: Kolln *et al*, Chapter 10 (209-224), & also sections on Metadiscourse & Style pp. 314-23

Nov. 9 is also Assignment 3 due date

Test surrogate 2: Week of Nov. 13

The fifteen-minute, one-on-one sessions devoted to the contemplation of error and the cultivation of clarity will be scheduled during this week. There will be no class meeting

Class 10--Nov. 23: Further coordination/subordination, with some consideration of little words and the many roles they play in gluing our sentences together: As the issues involved in coordination and subordination are essential to the creation of individual sentences and of such more extended structures as paragraphs, we'll consider these in further detail. Some consideration will be given to the fundamental sentence types (simple, compound, complex), to the contemporary preference for coordinating (paratactic) sentence structures, to the mechanisms by which parataxis is achieved, to the potentials offered by subordinating (hypotactic) structures, and to the mechanisms by which hypotaxis is achieved. We'll also revisit conjunctions in their coordinating and subordinating roles. Finally, we'll begin to look more programmatically at prepositions and pronouns and other little words.

Reading: Kolln *et al*, Chapters 13 & 14 (265-306).

Class 11: Nov. 30: Small anticlimactic close, in which we'll address those elements that have received less attention than they deserve It's hard for me to know exactly where we'll be, but I will ensure that we have discussed punctuation issues sufficiently for you all to have a chance to excel on the exam.

Nov. 30 is also the due date for Assignment 4

AP/WRIT 2710 THE GRAMMAR COURSE

WRITING ASSIGNMENT ONE

Due Date: Sept 28, 2023

Grade Value: 10%

Length: Two pages, double spaced. Submitted via eClass.

As we now know, SWE is one English dialect among many, albeit one with a peculiar privilege attached. However, most speakers and/or writers of Standard English – newscasters, journalists, politicians, educators, academics – speak in different *registers* of the Standard.

The following excerpts are drawn from David Foster Wallace’s essay “Authority and American Usage” (1999) is an example of one such register of SWE. Drawing from your own linguistic repertoire, re-write/ paraphrase/ translate **one of these selections** into the register of English with/in which you are most comfortable (yes, re-writing the passage in the vernacular or slang is one – among many – options).

Please pay particular attention to your addressee; to whom are you speaking/writing and how does your sense of their comfort with SWE affect your phrasing? In addition, discuss **ONE** of the following:

- Discuss one or two features of Wallace’s essay that indicate it is written in SWE.
- Identify one or two strategies you used to re-write/ paraphrase/ translate this text into “your English.”
- The passage concerns inclusion and exclusion and one might say its perhaps extreme version of SWE performs exactly that separation. Identify and discuss two of these gatekeeping phrases.
- Wallace’s essay is meant to be humorous. Identify one or two uses of diction and/or syntax to discuss how he conveys humour. Were you successful in conveying humour in your own re-write?

1) Did you know that probing the seamy underbelly of US lexicography reveals ideological strife and controversy and intrigue and nastiness and fervor on a near-Lewinskian scale?

For instance, did you know that some modern dictionaries are notoriously liberal and others notoriously conservative, and that certain conservative dictionaries were actually conceived and designed as corrective responses to the "corruption" and "permissiveness" of certain liberal dictionaries? That the oligarchic device of having a special "Distinguished Usage Panel ... of outstanding professional speakers and writers" is some dictionaries' attempt at a compromise between the forces of egalitarianism and traditionalism in English, but that most linguistic liberals dismiss the Usage Panel device as mere sham-populism, as in e.g. "Calling upon the opinions of the elite, it claims to be a democratic guide"?

Did you know that US lexicography even *had* a seamy underbelly?

2) From one perspective, a certain irony attends the publication of any good new book on American usage. It is that the people who are going to be interested in such a book are also the people who are least going to need it—i.e., that offering counsel on the finer points of US English is preaching to the choir. The relevant choir here comprises that small percentage of American citizens who actually care about double modals and ergative verbs. The same sorts of people who watched *The History of English* on PBS (twice) and read Safire’s column with their half-caff every Sunday. The sorts of people who feel that

special blend of wincing despair and sneering superiority when they see EXPRESS LANE—10 ITEMS OR LESS or hear *dialogue* used as a verb or realize that the founders of the Super 8 Motel chain must surely have been ignorant of the meaning of *suppurate*. There are lots of epithets for people like this—Grammar Nazis, Usage Nerds, Syntax Snobs, &c. The term I was raised with is *SNOOT*.¹ The word might be slightly self-mocking, but other terms are outright dysphemisms. A SNOOT can be loosely defined as somebody who knows what *dysphemism* means and doesn't mind letting you know it.

¹ SNOOT (*n*) (*highly colloq*) is this reviewer's nuclear family's nickname à clef for a really extreme usage fanatic, the sort of person whose idea of Sunday fun is to hunt for mistakes in the very prose of Safire's column. [DFW's note]

AP/WRIT 2710 THE GRAMMAR COURSE

WRITING ASSIGNMENT TWO

Due Date: October 19, 2024

Grade Value: 10%

Length: Two pages, double spaced

TENSE SEQUENCE

Employing either the 10-event sequence provided below, or an equivalent sequence you have created on your own, compose a paragraph (or two) that includes mention of ALL of the events, *taking as your narrative present any event except the first and the last*. The point is to deploy the resources of English's tense/aspect system to help your reader understand the temporal relations among a sequence of events.

The paragraph(s) should be followed by a brief explanation of your intents in arranging the sequence as you have, with comments on any challenges you may have faced.

- 1) April 10 noon: Representatives of Margravine Arugula of Coriander and the rebellious druids arrange a two-day truce.
- 2) April 10 afternoon: An unwilling but dutiful Elvis Harissa is selected as envoy and charged with meeting the Margravine to agree upon the protocols for formal negotiations
- 3) April 10 afternoon: The Margravine and her chief Minister, Zorro Fenugreek, meet and disagree on tactics.
- 4) April 10 evening: The Druid envoy, under heavy guard, arrives at the palace.
- 5) April 11 am: The Margravine and Minister Fenugreek meet again. She agrees reluctantly to compromise.
- 6) April 11 am: The envoy has a nervous breakfast, mostly of avocados.
- 7) April 11 noon: The Margravine and the envoy meet to discuss the manner in which formal peace are to be conducted..
- 8) April 11 5 pm: They meet again, with Minister Fenugreek in attendance.
- 9) April 13 11 am: As arranged, the Chief Druid and their entourage arrive at the Temple of the Burning Oak to await the Margravine.
- 10) April 13 noon: The Margravine arrives in state. The talks begin.

AP/WRIT 2710 THE GRAMMAR COURSE

WRITING ASSIGNMENT 3

Due Date: November 9, 2023

Grade Value: 10%

Length: Two pages, double spaced

I am interested in language because it wounds or seduces me.
Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

Step One: Write a paragraph explaining or reflecting upon what you think Barthes means in his sentence. What does his sentence *do* to you? What does it evoke for you? How does it direct your thinking?

Step Two: By taking as your model the example shown in lecture with Gertrude Stein's sentence, "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?", generate multiple versions of Barthes' sentence. Recall that the example, based on an exercise in Brooks Landon's book *Building Great Sentences*, goes as follows:

Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?

Why should a sequence of words not be a pleasure?

Why should a sequence of words not give pleasure?

Shouldn't a sequence of words always give pleasure?

A sequence of words should always be a pleasure.

A sequence of words should always be pleasurable.

Words in sequence should always give pleasure.

We should always find pleasure in a sequence of words.

Why should a sequence of words not always give us pleasure?

As you generate your own versions of Barthes' sentence, know that the possibilities are infinite. Feel free to "try on" different conjunctions, to try on different words. What would introducing a modal auxiliary to the sentence do to it? Experiment with turning nouns into verbs, with using subordinate conjunctions to create complex sentences, with applying sentence focus tools like "there transformations" or "cleft sentences"; experiment with creating shifts in point of view by changing (or removing) pronouns. Explore what effects participial, infinitive, gerund, or even absolute phrases can have on a re-framing of Barthes' sentence.

Step Three: After you have produced anywhere from three to three thousand variations of Barthes' sentence, choose two to discuss. Consider choosing your favorite version and discuss why it works; consider choosing your least favorite version and explore why it is a weak variation.

Here are a few questions to guide you and/or to get you started:

-How are your versions different from Barthes' sentence?

-What are your sentences *doing* grammatically, syntactically, semantically?

-Speak specifically to the sentence pattern(s) you are working with: have you shortened Barthes' sentence? Extended Barthes' sentence? Why? Did you introduce any forms that are now functioning adverbially or adjectivally?

-How does the order of the words in your sentence affect its meaning? How does your order affect its pace, its rhythm, or even its emotional impact?

AP/WRIT 2710 THE GRAMMAR COURSE

WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOUR

Due Date: November 30, 2023

Grade Value: 10%

Length: 200 words

The LONG Sentence

For this assignment, students will compose one full, coherent, and grammatical sentence of 200 or so words. It may be prefaced and/or concluded by one or two short sentences. Those grading will not be counting words unless the submission appears to fall very much short.

The sentence will feature at least one use of each of the elements listed below. These ought to be indicated, either by means of footnotes or by the insertion of the appropriate number parenthetically after the element's use.

- 1) Comma splice²
- 2) Expanded determiner
- 3) Conjunctive adverb
- 4) Subordinator
- 5) Appositive
- 6) Participial phrase
- 7) Parallel construction

In addition, as a way of making it more difficult for you to download an extended sentence from some other source, I ask that your sentence employ at least four of the following words:

gerrymander
 lagoon
 tor
 boondoggle
 ruminant
 margrave
 larval
 entourage
 whence
 hobgoblin
 demur
 diaphanous
 dour
 langour
 smite
 strew
 theramin
 snood
 purloin
 aubade

ß

² Bonus points if this element is employed in the short--introductory or concluding--sentences.

