

Grammar Without Rules

The Visual Method Students Actually Enjoy

Carl Eldridge

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Introduction

An important part of learning a language is understanding and making sentences—grammar. And when you think of grammar, you probably think of rules.

But are rules really the best way to help students understand and make sentences?

Addressing your student's needs

This book is for teachers who are not satisfied with the way grammar is traditionally taught. Many students find grammar daunting and difficult, and for good reason. The way it is presented typically consists of rules and exceptions to these rules. These can be quite complex, and many students find them hard to grasp.

There are rules that tell students how to form grammatically correct sentences, rules for when to use each grammar point, and even rules for when not to use them. However, this doesn't reflect the process expert speakers use when speaking English.

When we are processing language, we don't typically think about rules. We think about the **words in context** and what they mean. We use our reasoning skills to understand the things being discussed and how they are related to what is happening.

This is very different from following rules. The very point of rules is to bypass reasoning. If I make it a rule to turn off the computer by 7 o'clock, I do it simply because it is the rule. I don't reason my way out of it (otherwise I tell myself, "I'll just finish this paragraph first," and time drags on). Rules are useful if we want to do something a certain way and not consider alternatives. But remembering a rule is very different from understanding.

Understanding is about relationships and how the pieces fit together.

Many of the pieces of language are set phrases. Sometimes we use these phrases as they are, and at other times we build on them to meet our needs. To make sentences, we choose phrases and put them together based on meaning. By using and adapting set phrases, our sentences are both grammatically correct and meaningful.

When learning grammar, technical information is not necessary. It is like when we learn to use computer software; we don't need to understand the backend code to use the software effectively. In the same way, a student doesn't need to learn linguistic theory to use the language effectively. When learning our first languages, we all were highly skilled communicators long before we knew about complex ideas such as rules, exceptions to the rules, and terminology for different grammar points.

In this book, we will look at an alternative to traditional grammar rules. I'll show you a way to approach grammar based on phrases and meaning. These are the same things we paid attention to when learning our first languages from the time we were infants.

However, your students are not infants. They have life experience. They can notice patterns and reason. So while we'll provide the same basic ingredients we had as infants, we will do it in a way that respects our students' situation and is easily integrated into their mature understanding of the world.

When we learned our first languages, we learned:

Phrases

We heard people speak, became familiar with common phrases and developed an understanding of the patterns of the language. We produce perfect grammatical sentences, not because of formal grammar training, but because we are familiar with the patterns of English. Becoming familiar takes practice. The first step is to help students with basic phrases and patterns (Chapter 1). These will serve as a foundation for other grammar they learn.

What They Mean

We heard our first languages as we were experiencing the world around us: largely through what we saw and how we moved and interacted. We noticed relationships between the phrases we heard and meaning in context. Over time, these phrases became more and more meaningful. We experienced variations on the phrases and a range of ways the phrases could be used. Through listening to and using the language, we developed a knowledge of how to express things: an unconscious understanding of the grammatical patterns of English and how they function.

Nowadays, humans are not alone in our ability to use language. Let's consider AI. Early attempts at AI were programmed using rules of grammar. However, success came with LLMs (Large Language Models) that processed large amounts of language in context, and from this formed the ability to produce English sentences. Even so, LLMs don't understand language the way we do.

Humans understand based on personal experiences, emotions, sensory inputs, and a deep sense of consciousness. This understanding is influenced by individual memories, intuition, and an ability to empathize, reflect, and reason in complex ways.

My 'understanding' is a product of processing large amounts of text data and recognizing patterns within that data (ChatGPT 4o).

The same ingredient that has worked for humans and AI is essential: recognizing patterns of language in context. Being highly familiar with the patterns of English allows us to produce correct sentences.

Although both humans and AI learn language through input, the student also has something the AI does not: human experience.

You can help your students integrate the patterns of English into their understanding based on human experience (largely what we see and how we move, just like when we were infants learning our first languages). Examples and images are effective tools to help students understand grammatical meaning (Chapters 2-10).

Images: Seeing is Believing

This way of learning grammar without rules, but through meaning, relies heavily on images.

The Lascaux cave paintings. Aboriginal rock art. Human beings have been communicating in images since long before we could write, and well before any formal grammar. It's who we are and what we do. From kindergarteners to Da Vinci. It's essential. And it's way more fun than stodgy old rules.

Like with traditional grammar, we start with examples. However, at the heart of each grammar explanation is not a rule, but a series of images. These images are provided throughout the book. They are simple and can be drawn by anyone.

The images show core elements applied to various contexts. These are much easier for students to process than a traditional rule. Students see similarities and differences. Through viewing these images, thinking about the situation, and discussion with a teacher, students develop their sense of the core meaning of the grammar.

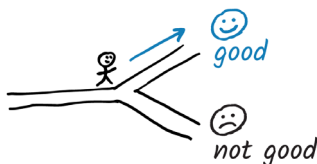
An example of image-based grammar:

We have a class tomorrow.



A fixed future event

It'll be good. (It will be good.)

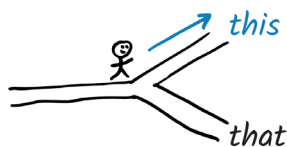


A prediction (possibilities)

The image for *will* above shows why *will* is useful for talking about the future: the future is often unknown. And by contrasting, students see why *will* is sometimes not the best fit when talking about the future.

The sentence with *will* above is a prediction. Through images, students can see how *will* also fits for decisions.

I'll go this way.



A decision (options)

I often explain broader ideas like this, such as “how do English speakers talk about the future,” with new students. It helps them open their minds and sets the tone for my classes.

Students are not asked to memorize when they should use the grammar. I simply ask that they see patterns, and they decide for themselves which pattern best expresses the intended meaning. Students become stronger communicators by practicing these patterns in context and becoming more aware of patterns of language and patterns of meaning.

When I meet non-native English speakers who communicate in English at a high level, I ask them how they got so good. They typically tell me at least one of the following: they learned through communicating with English speakers or watching movies in English.

They weren't only becoming familiar with the patterns but were developing their understanding of what these patterns mean in context. Sometimes this is straightforward, but when the grammar is different to the learner's first language, this poses a bigger challenge. By using images, you can support and accelerate the process of discovering grammatical meaning.

Benefits of core meanings and images

- Easier for students to process – highly visual, supported by simple language.
- Familiar method – a similar path to learning their first languages and the path taken by many successful students, but with images and explanations for additional support.
- Flexible and connected – simple ideas form a foundation for complex grammar. The same elements are repeated, so when further grammar is learned it strengthens the student's understanding of the basics.

Teaching grammar

This book is designed to provide general principles that can be applied to any kind of teaching style for any students of any level.

Many modern teaching styles are centered on communication. However, when expert speakers communicate in English, it doesn't always match "the rules". The ideas in this book allow you to explain any grammar, including grammar points you choose to cover and grammar that emerges naturally in context.

When explaining grammar, it is important to think first of the students. What you say to them will vary depending on the student's level, culture, goals, and other factors. The ideas and concepts in this book apply more broadly to how you approach grammar, and you can adapt it to meet your students' needs.

Even if a student does end up studying grammar rules in the future, the core meanings and images you provide will serve as a foundation, much like the mental grammar native speakers develop as children.

On the other hand, many students you teach will have been studying English for some time and will be familiar with "the rules". You can use core meanings and images to support the rules and help them

consolidate and refine their understanding. This will demystify the grammar and give them confidence.

This book aims to give you a fresh perspective on discussing grammar without complex terminology or rules. You can avoid exceptions entirely when you start with phrases and grammatical meaning. Students can take a basic phrase like “I’ll do it” and use the pattern to form other sentences, like “I’ll study English.” Terminology and rules are not required. By simply following the pattern, the sentence will be grammatically correct. Students will have less to think about and can focus their attention on what really matters for clear communication: language and meaning.

There are many examples in this book. You may pick and choose those that you think are most relevant for your students. Each grammar point is covered in more depth than I would present in a class; this is so that you can be confident that the theory is sound. I hope that through reading this book, you strengthen your own knowledge, and use this knowledge to help your students as you see fit.