Mentor Texts To Teach Grammar And Mechanics: A Curriculum

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UTILIZING MENTOR TEXTS FOR THE INSTRUCTION OF GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Literacy Education.

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To my family, especially my dearest husband and wonderful mother, for their encouragement and support.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

When one thinks of grammar instruction, worksheets with directions to underline the subject and circle the predicate may come to mind. Some people may remember diagramming sentences or memorizing parts of speech. Others cringe upon hearing the terms “dangling participle” or “split infinitive”. Many remember the rule not to end a sentence with a preposition. Most people don’t have many fond remembrances of grammar lessons, but that doesn’t minimize its importance. Inattention to grammar and mechanics can result in real-life consequences such as a cover letter landing in the recycle bin versus the interview pile. In a more dramatic example, punctuation turned out to be a million dollar skill in a recently decided court case revolving around how to read a law that was missing a comma and cost a company potentially millions of dollars (Victor, 2017).

As important as it may be, I have very few recollections of my own experiences learning grammar in school. I remember learning parts of speech in elementary school so I could play Mad Libs, and I probably did worksheets. I know people who had the unfortunate experience of diagramming sentences repeatedly in junior high and high school, but I escaped the tortuous process. As teachers, I think we need to change the bad rap grammar gets in schools. Mastering skills of grammar and mechanics can help
students become more effective writers. I’ve worked with many students who don’t
consider themselves to be writers, but after experiencing writing workshop, they want to
write. Teachers need to marry engaging teaching with effective teaching so students not
only want to write, but become better writers. I’ve found much success with using trade
books and articles as models, or mentor texts, to teach writing structure and craft.
Couldn’t mentor texts be used also to teach grammar? My capstone question is: How can
mentor texts be used to effectively teach grammar and mechanics in an elementary
classroom?

Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will detail my reasons for wanting to explore
mentor texts as tools for grammar instruction. These reasons fall into three broad
categories: 1) the importance of grammar, 2) teacher desire to teach grammar in a manner
influenced by best practice, and 3) authentic tasks in school. The rest of this capstone will
explore what the literature has to say regarding grammar and mechanics instruction and
mentor texts as well as my own development of a curriculum designed in light of
available research.

Is grammar important? When I began teaching, I didn’t think so. Grammar really
took a back burner in my instruction. I began my teaching career in Texas in a bilingual
fourth grade classroom. In Texas at that time, fourth graders took the state writing test,
so my students, all native Spanish speakers, had to write well enough to pass the test -- in
English. Our school taught writing in a workshop style, and I really didn't teach grammar
except to make sure that my students could tell me what was a noun and what was a verb.
I pulled out an occasional worksheet about comma usage. That old standby, Mad Libs,
made its showing in my classroom. This continued to be the bulk of my grammar teaching for 15 years. It’s an area I’ve mostly ignored and never approached in any coherent way.

In my professional reading there were passing references to grammar and mechanics, but it just didn’t seem very important. *Bringing Grammar to Life* by Deborah Dean (2008) came in the mail as an International Reading Association (now International Literacy Association) Book Club selection, but I didn’t ever get around to more than perusing the first chapter. Other books geared to writing teachers – I’m a huge fan of Katie Wood Ray – exhorted me to teach grammar as part of my writer’s workshop, for example by teaching mini-lessons on how strong verbs increase the strength of writing. I made weak efforts to do this, but have never included systematic grammar instruction in my teaching in any form.

I didn’t have students find errors in sentences (something I’d heard was poor practice), but I didn’t seek out an alternative either. Several years ago, I saw a 15 minute DVD of Jeff Anderson teaching grammar with an invitational approach and really enjoyed it. He was using real literature and students were engaged. I’ve tried it in the classroom … twice. It’s not that it didn’t work; I just didn’t make an intentional effort to include any grammar instruction in my teaching.

With the emphasis on standardized testing, writing often gets deemphasized. I thought I was doing well just having my kids write, when many other teachers didn’t even seem to be doing that. My kids wrote – a lot. They got choice in topics, learned about genre, revision, and even editing. Their writing improved over the year. We had
some conversations around punctuation and sentence structure, but most of those were in one-to-one conferences taking advantage of a teachable moment. I almost never approached grammar and mechanics in whole class mini-lessons. It didn’t seem to matter.

So why does it matter now? I may not pay too much attention to good grammar, but I certainly notice when someone does not use standard grammar. The students at the high-poverty school where I work often come to school with limited exposure to Standard English. They will need to work extra hard for many of the opportunities students from higher socioeconomic status (SES) schools have; it is not fair for them to be overlooked for those opportunities simply because their grammar is not standard. Many employers are demanding strong writing skills. These students need instruction in grammar and mechanics.

Also, other teachers and I collaborate on instruction much more than I did at previous schools. In my current position, I spend part of my time as a Title I teacher pushing in to classrooms and co-teaching. I’m also the elementary literacy coach, so many teachers come to me when they are looking to improve instruction. I’ve had several mention grammar instruction, and I can tell them what doesn’t work, but am unable to give them anything more than vague suggestions or a few specific tips. I certainly haven’t been able to provide an alternative to what they’re already doing.

Over the past several years, my school has undergone an intensive school improvement process. We’ve implemented one school-wide intervention, accountable talk, and are beginning implementation of a second school-wide intervention, writing to learn. Although writing to learn is very deliberately not focused on grammar and
mechanics, it definitely has teachers thinking more about student writing. I anticipate more concerns and/or questions about grammar instruction in the next couple of years. Current practice in teaching grammar in most classrooms at my school falls into two camps: 1) workbook pages and daily oral language exercises where students find errors in teacher-provided sentences and correct them, or 2) no systematic approach. My informal observation of student writing reinforces that thinking: students make the same errors in their writing that they’ve just been learning to fix on a workbook page. There is little or no transfer. Unfortunately, I don’t have an effective alternative to offer teachers who want to provide their students with quality grammar instruction.

In one conversation I had with a third grade teaching colleague about teaching subject and predicate, the grammar concept in the first week of the basal reading program our school uses, we discovered that the 2010 Minnesota Language Arts Standards do not include the word predicate, not just in third grade, but for any grade level K-12. However third-graders do need to “Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). The question became, do we need to teach third graders about subject and predicate? My answer was to teach it if she (the classroom teacher) felt it was a good prerequisite lesson to being able to identify nouns and verbs. I would have jumped straight to nouns and verbs, but this teacher had a lot of experience teaching subject and predicate and felt she could better scaffold the students’ work with verbs by teaching them about predicates first. I think my answer was a good one, but I wish I had more knowledge about not just what grammar concepts to teach, but how to teach them.
An important piece of the how in addressing any standard is authenticity. Authentic tasks lead to higher engagement and greater understanding of content (Parsons & Ward, 2011). That was certainly true for me when it came to my own grammar learning.

As I went through elementary and middle school, I’m not sure what kind of grammar information was conveyed to me, but I don't think I ever really learned grammar until high school, and then only as a means to some other end. I learned as much about English grammar as I did Spanish grammar in my high school Spanish classes; the curriculum included concepts such as indirect object pronouns and subjunctive verb tenses. What's interesting is the fact that not ever having been able to articulate those concepts before never seemed to inhibit my ability to communicate effectively in English.

I also worked as a copy editor for the high school newspaper for three years. I had the AP style guide nearly memorized and knew that you shouldn't use a comma before “and” in a series of three, but should if there were more than three items in a series. I was the heavy-handed with the red pen and made my writers redo their stories as many as seven times if they weren't up to standard. Of course, much of what I did on the paper was far beyond grammar, helping with layout, writing headlines, checking sources. But, my reputation was that of the go-to-grammar-girl.

For someone who hadn’t had much grammar instruction, that reputation was pretty ironic. I mostly thought it was a quirky part of my personality. I didn’t realize that my knowledge of grammar allowed me to communicate more effectively, and not just in
the school newspaper. In high school, I wrote a poem and submitted it to the school
literary magazine. It was accepted unanimously by the committee, something that almost
never happened. After that submission, one of the editors spoke with me and said that
what was so great about the fact that I knew grammar and mechanics so well was that
when I wrote something that didn’t follow convention, it was obvious that I was doing it
for a purpose, to convey some sort of meaning. Isn’t that what writing is all about?

Students should have the opportunity to write for a purpose. Authentic writing for
authentic audiences can increase student engagement and learning, much as working on
the school paper did for me. But writers don’t only write. They also read – a lot. When I
need to write something I’ve never written before, such as a letter of recommendation, I
read first. I find models and try to follow them. Students should have as much
opportunity as possible to see good models of writing, not sentences full of errors.

Children should be exposed to models of high-quality writing, not poor ones we
expect them to have the expertise to be able to fix. These high quality models, or mentor
texts, have been a part of my approach to teaching other writing skills such as word
choice and organization for years. It seems that I should be able to use mentor texts to
教 grammar as well, but I don’t really know what that would look like in an
elementary classroom. Children should have fun with words and language. Despite many
people’s dull experiences with school grammar, pop culture has shown that grammar can
Approach to Punctuation* is a best-seller and the comma joke “Let’s eat grandpa” vs.
“Let’s eat, grandpa” is found on social media sites such as Pinterest and Facebook. At
this writing, Grammar Girl, creator of a podcast focused on tips for improving grammar, has over 600,000 likes on Facebook. Certainly writing is also hard work, but think about how people’s negative feelings toward writing, grammar, and mechanics might be different if they were encouraged to play with language.

Throughout this chapter, I have shared three reasons I am interested in exploring effective grammar and mechanics instruction utilizing mentor texts. First, it’s important. Since grammar is important, it is imperative to find an effective way to teach it. While effective does not necessarily mean fun, making something enjoyable (or at least not boring or painful) can increase its effectiveness. Secondly, several teachers and I have had discussions regarding grammar instruction, none arriving at very satisfactory answers. Finally, writing workshop is based on the idea of kids being real writers. If they are truly doing what real writers do, that must include grammar. It cannot be relegated to 20 minutes of worksheets at a separate time of day for students and reserved for the teacher’s red pen during workshop. It also cannot be ignored. These three reasons compel me to ask, *how can mentor texts be used to effectively teach grammar and mechanics in an elementary classroom?*

Throughout the rest of this capstone, I will explore this question, examining pertinent literature and developing a project that will provide an avenue for teachers to approach grammar and mechanics instruction in an effective, authentic way. Chapter two will provide a detailed review of literature to determine what experts have to say regarding grammar and mechanics instruction and mentor texts. Chapter three will detail my curriculum development project. Chapter four will share my results and conclusions.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

In chapter one, I discussed why grammar and mechanics are important, including how I am fairly adept at using them correctly. However, I have had little successful experience teaching them. Instead, I’ve mostly ignored grammar and mechanics, occasionally giving students a worksheet or mentioning verbs in a writing mini-lesson on some other aspect of craft. With the acknowledgement that good grammar is a way to open doors to societal advancement and a strong belief in mentor texts, I arrived at the following research question: *How can mentor texts be used effectively to teach grammar and mechanics in an elementary classroom?*

In this chapter, I will share my findings from researching the literature pertinent to this question. I will give a brief overview of grammar instruction, including its history and a rationale for teaching it. This will be followed by an overview of writing workshop, focusing on the use of mentor texts. The final section will discuss writing assessment, specifically as it pertains to grammar and mechanics.
Grammar Instruction

This section will provide an overview of grammar and mechanics instruction in schools. First, I will explore and arrive at a definition of grammar and mechanics for the purposes of this capstone. Then, I will discuss the history of grammar instruction which will lead into the rationale for teaching or not teaching grammar. This section will conclude with a brief discussion of what research has shown does not work regarding instruction in grammar and mechanics.

A Definition of Grammar

Grammar can mean different things to different people. As discussed in chapter one of this capstone, the term grammar may bring to mind any number of things; but what does it really mean? According to Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary (“grammar” n.d.), grammar is “the study of the classes of words, their inflections, and their functions and relations in the sentence.” There are three other definitions also listed, each slightly different, but all relating to a system of rules.

Weaver (1996) names three distinct types of grammar brainstormed by teachers and usually found in secondary school texts: 1) descriptive -- describing what is written or spoken, usually by naming parts of speech and explaining syntax; 2) prescriptive -- prescribing rules for correctness; and 3) rhetorical grammar -- suiting syntax to situational demands such as audience and genre. Descriptive grammar is the type of grammar students are engaging in when they diagram sentences. This type of grammar is also taught when students are labeling, circling, or underlining various parts of speech.
Descriptive grammar can also be useful for explaining how certain words can function as various parts of speech, depending on their use in a sentence. For example, park can be both a noun – he went to the park – and a verb – she is going to park the car. Prescriptive grammar is the rule-based grammar, the red pen, so to speak. It gives students rules to follow when writing or speaking. Students most often experience this when their writing is edited. The difficulty with prescriptive grammar is that the prescriptions often don’t match the language students encounter, both aurally and in print. Rhetorical grammar is more than simply describing or prescribing; it is grammar for effect. A study of rhetorical grammar considers audience and purpose for writing, using grammatical and syntactical moves for effect and style.

Anderson (2005) separates the terms grammar and mechanics, defining grammar as the guide for sentence and paragraph structure and mechanics as how writing is punctuated, capitalized, and formatted. Even when defined separately, grammar and mechanics are intimately connected. Students need an understanding of sentence structure and function in order to use mechanics correctly. In the writing framework of six traits, all of this is grouped together under the term, conventions. Conventions also includes spelling, but a study of spelling instruction is beyond the scope of this capstone (Anderson, 2005; Culham, 2003).

For the purposes of this capstone, I will follow the definition of grammar and mechanics used by Anderson (2005): structure for sentences and paragraphs along with formatting, capitalization, and punctuation. While instruction in these areas may include the descriptive and prescriptive grammars discussed by Weaver (1996), I am most
concerned with students’ understanding of rhetorical grammar, grammar for effect and style, as revealed in their writing. Having arrived at this definition, I will discuss how grammar and mechanics have been taught in the past.

**A History of Grammar Instruction**

In her seminal work, *Teaching Grammar in Context* (1996), Weaver gave a brief history of grammar instruction in the United States. She begins by considering the connection between English grammar texts in the 18th century and Latin grammar. This resulted from the belief that Latin was a “purer standard.” Therefore English grammar school books created prescriptions for correctness in English that were based on descriptions of Latin grammar, even creating rules for English based on language features that weren’t possible in Latin, such as split infinitives (Weaver, 1996). This prescriptive approach to grammar continued into the early nineteenth century when grammar was mostly memorizing and reciting rules. The second half of the nineteenth century added the use of exercises, such as combining sentences and answering questions; by the end of the 19th century, grammar was viewed not only as a means to train the mind, but a means to improve writing; this shift towards grammar as an avenue for improving writing strengthened throughout the 20th century. However, the teaching methods (the exercises) of the nineteenth century are still common today.

Although grammar may seem rule-oriented and straightforward, there has been much controversy around its instruction. Dean (2008) found evidence of awareness of the challenges grammar instruction presents as early as 1880. In 1936 the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) passed a resolution against the teaching of grammar (as
cited in Weaver, 1996, p. 10). The stance against formal grammar instruction continued with NCTE’s report *Research in Written Composition* (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963) which includes this strong statement:

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (pp. 37-38)

This statement advocates a shift away from traditional grammar instruction, although that research has not always translated to the classroom. It was quoted in nearly every source I reviewed which had any discussion of the history of grammar instruction. Subsequent reports seem to echo this finding against the teaching of formal grammar (Dean, 2008; Weaver, 1996).

Although the conclusion that formal grammar instruction is not effective is widely accepted, there are those who disagree. Kolln (1981) wrote an article critiquing the methodology used in many of the previous studies. Her strongest conviction was that formal grammar instruction does not necessitate isolated grammar instruction and that teaching grammar along with explicit application may be effective. Because of this view, Kolln believed that the conclusion that there should be no formal grammar instruction is unjustified by research. The negativity towards formal grammar instruction seems to have created a rift not only among researchers, but among practitioners, with some classroom
teachers abandoning all grammar instruction and others continuing to teach it anyway (Dean, 2008).

**Rationale for Teaching Grammar – or Not**

With the lack of evidence of any positive effects of grammar instruction, one may wonder why anyone would bother to teach grammar at all. Weaver (1996) listed many reasons that have historically been offered as a rationale for teaching grammar, including mental discipline, better test scores, and improved language use. However, Weaver (1996) also summarizes statements found in both the 1950 and 1960 editions of the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* and then concludes that,

> the research apparently gave no support to the idea that teaching grammar would help students develop mental discipline, master another language, or become better users of their native language. Indeed, further evidence indicated that training in formal grammar did not transfer to any significant extent to writing "correct" English or even to recognizing it (p. 10).

None of the studies support grammar instruction as a means to improve mental ability, test scores, foreign or high-prestige language mastery, and general language use (Weaver, 1996).

As mentioned previously, there are detractors. Kolln (1981) believed that formal grammar instruction does not necessarily mean grammar in isolation and that the conclusion that there should be no formal grammar instruction is unjustified by research.
There does seem to be a distinction between formal grammar instruction and traditional grammar instruction. In the introduction of their 2010 book, Benjamin and Berger described old grammar teaching (traditional grammar instruction) as a three step process that focuses on low-level thinking, mostly identification. The three steps are as follows: 1) introduction of a concept or definition, 2) contrived sentences as examples, and 3) students correct errors or identify words to fit the given definition. In the same book, Benjamin and Berger (2010) discussed the problems with an approach in which teachers deal with grammar problems as they arise; teachers who’ve abandoned any formal grammar instruction may reserve any mention of grammar for the editing stage in process writing and therefore never approach certain grammar concepts with students. In fact, Benjamin and Berger (2010) advocate the use of a grammar calendar where teachers map out when they will teacher particular grammar concepts in order to ensure that certain concepts are taught and addressed. A planned, formal approach is advocated elsewhere throughout the literature as well (Anderson, 2005; Angelillo, 2002).

In addition to the support for formal (though not traditional) grammar instruction found in the research, the Common Core State Standards provide another rationale for instruction in grammar and mechanics. The College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010) include one standard devoted to grammar and usage; one devoted to capitalization, punctuation, and spelling (mechanics); and one concerned with rhetorical grammar, making “effective choices for meaning or style” (p. 37). Beginning in kindergarten, students are expected to demonstrate their command of grammar in speaking and writing and their command of
mechanics in writing. Yet they are never asked to label or identify parts of speech or any other grammatical or syntactical element. Current English Language Arts standards require teachers to teach grammar, but, like all standards, they do not provide a guide for how to do so. Local education agencies and teachers must determine how to effectively teach grammar and mechanics in classrooms.

What Doesn’t Work

There is a general consensus among researchers that isolated grammar instruction is not effective (Benjamin & Berger, 2010; Dean, 2008; Weaver, 1996). This includes grammar worksheets and textbook exercises. The daily editing exercises in many classrooms aren’t actually instruction (Anderson, 2005). Only students who already know what the errors are can complete them successfully. In other words, they aren’t actually learning anything. These low-level exercises are also a far cry from the high-level thinking that goes into producing a high-quality composition (Benjamin & Berger, 2010).

Summary

Based on my review of the literature, I have arrived at a definition for grammar and mechanics for the purposes of this capstone. This section has also offered a brief history of grammar instruction, a rationale for teaching it, and evidence that traditional grammar and mechanics instruction has not successfully transferred into student writing. The next section will discuss an approach to writing instruction currently used in many classrooms.
Writing Workshop

Writing workshop has children do the work of real writers. It showcases writing as a process and is a structure for children to engage in the process of writing. However, Anderson (2005) states that writing is not a linear process as it is sometimes taught; it does not have steps of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing that follow one another in a neat order. Writing is a recursive process, so real writers do not attend to grammar only at one isolated point (Anderson, 2005). Calkins (1994) suggested that editing is important as a time to look again at the use of conventions, not as the only time to put them to use. Therefore, grammar instruction should not be relegated only to the times when children (or the teacher) are editing their work. The writing process may be useful to inform the instruction of a teacher and helpful in describing the work of a writer, but the writing process itself does not make up a writing workshop.

Structure, time, and choice are the important elements of writing workshop, but there is variation in how those elements could be implemented. Indeed, Calkins did not prescribe a specific structure for writing workshop, insisting that “How we structure the workshop is less important than that we structure it (1994, p. 188).” Without a predictable structure and environment for writing, students are unable to develop independent rhythms and strategies; they are unable to plan for writing because they are always waiting to see what the teacher will do (Calkins, 1994). The predictable structure of a writing workshop may include mini-lessons, work time, conferring, share sessions, and publication celebrations. Grammar and mechanics may be broached in several of those components, but, for the purposes of this capstone, I will focus on mini-lessons.
Mini-lessons are a way for the teacher to engage the entire class, and, much like the entire workshop, often have a structure to themselves. The teacher decides where and when to meet, what materials will be needed, whether to record the content of the lesson (e.g. on an anchor chart), and what the content will actually be (Calkins, 1994). Although Calkins (1994) suggested at least five different types of mini-lessons, the two most relevant to this capstone are brief experimentation and reading literature aloud.

In using a mini-lesson for experimentation, a strategy or technique is introduced and the entire class is expected to try it. This does not necessarily mean they are required to use this particular technique or strategy, but it is a short piece of instruction to introduce them to something that may be helpful in their own writing (Calkins, 1994). What makes a mini-lesson focused on experimentation effective is not only the length, approximately 10 minutes, but the fact that the content is determined in the context of writers who are working in an environment with some amount of choice by a teacher who is considering what specific content will help those writers grow the most.

The other type of relevant mini-lesson, using authentic literature, can be very open-ended but is also the basis for the following section on mentor texts from literature. It is important for effective writing mini-lessons using literature to be taught from a writer’s perspective rather than allowing them to turn into a reading lesson. Teachers should lead students to examine literature not just for what it says or implies - a reader’s perspective - but for how the writer crafts words and sentences to communicate a certain message to the reader - a writer’s perspective. A reader can read like a writer by examining the choices a writer makes and the effect they have on the message conveyed.
In a literature-based writing mini-lesson, literature may stand on its own, inspiring students to write, or it may be used to foster a deliberate mentorship (Calkins, 1994). Reading, or listening to, good writing may spark ideas in young writers and it may inspire them to keep writing, but to really grow as a writer, students need to learn to read like writers, not just readers who can glean ideas from a connection they may have to a book. Writers, including student writers, need to study the craft of writing, the specific strategies and techniques experienced writers use (Calkins, 1994; Ray, 1999). When they apprentice themselves to writers by studying their writing, those texts serve as mentors.

**Mentor Texts**

The idea of imitating mentors in writing is not all that different from imitating mentors in speaking. In learning spoken language, children often repeat what they hear. They may also overgeneralize rules or make other mistakes, but in the spoken language of toddlers, these are usually understood to be signs of learning (Vygotsky, as cited in Anderson, 2005, p. 4). In writing, students may engage in the same behaviors. Their attempts may not be quite right, but they are practicing and learning when imitation is allowed and encouraged in the classroom (Dean, 2001). What children hear becomes part of their pool of linguistic knowledge and often appears in their writing (Brown & Cambourne, 1990). This idea points toward the importance of using quality, authentic texts as much as possible – even for the teaching of grammar – rather than contrived sentences with errors.

The practice students get in imitation is different from the practice they get in finding errors. Viewing correct sentences with grammatical structures they may not
normally use is a form of priming them to use those structures in the future. According to Leonard (2011), verbal priming is affected by syntactic structure, even when word choice and semantics differ. A speaker hearing a primed sentence is more likely to produce a sentence with a similar structure. If this is true for verbal production, it may also be true for written production.

Why priming works is still being researched. Some researchers currently view priming as a form of temporary activation of language structure, while others believe it is a form of implicit learning. Evidence for implicit learning includes: 1) priming effects are seen even when there is intervening material between the priming sentence and the target sentence; 2) largest priming effects occur with less common structures, reflecting the idea that less well-known structures would show greater learning effects; 3) a computational model generated sentences over time, adapting them, and showing what appeared to be the effects of long-term learning (Leonard, 2011). Whether priming functions as temporary activation or a form of implicit learning, primed oral sentences increase the variety of sentence structures accessible to learners. If deliberately chosen sentences can do this for oral language expression, it is not a huge mental leap to believe they can do this for written language expression as well. One can think of the written sentences used for priming as mentor texts.

Mentor texts have an important role in writing workshop. Any meaningful chunk of text, as short as one sentence, can be used as a mentor text (Anderson, 2005). Mini-lessons and conferences are times when teachers can introduce students to mentors and guide them to investigate and imitate engaging, well-written texts. Mentor texts can
be used to foster inquiry and risk-taking, important practices for writers and learners in
general. Students don’t always see a reading-writing connection, though, unless it is
deliberately fostered by the teacher through the classroom environment. Moreover, as
students begin to read full-length novels, they are less likely to make the connection to
the shorter texts they are probably writing. Choosing shorter texts and/or excerpts as
mentor texts can help bridge that gap (Calkins, 1994).

One of the challenges for teachers in helping students use mentor texts is the lack
of realization that authors make deliberate decisions about what happens in a story and
how it is portrayed. Author’s craft is not something that just happens, but unless students
become conscious of an author’s technique, they will not be able to borrow it to try in
their own writing (Calkins, 1994). To be writers and learn from others’ writing, students
need to learn to read like writers, examining what they see in others’ writing and
considering how they could use what they see in their own writing (Angelillo, 2002; Ray,
1999).

When teachers guide students to use and imitate mentor texts, there are not only
the effects of implicit learning from viewing a given language structure, but of explicit
instruction. This explicit instruction includes 1) noticing an element of a mentor text, 2)
describing and naming it, 3) and trying the same writing move in their own text
(Paraskevas, 2006; Ray, 2002). Both Anderson (2005) and Benjamin and Berger (2010)
advocated for extended exposure to a particular structure. Studying many quality
examples over time can help students begin to see patterns in language and function.
Of course, mentor texts can be used for more than studying grammar and mechanics. Ray (1999) divided what she noticed about texts into two categories: structure and ways with words. Structure is about the structure of an entire text rather than the structure of a single sentence. Examples include circular texts, alphabet texts, and narrative poem structures. Studying the craft of a single sentence or paragraph, the greater concern of this capstone, would fall under the category of ways with words. However, an effective sentence is not simply any sentence that follows the rules of traditional grammar; in fact, some craft techniques defy the rules of traditional grammar, rules such as eliminating sentence fragments (Ray, 1999). The primary concern of writers instead is to use language to convey meaning and to sound good. Author Gary Paulsen (1996) explains the primacy of meaning over correctness when he writes:

> Language, really, is a dance for me. I long ago decided that I would do anything possible to make a story work right – including sometimes getting fast and loose with grammar. Story is all, and language is a tool to make the story work right and should, I think, be kept flexible to fit needs (p. 276).

While this approach may be challenging for traditional grammarians, it is in keeping with the approach of writing workshop as a reflection of the authentic work writers do in the real world.

**Summary**

Through reviewing the literature, this section has provided an overview of writing workshop, including the key components of time, choice, and structure. One piece of that structure is using mini-lessons for explicit whole-class instruction. There are several
types of mini-lessons, but the one most relevant to this capstone is the literature-based mini-lesson. I expanded on literature-based mini-lessons with a discussion of mentor texts. A significant part of this section explained the concept of priming and how what researchers know about verbal priming may also be applicable to writing. Finally, I discussed how teachers might use mentor texts for explicit instruction while still staying true to the writing workshop approach of authenticity.

**Assessment**

In the previous section, I discussed writer’s workshop, including mini-lessons and mentor texts. In order for teachers to effectively plan instruction, including mini-lessons, they must constantly be assessing students’ writing, using formative as well as summative assessment. Writing is a complex, multi-dimensional task; assessment of writing is also complex.

Teachers assess student writing for many reasons and may often do so informally. They read, observe, and conference with students. Teachers may leave students verbal or written comments. There may be systems that include checklists, anecdotal records, and portfolios. In short, there are numerous types of assessment available for teachers to use (Reeves & Stanford, 2009). This section will first discuss rubrics in general, before moving on to Six Traits, a specific rubric. Finally, I will briefly discuss curriculum-based measurement (CBM) in writing.

**Rubrics**

Many teachers use rubrics to assess student writing. According to Reeves and Stanford (2009), a rubric is “any set of criteria that describe the varying degrees of
excellence or levels of development in an activity, process, or product” (p. 25). Not only do rubrics distinguish levels of performance among students, but they provide feedback to students and teachers and communicate to parents (Reeves & Stanford, 2009). Rubrics are also a common way to evaluate student writing for assessments beyond the classroom such as state assessments or essays required for college admission. Rubrics can be used holistically or analytically (Coker & Ritchey, 2010).

In addition to their evaluative purposes, rubrics may be instructional (Andrade, 2000; Andrade, 2005). Rubrics help teachers focus their instruction and provide common language for teachers and students. Rubrics are assessment for instruction, rather than simply assessment of instruction or assessment of student learning (Reeves & Stanford, 2009). If rubrics are given to students, or created with students, before they begin an assignment, and then used as the basis for feedback from the teacher, self, and peers while the assignment is in process, before ever being used to assign a final grade, they help the students learn and produce the desired quality of work (Andrade, 2000; Andrade, 2005; Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008). These rubrics serve an instructional purpose in addition to being an evaluative tool.

Another advantage of rubrics is that they can measure writing process as well as product (Reeves & Stanford, 2009). This is important in a workshop setting because it is the process that is emphasized. If there is time devoted to making the process visible through explicit teaching and helping kids develop independence through a gradual release of responsibility, then the assessments should give some weight to how students use what they’ve been taught (Reeves & Stanford, 2009). The ability to assess process
with rubrics also aligns with Common Core State Standards (CCSS), since three of the ten writing standards in CCSS are about the writing process.

In addition to their function of supporting instruction, rubrics must be valid, reliable, and equitable. A valid rubric will be aligned to standards and what is actually being taught in the classroom. It is reliable if multiple scorers will assess student work similarly against the rubric and equitable if ratings are not due to gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or other factors (Andrade, 2005). In order to address validity and reliability concerns, teachers can develop the rubric together with a copy of the standards at hand. Collaboration of a teaching team (and the support of an literacy coach or other expert if available) will help reduce any aspect of the standards that could be overlooked (Andrade, 2005). Teachers can also engage in a regular rubric check with colleagues by asking multiple teachers to score samples of student work and comparing ratings (Andrade et al., 2008; Spence, 2010; Stefl-Mabry, 2004). Discuss any differences and whether they are due to a rubric that needs revision or lack of clarity among scorers. This serves to also familiarize teachers with the rubric and helps them maintain fidelity to the rubric.

Another challenge in developing effective rubrics is the necessity to have descriptors that clearly distinguish between levels of quality. One way to address this is to provide objective criteria, such as specifying a number or percentage of times a student skill should occur, rather than simply using subjective words like “weak,” “excellent” or “most” (Stefl-Mabry, 2004). Another alternative is to use a single point rubric which only identifies criteria required at the proficient level and then leaves space for teacher
feedback in areas where students do not meet or exceed proficiency standards (Fluckiger, 2010).

**Six Traits or 6 + 1 Traits**

A widely used analytic rubric is Six Traits (also called 6 + 1 Traits). These traits were developed by Education Northwest (also known as as NWREL, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory) to help teachers provide clear, consistent feedback on writing with common language (Education Northwest, 2017). The six traits are ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions. The additional trait is presentation and includes visual as well as textual elements (Education Northwest, 2012). The two areas that are most relevant to this paper are sentence fluency and conventions (see Appendix A).

Sentence fluency is defined by Education Northwest (2012) as “the rhythm and flow of the language” (Sentence Fluency section, para. 1). It posits that writers convey meaning not only by the words they use, but through the rhythm and types of sentences with which they write. Culham (2003) defines it as an auditory trait, one the reader hears. To become fluent with the trait of sentence fluency, writers need to hear good writing. This relationship between sentence fluency and auditory input fits with the earlier discussion in this paper of priming and mentor texts. To help students develop sentence fluency, it is essential that students hear well-written pieces read aloud. Teachers and students can discuss together what makes the piece fluent, speaking about specific techniques and styles writers use. Teachers may also choose to share pieces that aren’t
written fluently to provide contrast for students, guiding students towards hearing the
difference on their own.

In her discussion of sentence fluency, Culham (2003) suggests an order for
teaching students to form correct sentences. This order begins with simple sentences and
ends with effective fragments. While fragments are not considered correct by traditional
standards, Culham considers fragments to be a valid means of expression if a writer is
using them intentionally to convey meaning. This reinforces the view that sentence
structures should be flexible, with meaning superseding a need for correctness.

Although conveying meaning is the primary concern of Six Traits, conventions
are still necessary. Conventions include spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage,
capitalization, and paragraphing (Culham, 2003; Education Northwest, 2012). Culham
(2003) explains that conventions are necessary because writing is meant for an audience.
If no one other than the author were to read his or her writing, there would be no reason
to attend to punctuation, grammar, or spelling. Inspired by Mem Fox, Culham (2003)
compares conventions to good table manners, emphasizing that they are used to
communicate with others during a meal, but are not the contents of the meal.

Even with the acknowledgement that there is a need for correctness with
conventions, it is important to remember that conventions are only one of the Six Traits.
An overemphasis on conventions can cause students’ writing to falter in the other traits.
They become so focused on making it right, that they aren’t willing to stretch themselves
and grow. Classrooms in which students are successful writers who use conventions
effectively are those in which there is reward for correctness and for risk taking (Culham, 2003).

**Curriculum-Based Measurement**

While rubrics, including Six Traits, can be useful classroom assessments, sometimes more standardized, norm-referenced assessments are needed, in particular to show student growth in particular areas. Curriculum-based measurements (CBM) provide this type of assessment. CBM is a quantitative, objective measure, usually involving counting the number of words written in a time limit, the number of words spelled correctly, and the number of correct word sequences (correct words in a row). Teachers who use curriculum-based measurement need to be conscientious of exactly what is and is not being measured. CBM may be appropriate for students in the primary grades or for monitoring progress of students with learning difficulties (Coker & Ritchey, 2010).

For young writers in kindergarten to first and possibly second grade, assessments that measure quantitative characteristics of writing may be appropriate because children at this age are still learning the skills necessary to put their words on paper. Doing so demands enough cognitive energy that it limits the complexity of their writing (Coker & Ritchey, 2010). Because of this, measurements on tasks such as copying and dictation may correlate closely to writing quality - simply because once students are able to transcribe the words, their cognitive load is freed up enough to focus on the quality, moving from simply conveying knowledge to transforming knowledge (Coker & Ritchey, 2010).
Another consideration in using CBM is the ability of teachers to use the measure. CBM may be more sensitive to small improvements in student writing or the effect of instruction in specific skills or text features than a rubric, especially a holistic rubric (Coker & Ritchey, 2010). However, writing is a multi-dimensional task and CBM is limited in what information it can capture about student writing. In addition, teachers may value their own rubric ratings as more informative than CBM scores (Gansle, VanDerHeyden, Noell, Resetar, & Williams, 2006).

**Summary**

Throughout this section, I’ve discussed three main writing assessments: rubrics, Six Traits - a specific rubric and framework, and CBM. Rubrics can serve both evaluative and instructional purposes and can measure process as well as product. The quality of rubrics can be affected by their clarity or lack thereof and by teachers’ fidelity to the rubric. Six Traits is a specific type of rubric as well as an instructional framework for teaching writing. It names six characteristics of quality writing, the most pertinent for this capstone being sentence fluency and conventions. The third type of assessment I discussed was CBM, where correct words and word sequences are counted to arrive at standardized, norm-referenced score.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter I have provided an overview of my findings in the literature about grammar and mechanics, including the history of grammar instruction. I’ve also discussed writing workshop, focusing especially on the use of mentor texts, and writing assessment, particularly as it relates to grammar and mechanics. This review of
the literature is in preparation for creation of a curriculum that addresses the research question: *How can mentor texts be used effectively to teach grammar and mechanics in an elementary classroom?*

In the third chapter, I will describe in detail the curriculum guide I will develop based on the research presented in chapter two. This will include a description of the setting and participants intended to use the curriculum guide, the curricular framework, and components of the curriculum.
CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Chapter one provided the context for how I arrived at the research question: *How can mentor texts be used effectively to teach grammar and mechanics in an elementary classroom?* Chapter two presented a review of research literature relevant to the research question, particularly in the areas of a history and rationale for grammar instruction, writing workshop as an instructional framework, mentor texts as instructional tools, and assessment of writing conventions. This chapter will first discuss the setting, participants, and curricular framework before providing the project and assessment description in detail.

Setting and Participants

This curriculum is designed for implementation in an elementary classroom setting in at a small rural school in Minnesota. The district covers just over 600 square miles. Enrollment in grades K-6 totals just over 400 students. According to Minnesota Report Card, in 2018 87% of students were Caucasian. The other 13% of students are composed of various ethnicities with American Indians making up the largest minority
group. Fifty-one percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, and two percent are homeless. Fourteen percent receive special education services.

Academically, students have been increasing proficiency on state assessments in math and reading each year since 2014. In 2017, the percentage of students proficient on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) in math was two points above the state average; it was two points below the state average in reading. Although special education students who have a writing goal on their Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are assessed with a writing progress monitoring tool that counts correct written word sequences, no standardized writing assessments are given schoolwide.

Teachers implementing the curriculum have varied levels of education and experience. Nearly half have master’s degrees, and all are compliant with state licensing requirements. Over 90% of teachers in the school have more than three years of experience, and nearly 50% have more than 10 years of experience. Over the past three years professional development in the school has been focused on effective standards implementation and alignment and implementation of accountable talk as a schoolwide instructional intervention. Currently, the school leadership team, composed of several teachers and the school principal, is in the beginning stages of providing professional development on a second schoolwide instructional intervention: writing to learn. This intervention is focused on writing as it relates to content without attention to grammar and mechanics.

There is not a specific writing curriculum in use across all grade levels; however teachers have identified focus standards for each month. For example, a particular grade
level may focus on opinion writing and the Minnesota ELA Standards that accompany
opinion writing for one month, then focus on narrative writing the next month. Teachers
use elements of the writing workshop -- choice, time, and structure -- in various manners
and to various degrees. Some teachers spend little time directly teaching grammar; others
spend more time. Some work is done on grammar exercises in isolation, particularly
identifying parts of speech within a sentence and Daily Oral Language (DOL) or
correcting errors in sentences.

Curricular Framework

This project will be framed by three major paradigms: Common Core State
Standards (CCSS), mentor texts, and rubrics. Each of those elements connects and
overlaps to inform the project design.

Common Core State Standards

Minnesota has adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English
Language Arts. There are four strands in the writing component of CCSS: Text Types
and Purposes, Writing Process, Research to Build and Present Knowledge, and Range of
Writing. Although Minnesota has adopted CCSS, there are a few small additions that
have been made. The most relevant addition to this capstone is in the Range of Writing
strand, that students “independently select topics and formats” for writing projects.

In addition to the writing standards, language standards are relevant, specifically
the strands on Conventions of Standard English and Knowledge of English. These
standards require students to “demonstrate command of the conventions of standard
English … when writing or speaking” or “use knowledge of language and its conventions
when writing, speaking, reading, or listening” (National Governors Association, 2010a, pp. 28-29). CCSS also includes a chart of language skills by grade level. The standards place an emphasis on student utilization of grammar skills over identification. While identification may be important to build a common vocabulary in order to have productive classroom conversations around written text, the main purpose is for students to be able to effectively use grammar and language. In fact, although language is a separate strand, it is considered inseparable to the modalities of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. There is a note on the writing strand stating that an important purpose of writing is communication to an audience. Appendix A of the CCSS also emphasizes the ability of students to make “purposeful and effective” (National Governors Association, 2010b, p. 29). choices in their language usage. All of this shows that conveying meaning is a key consideration when viewing student writing.

Another important contribution of CCSS is in two paradigm shifts: 1) regular exposure to complex text and 2) an increased emphasis on informational text (National Governors Associations, 2018). Because the standards were designed to scaffold students towards college and career readiness, they call for students to work regularly with increasingly complex texts. The standards also call for an increased usage of informational text to scaffold students towards the types of reading they will do in college and/or the workforce. Both of these shifts will affect texts chosen as mentor texts for this project.
Mentor Texts

Mentor texts are texts students can use to learn about writing. Primarily, students use them for imitation, and in imitating what they see other writers do, they are learning (Dean, 2001). It is important that students have access to high quality, complex texts since those texts will become part of their linguistic knowledge (Brown & Cambourne, 1990). Exposing students to texts that have syntactic structures teachers want students to imitate in their own writing not only adds to the linguistic knowledge available to students; it may actually prime them to use those structures, making it more likely students will achieve the instructional goal (Leonard, 2011).

Mentor texts can be any type of text, but short texts or excerpts of longer texts can be particularly beneficial in helping students connect their writing to the particular text (Calkins, 1994). Another component to helping students utilize mentor texts is modeling how to use them. Teacher modeling has two major benefits. First, it helps students become aware that authors consciously make decisions about the words they put on the page; students realize that the words don’t just appear, and since authors make decisions about their writing, they must make decisions about their writing as well (Calkins, 1994). Secondly, when teachers model how to use mentor texts, it allows students access to the thinking process behind it so that students can eventually apply it to their own encounters with texts (Angelillo, 2002; Ray, 1999).

Rubrics

Rubrics are an important mode of assessment for student writing for several reasons. First, they can be used as instructional tools, not purely for summative
assessment (Andrade, 2000; Andrade, 2005; Reeves & Stanford, 2009). Also, they can assess the writing process in addition to the final product (Reeves & Stanford, 2009). Writing process is an important part of the CCSS and should be assessed along with the other standards. Additionally, rubrics offer teachers an opportunity for collaboration. Of course, rubrics can be used independently, but when teachers hold discussions around a rubric it increases their understanding of the success criteria for students and ensures they are instructing and assessing with fidelity to the standards and fairness to students (Andrade, 2005).

Another advantage to rubrics is that they can provide flexible, informative feedback to students. Traditional rubrics include descriptors at various achievement levels. These descriptors can help students self-evaluate and define their own level of proficiency in comparison with the expectation(s) set forth in the rubric (Reeves & Stanford, 2009). While traditional rubrics can be beneficial in distinguishing achievement levels, single-point rubrics can also provide detailed feedback to learners. A single-point rubric only describes the proficient level of achievement. Where students match the descriptors, teachers can highlight, circle, or underline them. Where students fall below or exceed particular descriptors, a single-point rubric has room for teachers to indicate specifically which aspects of their performance fall outside of the proficiency description and provide detailed feedback (Fluckiger, 2010).

**Project Description**

In order to further explore the research question, *how can mentor texts be used to effectively teach grammar and mechanics in an elementary classroom?* I will develop a
curriculum guide consisting of several parts. This guide is geared towards teachers working with students in third and fourth grades. While younger students can certainly utilize mentor texts, several of the writing process and language standards in the CCSS do not begin until third grade. Also, many writers in the primary grades are still working through the physical act of getting words on paper and so the needs for assessment are somewhat different (Coker & Ritchey, 2010).

The first part of the curriculum guide will include a short, rationale for teaching grammar and mechanics and for using mentor texts that is written in teacher-friendly language. Next there will be a number of lessons with objectives related to the writing and language strands in the CCSS. In addition to addressing standards, these lessons will address essential questions as defined by Wiggins and McTighe (2011). Most of these lessons will include mentor texts. In keeping with the CCSS emphasis on varied text types, mentor texts will include both literature and informational texts. The mentor texts themselves will serve as a model, but each excerpt will also include a suggested teacher model. Teachers can use this suggestion as they think through the text and how to model their own writing after it for students. Lessons will follow the general sequence of 1) noticing an element of a mentor text, 2) describing and naming it, 3) and trying the same writing move in their own text (Paraskevas, 2006; Ray, 2002). To scaffold student attempts at using the writing element, the teacher will model this before students are expected to try it on their own.

Select lessons will also include links to video models of lesson implementation which I will create. I hope these video models will help teachers to envision what this
type of grammar instruction might look like in their own classrooms. Once teachers achieve a level of comfort with utilizing mentor texts for the purpose of instruction in grammar and mechanics, I hope they will be able to transfer the structure of the lessons to their own selected texts that are most relevant for their classrooms.

In addition to mentor texts, lessons will include assessment. Assessment suggestions will vary depending on the objectives, but rubrics will be a major component. In addition, there will be a rubric that will help teachers compare beginning and ending writing samples to ensure all students are increasing their effective use of grammar and mechanics over time.

This curriculum guide can be implemented flexibly throughout the year dependent on students’ needs. Lessons do not need to be implemented in a specific order. Suggested time is approximately 15 minutes twice per week. This instruction in grammar and mechanics is meant to supplement other writing instruction teachers offer, including writing workshop. Students will be invited to apply their learning from the lessons in this guide to their current writing projects. The hope is that this will increase transfer to student writing in service of the ultimate goal: increasing effective communication to an audience.

**Timeline for Completion**

In order to create an effective curriculum that adequately addresses my research question, I’ve broken the process down into several steps. My first task will be to identify quality texts to serve as mentor texts. Then I will read each of the mentor texts and select
sentences that correlate with Common Core State Standards in Language. I anticipate this to take about one week.

Next I need to group the standards into units and create essential questions for those units (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). Based on the standards, I will create an assessment rubric for the unit. While writing essential questions and creating a rubric should not take more than a few hours of hands-on time, I will need a few days of reflection time for these steps.

With an outline of my unit in place, I can begin to write lessons. I intend to write one or two lessons and then request feedback from peers before revising and continuing to write lessons to complete the unit. I anticipate a week-long return period for feedback. At this point, I will write a couple more lessons and set up times with colleagues to try out the lessons with third and fourth grade classes and record video, approximately another week. This may result in further revisions. Finally, I will spend a very intense week finishing out the lessons for the unit. The two weeks following this will give me a chance to finish up any tasks that still need to be done and make content and formatting revisions. This brings the total time for project completion to six or seven weeks.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a description of the setting and participants for which the curriculum guide will be developed. It also outlined three major curricular frameworks that will influence the curriculum guide: the CCSS and accompanying key shifts, mentor texts, and rubrics. Next, this chapter described the components that will be included in the curriculum guide: a short rationale in teacher-friendly language, lessons
utilizing mentor texts and teacher modeling, video models of select lessons, and assessment components. Finally, the chapter outlined a timeline for project completion.

The following chapter, chapter four, will reflect on the development of the curriculum guide, particularly successes and limitations. It will consider connections to previous research findings explored in chapter two and suggest areas for future research. In addition, it will explore what I have learned through my research and development of the curriculum guide. Finally, chapter four will outline recommendations for school leaders to consider relating to curriculum and instruction in grammar and mechanics based on my review of research and my experience developing the curriculum guide.
CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions

Introduction

Chapter one of this capstone provided background for understanding how I arrived at my research question: *How can mentor texts be used effectively to teach grammar and mechanics in an elementary classroom?* Chapter two reviewed research literature relevant to this question. In light of the research, chapter three offered a description of a curriculum project developed in order to answer my research question. This chapter will explore the learning I’ve done as a result of this research and design process, including connections to the literature review in chapter two. It will also consider results of this project in regards to possible policy implications, future research possibilities, and potential benefits to the education profession.

Major Learnings

I have learned a lot through the completion of this capstone. I would categorize my learning into two broad areas: content learning and process learning. Content learning is what I actually learned. Some of it was completely new for me, while other content was somewhat familiar, but was reinforced by research. Process learning is a result of what I gained through the process of research and curriculum creation.
**Content Learning**

Regarding content, I learned from the literature review that challenges around grammar instruction are not new. I hadn’t realized there was such a disconnect between research and classroom practice (Dean, 2008; Weaver, 1996). Knowing about the disconnect motivated me to complete this project, to contribute to the profession in a way that would help close that gap. Researching how to close that gap led me to research about priming (Leonard, 2011), which I had never heard of before researching this topic. I moved from research to curriculum creation with the concept of priming in mind, and I knew I wanted to step away from the low-level grammar instruction commonly used in classrooms for decades that my research had shown was largely ineffective (Benjamin & Berger, 2010; Dean, 2008; Weaver, 1996). Learning about priming meant that I could ask students to imitate text. It meant that mentor texts were a viable way to approach grammar instruction and a possible avenue for closing the gap between research and practice.

Another important piece of content I explored was the research around rubrics. I had used rubrics frequently before beginning this capstone, but reading research on rubrics helped solidify my understanding of how to use rubrics effectively for instructional purposes, not just assessment (Reeves & Stanford, 2009). I also learned about single-point rubrics (Fluckiger, 2010). These learnings on rubrics are ones I can carry with me and use in multiple subject areas and across grade levels. I feel like I can construct rubrics more effectively as a result of my research.
Process Learning

Beyond simply increasing content knowledge, moving through the capstone process has been a learning experience. The most important part of that process for me has been feedback from others, in particular my peers. This capstone project has been written not only for researchers who come across it on the Digital Commons, but for colleagues I know and work with. My current teaching position does not actually involve grammar instruction. While I believe in this curriculum and this method of teaching, it’s not really for me as a teacher. Its primary purpose is for other teachers to use. Creating curriculum with this mindset proved very different than designing a unit for myself. I made revisions to the project because of my audience and thanks to feedback from my peer reviewers. For example, my initial lesson plan was straight text, but I revised it to include tables and shading for easier reading. Another component I added because of feedback was an optional guiding question in part of the lesson sequence. Perhaps most importantly, putting together an entire unit for an audience made me more attentive to detail and consistency throughout the unit.

I also learned about the importance of vocabulary and clear definitions. Before creating a curriculum about grammar, I didn’t realize how much vocabulary would be necessary to teach students. I knew that students would need to know some grammar terms in order to effectively have conversations about their writing in regards to grammar and mechanics. However, as I wrote each lesson, the need to define and use certain words became clear and was more than I had anticipated. Clearly defining specific terms meant
that I had to stop, think, and re-examine my models frequently to be sure everything worked together.

Finally, I believe what I learned through this process will make me a better instructional coach. Even though I am not currently a full-time instructional coach, I am in a position where I may not be teaching what I am coaching someone else to teach. Before this project, I had never tried teaching grammar or mechanics with a mentor text. Now I’ve had the opportunity to try it a couple of times, borrowing classes from colleagues. Having this experience, even if only for a couple of lessons, has allowed me to add this tool not just to my mental toolbelt, but to my experiential one. Because of this, I know that even if I transition to full-time coaching, I will still ask to borrow someone’s kids so I can try a new strategy or technique. This will serve several purposes. It models willingness to try something new as a teacher, models the new technique for the teacher watching, and keeps my teaching repertoire current.

**Literature Review Revisited**

Thinking about all that I learned, there were a few parts of the literature review in chapter two that were particularly significant to the completion of this capstone. In particular the history of grammar instruction, the study of mentor texts, and the use of rubrics had the greatest effect on my thinking and the final project.

Knowing the history of grammar instruction was helpful for me as I began work on my project. In one way, it helped to relieve a little pressure to get everything right since many teachers and researchers have been struggling with how to effectively teach grammar for decades (Dean, 2008). It was also helpful for me to know that my direction
of moving away from identification and error correction to authentic writing was really essential to push students towards more complex thinking (Benjamin & Berger, 2010).

Authentic writing led me straight to Calkins’ (1994) writing, in particular her discussion of making students aware of author’s craft decisions. I don’t think that many of the lessons I wrote would qualify as addressing author’s craft because they were so basic. I don’t believe that most writers consciously think about how to punctuate dialogue or how to form superlative adjectives; they do it automatically. However, the lessons I created do help students to examine others’ writing, imitate it, and use those imitations in their own writing, necessary steps for students to learn from mentor texts (Angelillo, 2002; Ray, 1999). The research around mentor texts and how to use them formed the basis of my lesson sequence. There were a few exceptions, but my lessons generally followed the structure of 1) noticing an element of a mentor text, 2) describing and naming it, 3) and trying the same writing move in their own text (Paraskevas, 2006; Ray, 2002).

A final significant research contribution related to assessment. I chose a rubric format because it can easily be applied to process and product and used for both instruction and assessment (Reeves & Stanford, 2009). This means that teachers can use the assessment both as a pre- and post-assessment and that it can be applied to a variety of student writing. I opted to use a single-point rubric for each unit I created. The single-point rubric is streamlined since it offers criteria only at the level of proficiency (Fluckiger, 2010). The ease of use for a single-point rubric will help teachers assess the standards of grammar and mechanics, but my hope is that it will also prevent teachers
from spending too much time distinguishing among different levels of performance because the grammar and mechanics should not be a purpose in and of itself. Writers use grammar and mechanics in service of communication, the conveyance of meaning (Culham, 2003). Grammar and mechanics deserve to be assessed, and I believe the research on rubrics showed me a way to effectively do so without becoming cumbersome or overwhelming.

Implications

This project has potentially far-reaching implications on classroom practice. This curriculum offers concrete options for addressing language standards with authentic texts and calls for students to integrate their learning into the writing they are doing as part of the workshop. Local decision-makers don’t have to eliminate daily oral language that is not supported by research without offering an alternative. Furthermore, with support from administrators and literacy coaches, teachers can use this curriculum framework and replace the mentor texts I chose with texts they use for their instruction if they wish. By providing time for teachers to do this work, administrators can both increase teachers’ familiarity with texts they use in instruction and increase teacher competency with grammatical concepts as teachers create new teacher models based on the new mentor text models.

Another way administrators can support teachers is by providing funds for quality mentor texts that can be common across grade levels and providing time for teachers to closely examine those texts in light of academic standards. When teachers can examine the texts with the guidance of someone familiar with the standards and how to utilize
mentor texts, those texts can gain a lot of instructional mileage (McElveen & Dierking, 2001; Sturgell, 2008).

**Limitations**

Initially, I had planned to create a project that would address standards in grades three through five. As I began working, I realized that range was simply too broad, so I focused instead on grades three and four. Another challenge with the grade five standards was their increased rigor and specificity. More basic concepts, such as conjunctions, prepositional phrases, or punctuating dialogue, can be found in abundance in trade books. The more specific a concept is, such as perfect verb tenses or commas before a tag question, the more searching it takes to find authentic examples that effectively serve teaching purposes. Another issue as the standards increase in grade level is that they call for students to correct certain errors in writing. Mentor texts could show students correct examples, but are insufficient for a student to be able to correct errors and meet that component of the standard.

An additional limitation came from my research question. The focus of this capstone and project was on mentor texts. Although I found success in creating a curriculum that uses mentor texts to address standards relating to grammar and mechanics, it does not use sentence combining, a strategy that I encountered while conducting my literature review (Dean, 2001). Based on the research that I read, it is possible that a curriculum that uses both mentor texts and sentence combining to address grammar and mechanics could prove more effective than either one alone. The possibility of fusing those two strategies would be one area for future research.
Future Research and Projects

An exploration of mixing mentor texts and sentence combining into one curriculum is certainly a future research possibility. Another possibility is to address grammar instruction as it relates to reading comprehension. For example, several of the language standards require that students explain the function of certain parts of speech “in general and their function in particular sentences” (National Governors Association, 2010a, p. 28). Perhaps it would be better to have students meet this part of the standard in the context of reading, or both reading and writing, rather than limit it to writing.

Other possibilities for future projects relate more directly to this project, such as extending it to other grade levels or using the curriculum and conducting research on its efficacy. One could also create a writing workshop unit built around one of the essential questions from this project, but adding additional craft or genre lessons and assessments that focus on overall writing. Such a unit would integrate grammar and mechanics along with the other components of writing.

Communicating Results

I am excited to share this project with teachers at my own school and in my online professional learning community. Two of the teachers and the principal at my workplace have been involved in this project by offering me support and feedback. Their feedback has helped shape the curriculum project into something I hope will be understandable and usable for others. In addition to my local school, I look forward to sharing this with teachers I communicate with via the internet, especially Twitter. Finally, I would be happy to communicate more about the process I went through to actually create this
curriculum to anyone who asks. My hope is that these communications result not only in use of the lessons I created, but in an increase in teacher capacity to utilize mentor texts.

**Benefits to the Profession**

This capstone project is a benefit to the teaching profession because it attempts to bridge the gap, or part of it, between research and teaching practice. Teaching grammar in isolation is mostly ineffective (Benjamin & Berger, 2010; Dean, 2008; Weaver, 1996). I think most teachers don’t know what else to do. This curriculum project offers an alternative.

This capstone also highlights grammar and mechanics instruction. When people find out what my capstone topic is, I get some strange looks. Grammar and mechanics instruction is not a topic that a lot of people are passionate about, and they don’t need to be. After all, it is not the ultimate goal for students, but effective grammar and mechanics are an important means to an end, students becoming effective communicators. Perhaps having more research in the world about grammar and mechanics will prompt other educators to consider the topic more than they would have before.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed my learnings in both content and process as a result of exploring the question, *how can mentor texts be used effectively to teach grammar and mechanics in an elementary classroom?* I also highlighted key research points from the literature review in chapter two that had a particularly significant effect on my learning and on the project itself. I discussed possibly policy implications and limitations this project has, as well as possibilities for future research. Finally, I shared
my plans to communicate my results and share my project with my colleagues and possible benefits to the teaching profession.

Completing this capstone experience has been a journey, at times difficult, but full of reward. I have learned a great deal, and I have created a curriculum project I believe will be effective and useful. My hope is that this capstone will benefit others, both educators and students. I don’t wish to increase their knowledge of grammar and mechanics, but to increase teachers’ capacity to instruct proficiently and students’ ability to communicate meaningfully.
REFERENCES


Berninger, V. W., Nagy, W., & Beers, S. (2011). Child writers' construction and reconstruction of single sentences and construction of multi-sentence texts:
Contributions of syntax and transcription to translation. *Reading & Writing*, 24(2), 151-182. 10.1007/s11145-010-9262-y


Lane, B. (2010). In teachers and students we trust: Real education reform is a writer's workshop. *New England Reading Association Journal, 45*(2), 32-34.


### 6+1 Trait® Writing Rubric for SENTENCE FLUENCY

Key question: Does the author control sentences so the piece flows smoothly when read aloud?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not proficient</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Sentence Structure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has no apparent structure, making it nearly impossible to determine where sentences begin and end; piece cannot be read aloud without author's help, even with practice</td>
<td>Shows little evidence of sentence sense; requires reader to reconstruct sentences to make them flow correctly; does not invite expressive oral reading</td>
<td>Shows consistent sentence sense; enabling reader to read aloud after a few rereadings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structures sentences incorrectly so reader has to reread piece several times and still has difficulty reading aloud without pausing or substituting phrases</td>
<td>Varies sentences very little; uses even simple sentence structure incorrectly in places, causing reader to stumble when reading aloud</td>
<td>Has sentences that are sometimes technically correct but not varied, creating sing-song patterns or lifting the reader to sleep; sounds mechanical when read aloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses sentence structure that is sometimes correct, but may be overly simplistic for the purpose</td>
<td>Sometimes uses technically correct sentence structure, yet sentences are frequently not smooth</td>
<td>Usually uses sentence structure that is correct and smooth but mechanical in places; sentences hang together and are structurally sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Sentence Sense and Rhythm</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporates some sentences that are rhythmic and flowing, using a variety of correctly structured sentence types; flows well when read aloud</td>
<td>Uses sentences that flow, have rhythm and cadence, and are well built, with strong, varied structures that invite expressive oral reading</td>
<td>Uses strong sentence structure, underscoring and enhancing meaning while engaging and moving the reader fluidly from beginning to end</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### 6+1 Trait® Writing Rubric for SENTENCE FLUENCY

**Key question:** Does the author control sentences so the piece flows smoothly when read aloud?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not proficient</th>
<th>1 Beginning</th>
<th>2 Emerging</th>
<th>3 Developing</th>
<th>4 Capable</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>5 Experienced</th>
<th>6 Exceptional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Sentence variety</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Has incomplete sentences that make it hard to determine quality of beginnings or identify type of sentence</td>
<td>Uses simple sentences (i.e., subject-verb-object) that mostly begin the same way and are monotonous</td>
<td>Includes sentence beginnings that sometimes vary, but in a predictable way; limits almost all sentences to simple and compound types</td>
<td>Varies sentence beginnings yet many are routine or generic; includes simple, compound, and a few complex sentence types</td>
<td>Has varied and frequently unique sentence beginnings; uses a variety of sentence types (e.g., simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex) to create balance</td>
<td>Adds interest and energy with varied sentence beginnings; uses a variety of sentence types that appear chosen to enhance meaning and flow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Connecting sentences</strong></td>
<td>Has weak or no transitions that create a jumble of choppy language and/or run-on sentences; uses sentences that muddle the sound of the piece</td>
<td>Incorporates basic transitions (e.g., and, so, but, then, because) that do little to lead the reader through the piece; if used, transitions seem randomly applied</td>
<td>Leads reader from sentence to sentence with a few, simple transitional words or phrases, though coherence remains limited</td>
<td>Holds piece together with varied transitional words or phrases (e.g., either, therefore, although)</td>
<td>Moves reader easily through the piece with thoughtful and varied transitional words or phrases</td>
<td>Uses creative, appropriate, and varied transitional words or phrases that show how each idea relates to the previous one and tie the piece together</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### 6+1 Trait® Writing Rubric for CONVENTIONS

**Key question:** How much editing is required before the piece can be shared as a final product?

(Note: For the trait of conventions, grade level matters. Expectations should be based on grade level and include only skills that have been taught.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Capable</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Spelling</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Contains errors in conventions that distract the reader, making text unreadable</td>
<td>Has many types of convention errors scattered throughout text</td>
<td>Handles conventions well at times but, at others, makes errors that distract the reader and impair readability; displays a lack of skill with particular convention(s) through repeated mistakes</td>
<td>Applies standard grade-level conventions accurately on most occasions</td>
<td>Shows few errors with only minor editing needed to publish; may stretch, trying more complex tasks in conventions</td>
<td>Uses conventions effortlessly without significant errors; may use conventions to creatively enhance message</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has frequent spelling errors, even with common words</td>
<td>Uses phonetic spelling with many errors</td>
<td>Frequencies spells simple words incorrectly, although reader can still understand the meaning</td>
<td>Usually uses correct or reasonably phonetic spelling for common grade-level words; may be inaccurate with more difficult words</td>
<td>Correctly spells most common grade-level words and often more difficult words</td>
<td>Has mostly correct spelling, even for more difficult words; includes occasional errors that do not detract from overall quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **B. Punctuation**   |              |         |           |         |             |             |
| Uses missing or incorrect punctuation nearly all the time | May have punctuation present but it is usually incorrect | Features simple end punctuation (e.g., period, question mark, exclamation point) that is correct, but internal punctuation (e.g., comma, apostrophe, semicolon) is often missing or wrong | Uses correct end punctuation with only minor errors; contains internal punctuation that is usually correct | Has punctuation that is almost always correct and guides reader through the piece | Includes correct punctuation that enhances readability; may use creative punctuation when appropriate |

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# 6+1 Trait® Writing Rubric for CONVENTIONS

**Key question:** How much editing is required before the piece can be shared as a final product?

*(Note: For the trait of conventions, grade level matters. Expectations should be based on grade level and include only skills that have been taught.)*

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Capitalization</strong></td>
<td>Has capitalization that is random, inconsistent, and sometimes nonexistent.</td>
<td>Only at times applies the most basic capitalization rules correctly.</td>
<td>Has capitalization that shows frequent errors except for proper nouns and sentence beginnings.</td>
<td>Uses correct capitalization in most cases.</td>
<td>Includes correct capitalization consistently.</td>
<td>Includes correct capitalization consistently and may employ more sophisticated capitalization for effect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D. Grammar/usage</strong></td>
<td>Frequently includes noticeable errors in grammar/usage, making writing incomprehensible.</td>
<td>Has serious grammar/usage problems of many types that make comprehension difficult.</td>
<td>Relies heavily on conversational oral language that results in inappropriate grammar/usage; errors sometimes distract the reader.</td>
<td>Employs proper grammar/usage fairly consistently; problems are not serious enough to distort meaning or distract the reader.</td>
<td>Includes correct grammar/usage; shows few grammar mistakes and has meaning that is clear.</td>
<td>Uses correct grammar that contributes to clarity and style; enhances meaning by sophisticated grammar/usage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E. Editing needed</strong></td>
<td>Requires extensive editing (i.e., on virtually every line) for meaning and publication; reader must read once to decode, then again for meaning.</td>
<td>Requires much editing, making publication a time-consuming challenge; meaning is often unclear.</td>
<td>Still needs too much editing to publish without multiple redrafts, although meaning begins to emerge.</td>
<td>Needs moderate editing to publish; has clear meaning.</td>
<td>Requires only some minor editing before publishing; has conventions that are more often correct than not; easily communicates meaning.</td>
<td>Needs almost no editing to publish; author may successfully manipulate conventions for stylistic effect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F. Bibliography (optional)</strong></td>
<td>Does not cite works or basic bibliographic information; if included, is unrecognizable.</td>
<td>Attempts to cite works and include basic bibliographic information, but these are variable or random.</td>
<td>Uses citations and basic bibliographic information inconsistently and/or incompletely in placement and format.</td>
<td>Usually cites works and uses basic bibliographic information in correct format.</td>
<td>Almost always cites works and uses basic bibliographic information in correct format.</td>
<td>Consistently uses correct format to cite works and includes basic bibliographic information with only minor errors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>