



# Teaching Grammaticality with Online Tools

Beth Rapp Young, Associate Professor – [byoung@ucf.edu](mailto:byoung@ucf.edu)  
University of Central Florida, Orlando

Presentation Opportunities for Scholarly Teaching, Education, & Resources (POSTER)  
95<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America  
Saturday, January 9, 2021, 12:00 – 12:30 p.m. PST

## Background

- UCF is Florida's largest public university by enrollment (71,948 students in Fall 2020). We have a linguistics minor, but no major.
- I developed this assignment for Modern English Grammar, a class that I've taught fully online since 2000.
- English majors are required to take either this class or History of the English Language. Most students who choose the grammar option plan to become technical writers or English teachers.
- Most students don't have a deep knowledge of formal grammar when they enroll. They have been taught to draw on their language intuition—which makes sense! Great writers don't need a formal knowledge of grammar any more than great athletes need a formal knowledge of physiology.
- However, sheltering students from explicit grammar knowledge--together with ingrained cultural attitudes--creates an environment where linguistic prejudice can flourish. When we encourage students to believe that their *preferred* language is also *the correct* language, they can become unduly judgmental towards other language varieties. Not good for future teachers.
- One of the goals of my class is to help students see that "grammar" involves more than just error correction. I try to inspire an attitude of CURIOSITY about language and HUMILITY towards all the things we don't know. Language that might seem unfamiliar or awkward isn't necessarily wrong.



## Perceived Grammaticality Survey

Rate each of the spoken English sentences below, relying on your intuition and on reference texts, especially Merriam-Webster's Concise Dictionary of English Usage (MWCDEU). NOTE: Because these are all spoken utterances, punctuation and spelling are irrelevant.

The assignment has two parts, each part with its own deadline, e.g. part 1 due Monday and part 2 due Friday, usually during week 2 of the semester.

For part 1, students review a brief reading about the concept of “grammaticality,” then take an online survey. The survey is hosted in [Google Forms](#), a free online tool that is easy to set up and embed into Canvas, the online course management system used by my university.

You can view an edition of this survey at <https://forms.gle/1ZcdJQKwKgJLMqtU6>



The survey presents about 15 example spoken utterances and asks students to rate each one as

- I say
- Other group says
- Ungrammatical

Utterances include:

- Classic peeves – *Hopefully, this survey will be easy.*
- Regional idioms – *We might could do that.*
- Hypercorrection – *They told the news to Michelle and myself.*
- Unobjectionable – *We have some gifts for you.*
- Ungrammatical – *I'm a week older than Bob is old.*

These are invented utterances, but I confirm their grammaticality, usually at [english-corpora.org](http://english-corpora.org). Plausible yet ungrammatical examples are the most difficult to come up with!

This is a graded discussion: 10 points possible

## Perceived Grammaticality II

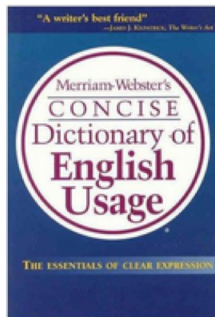
33

This is part 2 of a 2-part assignment. ([Part 1](#)) Do not do this part the same day that you take the survey! Give everyone in the class time to complete the survey, then review everyone's survey answers. (I think this is the link: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1A\\_E\\_06909rj8tXWtGQV7vZmEoPqy41Tz6/tu/copy-sharing](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1A_E_06909rj8tXWtGQV7vZmEoPqy41Tz6/tu/copy-sharing). Let me know if that's not right; don't worry if answers from a previous class are included), then answer the following questions:

1. In general, what conclusions can be drawn from these results?
2. Only two of the sentences were actually ungrammatical. Which two do you think are ungrammatical and why? (Hint: Use the [Merriam-Webster Concise Dictionary of English Usage \(MWCDEU\)](#)\*. Also, the punctuation on the quick poll has nothing to do with grammaticality. Punctuation is a written convention; the statements on the poll are spoken.)

Post your conclusions to the Perceived Grammaticality II discussion topic. (Your grade will reflect your work on both parts of this assignment.)

\*MWCDEU looks like this:



If your book looks different, you have the wrong book.

For part 2, on the class discussion board, students:

- Review the aggregated class responses and a usage guide
- Draw general conclusions from the information
- Try to identify the two ungrammatical examples

Google Forms does an adequate, if suboptimal, job of sharing responses. Students should view the graphical pie chart display, not the spreadsheet. See sample results (student identifiers removed), in the accompanying links. Sometimes I post a similar pdf to the class discussion because students have trouble getting to the pie charts online.

## Sample student responses: Common theme = surprise

I came across some sentences that I hear quite frequently such as "We might could do that." or "They haven't got a strategy." that people do actually say. I guess I'm just surprised that those numbers weren't higher for the "I say" category.

I was taught in high school that it was incorrect to start a sentence with the word "Hopefully" as in the sentence, "Hopefully, this survey will be easy," but for the life of me I cannot remember the reason given.

The only sentence that received 100% "I say" was "Hopefully, this survey will be easy". I'm glad to see we can all agree on something, especially a sentence that is as grammatically correct as this one.

I was tempted to say that "I'm a week older than Bob is old" is ungrammatical because everyone else says it is, but I've never learned that redundancy is a GRAMMATICAL error. It weakens the sentence, but I don't find it to be ungrammatical.

"These dishes need washed." This one made me cringe a little bit. It makes sense that the "to be" has been dropped out of the sentence to make the sentence shorter in common spoken usage, although I don't know how to specifically say how it is ungrammatical in written terms. What function does the word "washed" play here?

The Miriam-Webster Concise Dictionary says that "These constructions (might could, might should, etc,) are not found in print except as part of reported or fictional speech." That they aren't found in print leads me to believe that they are in some way considered ungrammatical. Is vernacular on the same level as written English? Is it only grammatical if it's written?

One more time I change my answers! "The students gave the professor it" is grammatically correct because if I change it to a known object--"The students gave the professor the paper"--it didn't sound as strange to me.

"I sleep late anymore." Whether it be ungrammatical or not, I have heard "anymore" used in this fashion by some northerners. . . . It doesn't mean "I never sleep late anymore" but rather "I sleep late all the time." I had a friend from PA and he would say "anymore" in this way and it took awhile for me to understand what he meant because I have never heard it used as such before.

I asked my husband to give me his opinion because I wanted to see if we would have the same or at least similar answers since we spend so much time together. I was surprised to find that there were several that we didn't agree on.

I was amazed by the inconsistency of the results from the survey quiz. Not one question was answered unanimously, which means that the way we all speak is very different from each other.



Beth Young



You all are making a good start! Special kudos to those of you who are looking in *MWCDEU*. No one has found both ungrammatical sentences, though. :)

A couple of points that may help:

An expression can be "grammatical" English without being "standard" English. Standard English, aka Edited American English, is something we learn in school. No one speaks it natively, though some of our dialects will come closer than others. An expression can be part of a dialect and still be grammatical.

Since some of your textbooks have not arrived yet, here are a few key terms from the glossary of your textbook:

**Standard English:** See *Edited American English*.

**Edited American English:** The variety of English usage that is widely accepted as the norm for the public writing of school essays, newspapers, magazines, and books. It is sometimes referred to as EAE.

**Grammatical:** Usage that conforms to the rules that native speakers follow or that native speakers would find acceptable in a given situation. See also *Ungrammatical*.

**Ungrammatical:** Usage that does not conform to the rules that native speakers follow. Usage that varies from one dialect or speech community to another is not necessarily ungrammatical. "I ain't coming" is an unacceptable usage to many, although it follows the "rules." However, it is not part of the prestige, or standard, dialect and would be inappropriate in most formal and business situations. See also *Grammatical* and *Edited American English*.

**Aspect:** The perfect (*have* + *-en*) and progressive (*be* + *-ing*) auxiliaries, which denote such features of verbs as completion, duration, and repetition--time elements not related to past, present, or future.

Aspect is a normal part of languages. Aspect accounts for the subtle differences in meaning between such statements as

- *She bakes cookies.* [She knows how to bake cookies and does bake them on occasion.]
- *She baked cookies.* [She baked them at a specific time in the past. You could say, *She baked cookies at 9:30a today.*]
- *She has baked cookies.* [She baked them at some unknown point in the past, but may or may not still bake. You cannot say, \**She has baked cookies at 9:30a today.*]
- *She is baking cookies.* [She is still in the act of baking them right now.]

Edited American English expresses habituality with adverbials (*She bakes cookies all the time!*) and/or with the "used to" quasi-modal (*She used to bake cookies*); other dialects of English express habituality in other ways.

I chime in occasionally if they need a nudge.

(Here, some students had located information about habitual *be*, but they didn't seem to understand what "aspect" meant.)

## Student conclusions are often insightful.

Prescriptive grammar makes us squirm--at least when we are put on the spot as to whether a sentence is grammatical or not. Status is conferred on those who know what “good” grammar is, since good grammar is a reflection of how we were raised, where we grew up, and how much education we have. Our anxiety and sudden uncertainty was shown in all of the times we chose what others would say or in our perceived ungrammaticality of perfectly good sentences.

What was interesting about this exercise was not what we as a class agreed was grammatical (there was actually only one sentence that everyone agreed on: Watching them eat insects made me feel nauseous.), but that we questioned what we innately knew.

Upon review of the results, it can be stated that, though the class can come to grammatical agreement on some phrases, there is a difference of opinion in terms of what is "proper grammar" and what is not. There are various lexical and syntactic preferences--none of which are necessarily "improper". For example, "He be eating cookies" seems ungrammatical (traditionally speaking), but it is very prevalent in Black English (MWCDEU: 123). We cannot assume a phrase is ungrammatical based solely on our own grammatical schooling and upbringing.

From the results it seems that most respondents confuse regional or dialect English with incorrect grammar. While some things may not have been the way we would say them, they weren't necessarily incorrect.

I think we sometimes get wrapped up in our own little “grammar world” and forget the way people from different walks of life speak. It's easy to get on board with the notion that the way you, your family and the people in your environment talk is the correct way to do so, but the English language can be so subjective. I do find myself in a battle between believing that following the guidelines of Standard English is the only way to be grammatical and that dialectal differences can still be grammatical.



Grading is based solely on participation.

After the part 2 deadline, I post one grade for the whole thing: 10 points maximum (out of 1000 points in the class).

Students earn 5 of the 10 points if they complete the survey by the part 1 deadline. They earn the remaining 5 points if they write at least one discussion post by the part 2 deadline.

I don't care whether they figured out which examples were really ungrammatical, just that they tried.

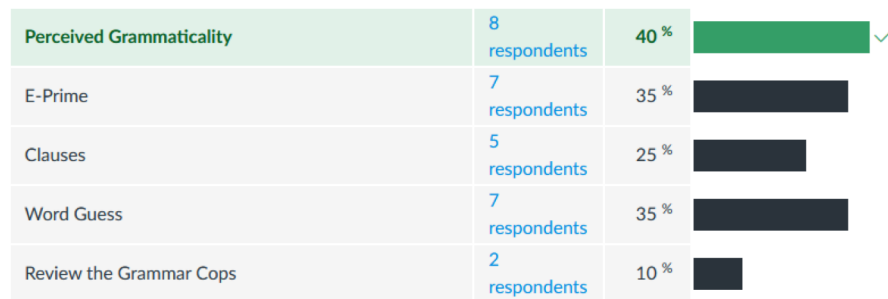
I do congratulate those students who did identify the ungrammatical sentences—and I give the class more information about the controversial examples. Also “fun facts” when I can find them.



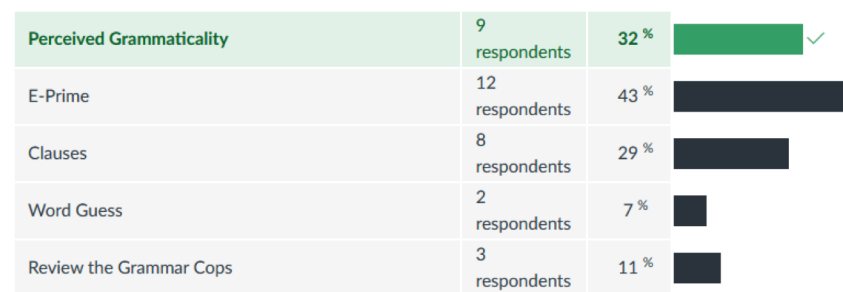
Fun fact: There's a band named "Might Could" . . . that has an album titled *Wood Knot*.

In anonymous end-of-semester surveys, students often choose this assignment as “the discussion assignment that taught me the most” (though it isn’t always #1).

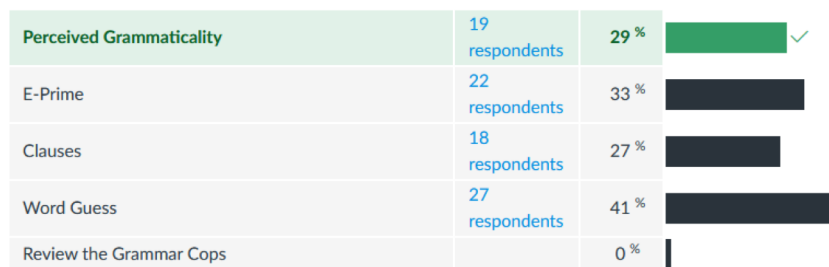
The discussion assignment that taught me the most was:



The discussion assignment that taught me the most was:



The discussion assignment that taught me the most was:



Results from my last three semesters.

## On the final exam, most students are able to define “grammaticality.”

Which word best matches the following definition:

*Usage that conforms to the rules that native speakers follow or that native speakers would find acceptable in a given situation*

Correct		0 %	
Grammatical	22 respondents	71 %	✓
Prescriptive	3 respondents	10 %	
Dialect	6 respondents	19 %	
Incorrect		0 %	

Which word best matches the following definition:

*Usage that conforms to the rules that native speakers follow or that native speakers would find acceptable in a given situation*

Correct		0 %	
Grammatical	19 respondents	76 %	✓
Prescriptive	2 respondents	8 %	
Dialect	4 respondents	16 %	
Incorrect		0 %	

Which word best matches the following definition:

*Usage that conforms to the rules that native speakers follow or that native speakers would find acceptable in a given situation*

Correct	2 respondents	3 %	
Grammatical	57 respondents	78 %	✓
Prescriptive	6 respondents	8 %	
Dialect	8 respondents	11 %	
Incorrect		0 %	

Results from my last three semesters.

As a teacher, I can talk at length about how English is more than just written English, and about how much even native speakers have yet to discover. But when students make these discoveries themselves, the lessons seem more likely to stick.