Books

**Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing**


The cause always precedes the effect. This essential principle of physics underlies our perceptions of the world and our lives. Recently, two discoveries changed my view of this. First, a month ago, scientists managed to break the speed of light using a combination of vacuums and chambers. Second, Harry Noden managed to break the “slowness of dark” surrounding the study of grammar.

In his book *Image Grammar*, Harry Noden expands the relationship between the parts of speech and writing. He does not deny the existence of the traditional principles: adjectives still modify nouns, and verbs provide the action. He moves beyond these with a combination of vivid writing samples and creative writing exercises that break our limited view of grammar.

“Participles evoke action in a sentence.” In the first chapter of *Image Grammar*, Noden shows teachers and students how Anne Rice and Ernest Hemingway, together with four eighth grade writers, create tension and action with participial phrases. In chapter 3, we learn how “parallel structure creates an echo and a drumbeat.” Examples include Rod Serling’s eerie opening lines of *The Twilight Zone* and sentences from Peter Benchley’s *Jaws* and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Yet most of the examples are from eighth grade writers in Noden’s own classroom.

The basic purpose of the book is to show how a writer uses grammatical structures like an artist uses a paint palette. Noden explains:

> Grammar is the secret muse of all expression, the portrait painter of life’s emotions. It allows us to feel the touch of a lover’s hand on a bridge in Madison County and hear the cracking voice of the oldest living confederate widow.

The first five chapters identify numerous vivid writing techniques, and Noden analyzes their effects on the reader. Each chapter ends with five to eight activities that help students apply “new brush strokes” to their writing and to understand and appreciate various writing styles. These activities vary from writing descriptive paragraphs and poetry to discussing reactions to popular and classical literature.

Noden provides excellent examples throughout his book. Student samples dominate the book. Fortunately, they are middle school student writings, so high school teachers can motivate their students to write as well as eighth graders, and elementary and middle school teachers can reasonably challenge their students. I found these samples especially helpful in encouraging my twelfth grade students to write “golden lines” that I posted on the classroom bulletin board. Since thirteen-year-old students had written such excellent samples throughout the book, my students felt empowered to write better.

A middle school English teacher has obviously written the book because he knows what it takes to interest students. Beyond the wonderful mixture of samples, Noden varies his descriptions and analyses. There is also an intriguing CD-ROM that comes with the book. Pop it into your computer, and you will have quick access to stimulating photos and artwork that will inspire student writing. I did not find as much use for this since I was teaching IB English 12, but I could see a good use for it in a creative writing class as well as other classes.

The last four chapters move beyond the sentence and paragraph level. Noden analyzes the grammar of stories, essays, non-fiction, and revision. I find this section of the book more remote, not directly related to what my students need. In time, I expect to use parts of each of these chapters.

Harry Noden challenges the principle of cause and effect that underlies the traditional view of grammar, which emphasizes that a student becomes an effective writer by first learning grammatical terms and structures. As this book shows us, the effect can come first. Student writers will imitate vivid writing techniques and become wonderfully creative and effective in their writing and later learn what those grammatical structures are.

*Image Grammar* is a wonderful addition to an English teacher’s resource shelf, not only to help teach writing, but also to help us become better writers. This past spring, I convinced my principal to buy one for each English teacher in our department before we left for our summer vacations. Vacationing with grammar—now that is certainly a violation of some law in physics.

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