

To Diagram or Not Diagram: The Role of Sentence Diagramming in Writing Education

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Sometimes described as a pointless exercise or a middleman that simply adds busy work to the exercise of learning about sentences, **diagramming can be a controversial topic**. Some people love it. Some people hate it. Some people have never even heard of it.

As a writer who is quick to recognize that words and good sentences are more based on flow and a certain degree of subjectivity rather than strict rules, I might be inclined to find diagramming unnecessary at best and far too structured at worst. I want students to hear their words and the rhythm of the sentences that they string together so that the words are enjoyable for readers and they work together to communicate well.

But—and there is a fairly sizable *but* here—sentences are not just about flow. They are also about logic. The English language uses syntax, or word order, to clue our readers into the jobs that words serve in a sentence, and having a very clear handle on syntax and the function of words in sentences is a big part of constructing language in a way that makes sense to readers and helps us communicate.

Diagramming is a wonderful tool that helps us learn the rules and relationships of words and ideas in sentences, so that we can be writers who construct with ease. And I think the exercise falls firmly in the camp of learn the rules in order to break them. And break them, you must. Because the rules should never restrict your voice or ideas, but the lack of understanding the rules must also never compromise your ability to communicate.

Diagramming does not have to be onerous. Even though this educational tool was birthed during the time in American education that favored drills and rote learning, there is no reason that diagramming has to be approached with such rigidity. The concepts of diagramming are simple and when paired with clear instruction about the roles of parts of speech in sentences and the types of sentences that are available to us, these concepts can fit in seamlessly and provide an alternative way of looking at sentences and parts of speech.

Diagramming is also a way to broaden our educational modalities. We all know that not every student learns the same way, and finding ways to use diversity in our learning strategies is an important part of helping all our students succeed. While diagramming might not be necessary for every student, there is no doubt that providing a visual representation of linguistic material will most certainly appeal to some and provide an easier entry in the mastery of the concepts.

Diagramming is a wonderful way to work with ESL students. Every language has their own variations related to syntax, and diagramming a great way to visualize the difference in syntax between different

languages. By providing a concrete, image-based resource for working with English syntax, we have opened up opportunities for ESL students to make sense of the English language in new ways that will allow them to work out any questions that have when comparing their native language's syntax to English.

Diagramming provides a concrete way to think about sentences and thereby removes the often unintended, seemingly ambiguous nature of language arts. I never cease to have students in my class who try to feel their way through language concepts, and I think this is a result of the way that we teach language. Because there is an inherent subjectivity to grading written work, many students pick up on the idea that language usage is difficult to nail down and hand wavy. I know that this is not the intention of many teachers, but by adding diagramming to the curriculum, we can provide a concrete representation of language that anchors learning.

Learning to think about sentences as logically constructed units of words, allows students to play with the ideas of the roles of words and punctuation in sentences. This pushing toward logic provides a schema for them to use when learning to effectively use punctuation that, for some reason, often seems like a "just throw a comma in here and there" experience for many students.

And perhaps most importantly, **diagramming is just learning a way of thinking so that when the diagramming is removed and the lines and exercises are put away, students will have a clear understanding of the DNA of sentences and sentence structure that they can carry forward with them.** This solid foundation allows them to edit for clarity, because they can clearly identify what each word in their sentences is doing. They are less likely to have misplaced modifiers, ambiguous pronouns, and easily misunderstood structure that erodes the clarity of their sentences.

There is no intention for anyone who teaches diagramming that diagramming become an end or an important exercise in and of itself. At least not anyone who teaches well. And there is no intention that in learning diagramming, students are bound to the strict structure of the parsed sentence and rendered incapable of creativity and the ability to flow with the intoxicating nature of a rhythmically beautiful sentence that defies the rules for the sake of impact.

On the contrary. The goal of learning diagramming is to fall in love with sentences and the power therein. The ultimate goal is to understand the role of words, so that when you want to play with the ever-imaginative English language, you can do it with an adeptness that can only come from truly understanding how words work and how to leverage them both through using the rules and breaking the rules.

Diagramming is a set of tools to learn the rules, but even as someone who is very quick to let the rules go, it's a good set to have in your tool belt.