

Meet the X-Words

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ABSTRACT

For several years, many students who have wanted to register for classes at Greenfield Community College (GCC) in western Massachusetts have been tested and found to have low scores in writing. They have been required to enroll in basic writing classes where they are given instruction in grammar, vocabulary, writing expository papers, and computer literacy. The goal for the students is to improve their skills in all of these areas in one semester, so they can go on to English 101. One way teachers can effectively help students with their writing is to introduce them to the x-word editing method, which offers a quick and easy way to find and locate errors in writing. A brief history and description of this method and its lessons will be given as well as the results that can be expected. Once the students have learned to identify the twenty-one x-words, they are able to test their sentences and avoid using fragments, run-ons, or comma splices. The x-words also help writers to keep their subjects and verbs in agreement, and to use the correct past tense and past participle form of verbs. Other writing areas such as correct punctuation and syntax can be better understood by working with the x-word method, which is beneficial for both native speakers of English and ESL (English as a Second Language) students who want their writing to be clear and effective. The x-word editing method, which can be taught in nine lessons has been given high and enthusiastic ratings by my students who have found the x-words rapidly empowering them to improve their communication skills and proceed to higher levels of education.

INTRODUCTION

Today, even in those countries that are considered to be advanced societies, many women struggle for position and power within the home and within the marketplace. Sometimes those struggles are created or exacerbated by systems—familial, political, or religious—that place women into a second-class status in male-dominated societies. Sometimes, however, women's struggles are the result of communication issues that automatically consign women with ungrammatical speaking or writing habits to a lower level. For example, if we think of G.B. Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, in which Eliza Doolittle (before her linguistic transformation) would always and forever remained a flower seller at no one's wedding, the effect and the power of language transformation brought out in Shaw's play (and in our own world) cannot be disputed.

Language remediation has been my passion and my area of expertise at Greenfield Community College (GCC) for many years. It is also a growing business in colleges and universities across the United States, where more and more entering students are seeking to gain new skills and to reinvent themselves and their lives in an unstable economic world. When new students first arrive to register for classes at Greenfield Community College, which is located in western Massachusetts, they are required (as is customary in other colleges) to take an entrance test that evaluates their reading, writing, and mathematical skills. If they fail the writing test, for example, they have to enroll in a developmental English class (labeled English 090 at our college) where they are given instruction in grammar, vocabulary, writing expository papers, and

basic computer training. Once they succeed in passing this class, they can move on to English 101 and other college-level courses. The number of women and men needing remedial classes has increased over the years. In the fall of 2009, 73% of the new students entering GCC failed at least one of the three placement tests, and 25% failed the writing test.* Some of these students with low writing scores were registered into my English 090 class this spring.

The students at GCC are diverse in many ways. This spring we graduated 302 women and men including most from Massachusetts, some from the states of Vermont and New Hampshire, and others listed as international students. These graduates differed in their cultural backgrounds, ages, economic standings, purposes for attending college, and the length of time spent on earning their degrees. Some students had to earn a living, so they could only attend night classes. Others came part-time because they held jobs or had to care for their children, but many had to take one or more developmental classes to upgrade their basic skills before they could start their college programs. For some of these graduates, earning an associate's degree may have taken several years to complete.

Helping students to pass English 090 classes as rapidly as possible has been my job for the last forty years, and it has been a challenge and a source of personal satisfaction for me to see my students improve their language skills. I attribute most of their success to their own hard work, but I also give credit to the effectiveness of an editing method based on using x-words. This method, which I teach in all my developmental classes, is a powerful tool for students because it offers them a quick and easy way to find and self-correct their errors in writing. It is especially empowering for those who never learned or understood the rules of traditional

* GCC Internal Report (Fall 2009 Accuplacer Report).

grammar, for international students who are struggling to learn English, or for students who have various kinds of disabilities. While there is no denying that both women and men can benefit from learning the x-word method, it may be especially important and helpful for women to improve their communication skills in order to compete effectively for academic achievements or job promotions.

So now let us proceed to a description of the x-word editing method by looking back briefly at some definitive terms and the origins of x-word grammar. We can then project forward to summarize the lessons and goals, and conclude with a discussion of the value of teaching this short-term method in preparing developmental students for the specific demands of their future academic or vocational programs.

Some X-Word Terms

To begin, we need to define two terms: “x-word” and “x-word grammar.” The term “x-word” refers to a group of twenty-one words in the English language that regularly shift position back and forth (in an “X” formation) when a sentence is changed from its statement form to its yes/no question form (or from its yes/no question form to its statement). The list of x-words includes: *am, is, are, was, were, will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, must, ought (to)*; in addition, *do, does, did, and has, have, had* are x-words when these words are not functioning as main verbs.*

* *Do, does, did, and have, has, had* may be either x-words or verbs, depending on the position they hold. For example, in the sentence “I do my exercises every night,” *do* is a verb. However, in answering the question, “Do you do your exercises every night”: the response might be, “Yes, I do do my exercises every night.” Here the first *do* is an x-word, and the second *do* is a verb.

The x-words include many of the words traditionally called “auxiliary verbs” (or helping verbs) that are used before a main verb to build a verb phrase (*am, is, are, was, were, has, have, had, do, does, did*) and “modal auxiliary verbs” that express a writer’s or speaker’s attitudes, moods, possibilities (*can, could, shall, will, would, will, would, may, might, must, ought (to)*). However, not all auxiliaries are x-words (e.g., *be, been*). Some x-words, as we have noted in the case of *do, does, did* and *has, have, had*, can also function as verbs as well as auxiliaries. Generally speaking, every English statement or question must contain at least one x-word. (In the case of *do, does, did*, the x-word may be a hidden x-word.)

“X-word grammar” is the name of a sentence-level editing method based on locating x-words and using yes/no questions to identify sentence parts (fragments, trunks,* subjects, verbs, etc.) and sentence patterns (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex). As an editing method, x-word grammar can be taught as a series of techniques in which the x-words serve as markers that help writers to edit their own papers for fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, verb types and tenses, sentence variety, and punctuation. This kind of editing is especially useful for proofreading written work that is generally assigned in high school, college courses, or in the workplace.

Looking Backward: The Origins of X-Word Grammar

The roots of x-word grammar can be traced back to some new and far-reaching research in transformational grammar linguistics that was developed in the 1960s at Teachers College, Columbia University. One of the leading researchers was Robert L. Allen, who produced a

* A “trunk” is a term used for a simple sentence in x-word grammar.

linguistic analysis of American English known as “sector analysis.” In sector analysis, a sentence is described as being made up of a sequence of positions (called “sectors” or “slots”), which may be filled by words or groups of words of various forms. Therefore every sentence contains positions for a subject, auxiliaries, a verb, complements of the verb, adverbial units, and so forth, although in any given sentence not all of the positions may be filled. According to Allen, “Sector analysis is construction-oriented, not word-oriented, and it is an analysis of written English rather than spoken English.”* These differences are important to students who wish to understand the structure of English sentences in order to write well-formed sentences. They are asked to focus on large sentence constructions rather than individual words in a sentence. As Allen puts it, “Sector analysis helps them to recognize these larger units and grasp the syntactic relationships.”**

In the 1970s, Allen’s colleagues at Teachers College went to work and field-tested Allen’s work in some of Newark’s public schools. There the concepts of sector analysis were simplified and shaped into a teachable method called “X-Word Grammar.” As a result, author Linda Ann Kunz, a student of Robert L. Allen, published *X-Word Grammar: An Editing Book*. In the preface of her book she writes:

In 1964 I began studying under Dr. Robert L. Allen of Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Allen is the originator of Sector Analysis, the system of grammatical analysis from which X-Word Grammar is derived. I met the x-words in his class much as my students meet them in mine: with relief and delight at the thought that English has its own system, and that this system is both logical and graceful.***

* Robert L. Allen, Rita Pompian, and Doris Allen. *Working Sentences*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1975, page ii.

** Allen, *Working Sentences*, page ii.

*** Linda Ann Kunz. *X-Word Grammar: An Editing Book*. New York: Language Innovations, Inc., 1976, page ii. As a tribute to Linda Ann Kunz’s career of five decades, she was given special recognition as part of the 2010 *New York Times* ESOL Teacher of the Year.

The system that Kunz calls “X-Word Grammar” had become a simplified and teachable set of sequenced x-word manipulations that offered (and continues to offer) writers two advantages: it not only allows them to *test* their sentences for correctness, but it also gives them the ability to *correct* the errors they find.

The concepts of x-word grammar were introduced to me in 1976 when Margaret Furcron, Director of the Learning Center at Rutgers, came to Greenfield Community College as a consultant to help us set up a new and expanded basic skills program. As one of the teachers in the program, I received training in teaching x-word grammar in both the basic skills and the ESL (English as a Second Language) programs. I have always been impressed with the method, and I continue to find great pleasure in teaching it. After several years of “wearing two hats,” as a writing teacher, I have been able to observe the writing problems of students who are native speakers and those who are not, and I have found that ESL students benefit as much as native speakers from using the x-word method of editing.

Looking Forward: X-Word Lessons and Goals

Students in developmental college classes can easily be taught to use the x-word lessons to edit their sentences. The results are almost immediate. After the third lesson, they should be able to check their class papers with some accuracy for fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices, and to make corrections. By the end of the fifth lesson, they should be able to identify (with certainty) the subjects and verbs in their sentences and check them for agreement.

Following lesson nine, they should have a fair degree of knowledge about constructing a variety

of sentences and using correct punctuation. (A detailed summary of the purpose and performance objectives of the lessons can be found in Appendix A.)*

Many colleges require developmental writing students to submit an exit writing sample during the final exam period. If that is the case, students find that being able to use x-word editing is helpful in producing papers that meet the following standards:

A clear thesis statement that is a complete sentence

Distinct paragraph topic sentences (using complete sentences)

Adequate development; i.e., at least some supporting details for each division (again, using complete sentences)

Subjects and verbs in agreement

Correct forms of past and present participle verbs

The use of sentence-combining

The use of subordination

No fragments, run-ons, or comma splices

A variety of sentence types: simple, compound, complex

Correct punctuation.

These exit standards can be viewed as especially important goals for students who are finishing developmental English courses, or for non-native speaking students who are leaving ESL classes and facing the writing demands of various college-level courses across the curriculum.

* While x-word texts vary in the presentation of their lessons, the projections of student progress given here (and in Appendix A) are based on the lessons in my book *Basic X-Word Grammar: Editing Techniques for Developing College Writers*.

FINAL WORDS

It appears that currently, x-word grammar is gradually being rediscovered and used by more teachers in either English or ESL classes. Regrettably, both Robert L. Allen's text *Working Sentences* and Linda Ann Kunz's *X-Word Grammar: An Editing Book* are no longer in print. However, these books may still be available on-line or in libraries along with other texts on the subject such as *Discovery I and II: A Linguistic Approach to Writing** and *Focus on Composition.*** In addition, a new interactive x-word website has recently been created by Bonny Hart, a colleague of Linda Ann Kunz at City University of New York (CUNY). For those who would like to register or receive more information about this website, Hart can be reached at <BonnyRHart@gmail.com>.

The text that I authored in 1995 for my classes is also available. Its title is *Basic X-Word Grammar: Editing Techniques for Developing College Writers*, and it was updated last year (2009) in its content and exercises. Currently it is formatted into a plastic-spine bound workbook containing nine lessons with accompanying follow-up writing tasks, quizzes, and practice tests. It has been published by the Greenfield Community College Foundation for several years, with all proceeds going to GCC student scholarships. For information on ordering this book, I can be contacted at <tomcar59@comcast.net>.

* Robert L. Allen, Doris Allen, and Edward Ouchi. *Discovery I and II: A Linguistic Approach to Writing*. New York: Language Innovations, Inc., 1967.

** Ann Raines. *Focus on Composition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

In conclusion, I would like to add that although x-word grammar does not claim to solve all the language problems that students meet as they make their way through college or careers, it can contribute to solving many of their long-term language errors. For this reason, x-word grammar has real value and a place in both English and ESL classes. In my years of teaching this approach to written and spoken English, I have seen dramatic results that attest to the strength and efficacy of this program, which empowers those who had often considered themselves to be lifelong failures. Thus, along with many writers on the subject, I believe that many culturally disadvantaged women such as Miss Doolittle can grow into victory and even triumph when certain language skills are mastered. It was this thinking that led to the development of what is called x-word grammar.

Lesson 1 The X-Words

Purpose: To provide a definition of an x-word and a list of the 21 x-words in the English language.

Performance Objectives:

- To recognize x-words from their position in a yes/no sentence.
- To change yes/no questions into statements.
- To know that three x-words (*do, does, did*) often disappear when moving from question to statement.
- To memorize the list of 21 x-words.

Lesson 2 Yes/No Questions and Statements

Purpose: To familiarize students with a method for identifying complete sentences and incomplete sentences (or fragments).

Performance Objectives:

- To be able to change statements into yes/no questions by moving the x-word or adding *do, does, or did*.
- To recognize that a sequence of words that leads to a sensible question is a complete simple sentence.
- To recognize that a sequence of words that leads to a nonsense question is a fragment.

Lesson 3 Fragments, Comma Splices, and Run-on Sentences

Purpose: To introduce students to the x-word method of identifying run-on sentences and comma splices.

Performance Objectives:

- To recognize that two or more complete sentences put together with *no punctuation* will be labeled as a *run-on sentence*.
- To know that two or more complete sentences put together with only a comma joining them will be labeled as a *comma splice*.
- To identify a run-on sentence or a comma splice as a group of words that can be changed into more than one sensible yes/no question.
- To be able to correct a run-on sentence or a comma splice by changing its punctuation, adding a connective word, or both.

Lesson 4 X-Words and Their Relationships with Other Verbs

Purpose: To examine the function and form of verbs and their relation to x-words.

Performance Objectives:

- To understand how to find the *base form* of a verb.
- To find four other accompanying forms of a base form verb (past form, past participle form, -ing form, -s form).
- To list all the x-words that can accompany each of the verb forms.
- To discover the 21 two-word verb phrase combinations in the English language.

Lesson 5 Find Subjects and Verbs

Purpose: To introduce the process of dividing a simple sentence into two or three major parts: the subject section, the verb section, and possibly a completer section, by noting their functions and locations in the sentence.

Performance Objectives:

- To be able to find the verb in a trunk by locating the x-word or x-word slot (the place where *do*, *does*, or *did* might be found).
- To be able to find the subject in a trunk as a word or group of words usually somewhere before the verb (exceptions to be noted in Lesson 6).
- To be able to label anything following the verb in a simple sentence as a completer.
- To be able to identify active and passive sentence patterns.

Lesson 6 More About Verbs

Purpose: To develop the process of finding verbs in simple sentences with more accuracy by learning to identify verbals and three types of sentences that either omit the subject (commands) or invert the subject/verb position in sentences.

Performance Objectives:

- To recognize verb-like words that are not really verbs. They are called *verbals*. Students should be able to identify the following verbals and know that they can never be the verb of a sentence:
 1. A base-form verb with *to* [*infinitive*]
 2. An *-ing* verb form *without any x-word* [*gerund*]
 3. A past participle *without any x-word*
- To know command-form sentences.
- To identify subject/verb inversions in sentences beginning with a *where phrase* (location), or *There is/are*, or *Here is/are*.

Lesson 7 More About Subjects

Purpose: To distinguish between nouns that function as subjects, and nouns that are part of descriptive phrases beginning with prepositions that rarely function as subjects. To introduce front and end shifters and their uses in sentences.

Performance Objectives:

- To learn a basic definition of the term *preposition*.
- To know the parts of a *prepositional phrase*.
- To recognize that a noun or pronoun that is part of a prepositional phrase is probably *not* the subject of a sentence.
- To know the types and positions of words or word groups called *shifters*.

Lesson 8 Phrases, “Villain” Words, and Fragments (s/v)

Purpose: To examine the positions and functions of phrases and fragments (s/v) in sentences. To provide a definition and list of “villain” words.

Performance Objectives:

- To become familiar with the meaning and subordinating functions of “villain” words.
- To learn to recognize “villain” words.
- To know the roles and positions taken by fragments (s/v) in sentences.
- To be able to distinguish phrases (as fragments) from fragments (s/v).

Lesson 9 Sentence Types: Simple, Compound, Complex, and Compound-Complex

Purpose: To introduce four types of sentence structures and their punctuation rules.

Performance Objectives:

- To know that a sentence part containing a subject and verb is called a *simple sentence* or *trunk* if it makes a sensible question.
- To know that two *simple sentences* can be joined with punctuation in three different ways to form a *compound sentence*.
- To know that a *simple sentence* can be joined with *fragments (s/v)* in different arrangements to form a *complex sentence*.
- To know that two or more *simple sentences* can be joined with *fragments (s/v)* in different positions to form a compound-complex sentence.

**COMMENTS ABOUT X-WORD GRAMMAR
AS SUBMITTED BY TWO ENGLISH 090 STUDENTS
MAY 2010**

X-Word and Me

I am from Turkey. I have been in America three years. I have taken ESL classes in the evenings for the last two years. I decided to go to college last fall, and started this spring. I was very lucky to take the writing class with Carolyn Nims McLellan who taught using *X-Word Grammar*. I learned more English in one semester than last three years.

I understand much better the English language now. For example, I can fix fragmented sentences and run-on or comma splice sentences using punctuation rules. I am so happy to improve my English writing, reading and speech. I know many rules that I will use the rest of my life. X-Word Grammar rule worked for me brilliantly. Thanks to the class and the book for make me less mistakes.

Sevtap Taylor
(with permission to print)

How Do I View the X-Words?

I have spent most of my life having a hard time in English. It took a lot of work to get through high school English. The worst part was always grammar. I could not grasp the concept of it. I had a hard time writing papers and letters. This followed me through life.

Due to the death of my husband I raised our two kids alone. I spent most of the time working in factories. I could not do much of anything else. I had no training. I tried hard to get promoted at work. At my last job I made it to back up lead. This meant a lot to me, but I still needed more for me and my kids.

I applied for lead positions every time one went up on the board. I would be told every time I needed more experience. They would ask if I ever thought of going back to school to take a supervisor course. School was the last thing on my mind. I felt I would not be able to handle it.

On June 1, 2009 I lost my job due to a down size at work. The thought of going and looking for a new job at age 51 scared me. There were so many people unemployed that I did not

stand a chance. The only thing left to do was to go back to school, so I enrolled in Greenfield Community College, for the spring semester. This was the best choose I have every made.

I took English 090 with Carolyn McLellan as the instructor of the course. The first day she introduced me to x-word grammar. I was so worried. It had been thirty two years since I had graduated. I thought I would never learn grammar.

I opened my texts books titled "Basic X-Word Grammar" by Carolyn McLellan. She started by telling us what an x-word was. An x-word is the first word in a yes or no question. There are 21 x-words in the English language. I was so relieved; grammar seemed easier with x-words.

My fear of learning grammar was over. I started to enjoy English for the first time in my life. The text book made it easy to learn. I wonder where I would be had x-words grammar been taught in high school.

Knowing the x-word has made writing a paper fun, and easy. School had become something I enjoyed. It got easier with the more we learned about x-word grammar. I was speaking and writing better. My friends and family noticed the different in me. I am now confident in myself.

Rose Locke
(with permission)

FURTHER READING

on the History and Current Uses of X-Word Grammar

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