

## **Staying Out of the Weeds: Rethinking the Way We Teach Grammar**

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*I have a guiding grammar teaching principle that I like to call “**Stay Out of the Weeds.**”*

What any student of grammar will quickly learn is that **grammar nerds generally love the weeds**. This makes sense because the more details they get to discover, the more fulfilled they feel. And that’s great. For them.

As someone who studied Advanced Grammar in college (and has at times identified as a grammar nerd), I really enjoy what grammar knowledge can do for me. **But I also know that grammar is a tool for most people.**

*If you are someone who just wants to know grammar well in order to write and edit more proficiently, and you don’t have an inherent love of grammar that drives you to keep digging in the field of grammar knowledge, you are not alone.*

I do not want to minimize the value of depth, and I know that there is immense value in digging deep, BUT, if the vastness and complexity intimidates people and it turns out that detailed specificity is better relegated to those whose lives are defined by language pursuits, then **maybe we need to think about the level of knowledge that is truly required for most people.**

Grammar educators have taken in *all* the info about grammar and they want to communicate it *all*. And that’s good, kind of. *But as people begin learning grammar, I find that they are quickly up to their hips in figuring out the nuances of participial adverbs and their place in the world when they might not even really understand exactly how to use a comma—a much needed skill.*

I also find that **many people who are not grammar nerds are inclined to dismiss the subject as unnecessary**. And that too is a grave mistake. But maybe that’s because they spent most of their time learning it in the weeds.

**So I think it is high time that we found a way to teach grammar, especially remedial grammar for those well past middle school who still need to understand the English language, in a way that focuses on something as crude as a return on the investment.** Could you learn all the ins and outs of gerund phrases functioning as adjectives or how to diagram an infinitive? Sure. Do you need to? Probably not. But should you know how an adjective works and what a gerund is and how to diagram a basic sentence? Probably. And you will be a better write and editor for that knowledge.

There has to be a happy medium.

- We need to **provide tools that are effective and useful** and downright needed.
- We need to **explain to people why understanding an appropriate level of grammar is fundamental** to writing and communicating well.
- We need to **shift to a “staying out of the weeds” approach** to grammar.
- I also think grammar nerds need to **realize that not everyone is going to love grammar exploration for its own sake**, and to pretend that knowing every rule is necessary to effective communication is something I have been known to struggle with, but is, well, dare I say, snotty.

Staying out of the weeds, but being comfortable in the field of grammar is where I want to encourage people to be. **Because grammar is a tool. You need it.** But you probably don't need the professional tool set unless you plan to be a professional grammar nerd.

Maybe we could think of it like crayon boxes. **Grammar nerds need to stop solely pedaling the 132-color set when 24 colors will do most people a world of good.** Because if all we sell is the 132-color set, and no one wants to buy it because it's way too much, then we are all poorer for it, and, metaphorically speaking, the world will be a less colorful place than it could be.