

Grammar

Grammar in the middle grades

Students' intellectual and emotional development during the middle grades is often accompanied by a growing interest in how to use language to express themselves and their ideas. Consider how quickly your students integrate the latest catch phrase into their everyday language, and listen to how easily they seem to adapt the tones and style of their speech to catch the interest and approval of their peers.

They are experimenting with the ways in which language can be intentionally structured to communicate a specific meaning and have an impact on the listener. They are using grammar to make meaning. The students' goal is to express their ideas in an effective way. The goal of the Amplify ELA grammar program is to ensure that students understand grammar as an essential tool in communication and language development.

Teaching grammar presents particular challenges in the middle grades. Middle school teachers often observe an uptick in lapses in sentence structure struggles from their students, as students attempt to employ the growing sophistication of their thoughts and ideas. (This may include a higher frequency in the usage of sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and the like.) Research has shown a growing discrepancy between the grammar skills students are able to identify and use, and those skills which students are able to use consistently well—but it is also shown that existing grammar drills in common usage do not effectively address the issue.

The Amplify ELA grammar program tackles these challenges by better integrating proper grammar instruction with the students' growing desire to express themselves. The goal here is to create a classroom community where students feel compelled to experiment with sentence structure. The components of the Amplify ELA grammar program focus on combining sophisticated grammar usage alongside writing activities, and further provide teachers with the tools necessary to work with their students effectively.

Students build grammar skills by using the following components of the Amplify ELA core curriculum:

1. **Get Started:** This sub-unit aims to jump-start student writing by developing a student's stamina and sense of focus.
2. **Regular opportunities for writing:** Frequent writing opportunities throughout the curriculum ask the students to develop their ideas in connection to a given piece of text to establish control over syntax.
3. **Mastering Conventions:** Over 1,000 pages of exercises provide teachers with the tools and materials necessary for mastering key grammar instruction from grade 3 through 8.
4. **Revision Assignments:** These small grammar assignments offer students the opportunity to practice how to revise a piece of their own writing.
5. **Targeted feedback:** Teachers are instructed on how to provide specific grammar feedback in written form or by the use of over-the-shoulder conferences (OTSC).
6. **The Flex Day:** This lesson allows teachers "to regularly instruct students on grammar, in accordance with the flex day grammar schedule at end of this section. This schedule divides and charts these lessons so the teacher can provide instruction for each language for that grade over the course of a year.

How to use the Amplify ELA grammar program

The goal for grammar instruction is to ensure that students are able to utilize these skills when responding to the writing prompts in the core instructional lessons. Success is measured by what rate students begin to integrate these skills correctly and purposefully to express in their writing. For this reason, the Amplify ELA grammar program emphasizes four key instructional approaches:

1. To build up a student's ability to express himself or herself through writing in complete thoughts before beginning formal grammar instruction
2. To select the just-right grammar skill by identifying the 'next' skill to boost a student's ability to communicate his or her ideas effectively
3. To emphasize how and why a grammar skill helps convey meaning
4. To focus on providing small pieces of specific feedback via quick revision assignments that allow students to swiftly see the impact a specific grammar skill has on their writing

Teachers are advised to keep these moves in mind as they proceed with the following guidelines intended to integrate various components of both the CA CCSS and Amplify ELD grammar program.

Grammar instruction in Amplify ELA core instruction:**→ Step 1: Build students' focus and stamina before beginning formal grammar instruction.**

Use the Get Started lessons in Unit One to build students' writing productivity and to develop their ability to focus on one specific idea.

These lessons provide students with a sense of how to use writing to communicate an idea effectively. Students are also able to practice what skills make writing comprehension most expressive.

Within these lessons, students will practice the skills of focus and showing, two foundational writing skills that immediately give writing an effective expressive power students can sense. At the same time, teachers will find the tools necessary to quickly assess their students' writing, and to use these assessments along with over-the-shoulder conferences (OTSC), Revision Assignments, and Spotlights to make sure each student experiences the power of communicating an idea effectively.

In this section, students are instructed to produce 75 words during a 12-minute writing activity, and score at least a 2 in Focus. These markers indicate that students are committed enough to communicating with a reader that they will pay attention to their syntactical choices and how these choices make their writing more clear and powerful. If you try to teach grammar before these conditions are in place, students will not apply the rules to their own writing.

→ Step 2: Prioritize regular writing opportunities for students via the core lessons.

These writing activities form a foundational opportunity for students to learn how to develop an idea. Without these regular writing opportunities, a teacher cannot gauge to what extent students have been able to integrate their new grammar skills into their writing.

Most of the lessons in Step 2 end with a writing activity where students are asked to write for 12 minutes in response to a text they have studied during class. At times, with all that happens during a lesson, teachers might be tempted to "skip" the writing. However, these writing activities are the foundational moment where students learn to develop an idea, enlarge their understanding of the text they have been reading and experiment with the writing skills they are learning. Without these regular writing opportunities, you cannot gauge whether students are trying to integrate new grammar skills into their responses as a way of clarifying their ideas.

→ Step 3: Use the Flex Days to teach the key language skills for each grade.

All four volumes of *Mastering Conventions* are located in the final lessons of the Get Started sub-unit in Unit 1. These exercises cover the language skills for grammar advised by the CA CCSS for grades 3 through 8.

These lessons have also been divided and sequenced to ensure that teachers at grades 6-8 teach all grade-level skills identified for instruction by the CA CCSS. The specific lessons associated with each skill are in the first 10 Flex Days in each grade.

Follow these steps to work with these lessons.

1. The Flex Days within each unit are designed as a space for grammar instruction, in addition to containing space for review, reinforcement, or extension activities as time allows. Before each Flex Day, consult the pacing schedule for grammar at the end of this section to identify which grammar skill is identified for that day's instruction. (If all your students have mastered this skill, move onto the next skill on the pacing schedule. If students are not ready for this skill, the pacing schedule also contains information about working with foundational and earlier grade skills.)
2. The lesson for the identified grammar skill is in the lesson materials section of the Flex Day. Review and prepare the lesson activities, teacher instructions, and student worksheets. Find instructions for how to use these lessons within each Flex Day.
3. Consider following this targeted instruction and practice with:
 - a. Additional short skill drills (in *Mastering Conventions*) for that grammar skill
 - b. Revision Assignments (also found in *Mastering Conventions* and in the flex day lesson materials) that give students practice with the skill
4. If students have been able to master these grade-level skills after the first 10 Flex Days, the teacher should use the remaining Flex Days to refine a student's use of these skills, in particular by assigning them Revision Assignments associated with these skills.

→ Step 4: Use targeted feedback and the Revision Assignments to help students understand how best to use these skills in their daily writing.

Targeted Feedback: Teachers are instructed to include these grammar skills in their targeted feedback either by way of written comments or during over-the-shoulder conferences. Point to the sentence, name the skill, and comment on it.

For example, teachers are encouraged to write for their students things like:

"This subordinate clause makes it clear how truly strange his behavior appeared."

"These three complete sentences clearly illustrate your idea, and make it easy to follow."

Over-the-shoulder conferences are also an effective way to engage students in terms of how they have successfully integrated a grammar skill into their writing.

In this case, teachers are encouraged to say directly to their students (while looking over the student's shoulder), things like:

"It looks like what you have written in this one sentence depends on what was written in your previous sentence. I would like you to combine the two sentences into one complete thought, perhaps by using a dependent marker like *because*, *when*, or *although*." "I am confused by this section here, because your writing is missing some key punctuation. I would like you to read this section out loud with me, and think about how you might best separate your ideas and most properly punctuate your thoughts within it."

Revision Assignments: Assign these when time permits, to provide each student with an opportunity to practice a grammar skill that may be lacking. The Revision Assignments are provided as a PDF in the teacher materials section of every Flex Day lesson. These Revision Assignments target middle grade skills that address how to formulate complete sentences. The assignments are intended to encourage how to best emphasize a main idea and to experiment with new syntax. Each Revision Assignment focuses on one of the following five areas, respectively:

- Complete sentences
- Pronoun usage
- Subject-verb agreement
- Verb tense
- Sentence combining

Once a teacher is familiar with the range of Revision Assignments, they are encouraged to use the following steps during the Flex Day lesson.

1. Review two or three pieces of a student's writing to identify which grammar Revision Assignment will be most beneficial for a student's current ability.
2. Provide accurate instructions for the Revision Assignment to each student, perhaps with printouts of what each respective assignment entails. Many teachers provide printouts of the Revision Assignments for each student and post a list of which Revision Assignments each student will do on a given day.
3. If this is the first time a student will be working on a particular Revision Assignment, teachers are encouraged to go over the directions in more detail, perhaps with a sample of writing to model how to accurately complete the Revision Assignments.
4. Quickly check each student's assignments as he or she completes them, correcting skill misunderstandings or guiding students to redo an assignment that is incomplete. Many teachers choose to give students a +, + or – for this work.

→ **Step 5: Use the rubric to assess and track student progress with their control of grammar in their regular writing prompts.**

Sixth-grade conventions rubric

1 Needs Improvement	2 Developing proficiency	3 Proficient	4 Exceeds expectations
Student writes a minimum of 25 words, but there are many fragments and/or run-ons that prevent the reader from understanding the writing.	Student writes a minimum of 50 words, and most sentences are complete. Errors impede the reader's ability to understand the writing.	Student writes a minimum of 85 words, and most sentences are complete and punctuated correctly. Errors might distract the reader, but do not impede the reader's ability to understand the writing overall.	Student writes a minimum of 120 words, and almost all of the sentences are complete and punctuated correctly.

Seventh-grade conventions rubric

1 Needs Improvement	2 Developing proficiency	3 Proficient	4 Exceeds expectations
Student writes a minimum of 25 words but there are many fragments and/or run-ons that prevent the reader from understanding the writing.	Student writes a minimum of 50 words and most sentences are complete. Errors impede the reader's ability to understand the writing.	Student writes a minimum of 95 words, and most sentences are complete and punctuated correctly. Errors might distract the reader, but do not impede the reader's ability to understand the writing overall.	Student writes a minimum of 130 words, and almost all sentences are complete and punctuated correctly.

Eighth-grade conventions rubric

1 Needs Improvement	2 Developing proficiency	3 Proficient	4 Exceeds expectations
Student writes a minimum of 25 words but there are many fragments and/or run-ons that prevent the reader from understanding the writing.	Student writes a minimum of 50 words and most sentences are complete. Errors impede the reader's ability to understand the writing.	Student writes a minimum of 105 words, and most sentences are complete and punctuated correctly. Errors might distract the reader, but do not impede the reader's ability to understand the writing overall.	Student writes a minimum of 140 words, and almost all sentences are complete and punctuated correctly.

This carefully constructed rubric encourages the teacher to assess the student according to his or her skill level. This broad category (tied to increasing word counts) is a reliable indicator of students' ability to use more complex grammar skills (sentence combining, subordinate clauses, modifiers, etc.) when focused on expressing an idea clearly in writing. In other words, the writing has not specifically prompted them to use a particular syntax, but will reflect whether they are beginning to experiment successfully with these skills.