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Unlocking Complex Grammar: 4 Steps for Reading and Writing
by Heather Weger and Julie Lake

In our English for Law Purposes context, we have noticed that students in our writing classes often struggle to understand and produce texts because of gaps in their grammatical awareness. This gap may explain why learners tend to make "safe choices" (Neumann, 2014) when writing. These choices, however, can disadvantage students in contexts where writing is a primary measure of success, as is true of many advanced academic programs (Swales & Feak, 2012) and professional programs like ours (e.g., Baffy & Schaetzel, 2019). This article outlines four steps to increase students' grammatical accuracy by analyzing grammar in reading and applying this analysis to student writing.

As detailed in this article, our approach evolved into a four-step process that moves from scaffolded, contextualized grammar analysis to students' independently recognizing and correcting errors in their own writing. We drew inspiration from Grabe (2014), which shows a clear link between decoding complex lexico-grammatical structures and reading ability, especially for advanced-level authentic texts. We hope that you can use these strategies in your teaching context to encourage your students to better understand and use complex grammar.

Step 1: Analysis of Complex Structures in Authentic Texts

In Step 1, the cornerstone step, we ask learners to analyze complex, challenging grammar structures in authentic readings. A foundational activity is a close-reading strategy that helps students grasp not only the main ideas but the details of a text.

Though reading for main ideas, and not details, is often an effective reading strategy, skilled readers in advanced-degree programs and specialized fields often need to focus on these very details. A close-reading strategy can help learners grasp these details and, ultimately, clarify the meaning of an important text by developing learners' linguistic knowledge. For example, the use of *crucial* in the following excerpt, taken from a scholarly legal article on the issue of gun laws and gun rights in the United States, signals to the reader that this excerpt contains an important detail the reader should attend to:

> There is a crucial divide in these laws between those that issue permits essentially automatically to anyone who applies and those that employ a measure of discretion. The majority of states fall into the former category,

> often called "shall issue," giving states and municipalities no choice but to issue a permit so long as the person is not a felon, a domestic violence offender, or seriously mentally ill. (Meltzer, 2014, p. 1498)

Using this excerpt, we coach our students through a close-reading strategy. Though we do not have space to show the entire process, Figures 1, 2, and 3 show selected materials to demonstrate the substeps. For each substep, we first let students try close reading individually or in small groups before showing our analysis.

Substep 1

Students **find the groups of words** (or chunks). We generally have students chunk at the phrase level, but students can group words in a variety of meaningful ways. Figure 1 shows our use of different colors for different phrases; please note that these colors are arbitrary and do not signify systematic differences in grammar structures.

Substep 2

Students **determine the clauses**. Using animation, we demonstrate our coding system to indicate the relative clauses and adverb clauses (see the use of brackets and underlining in Figure 1).

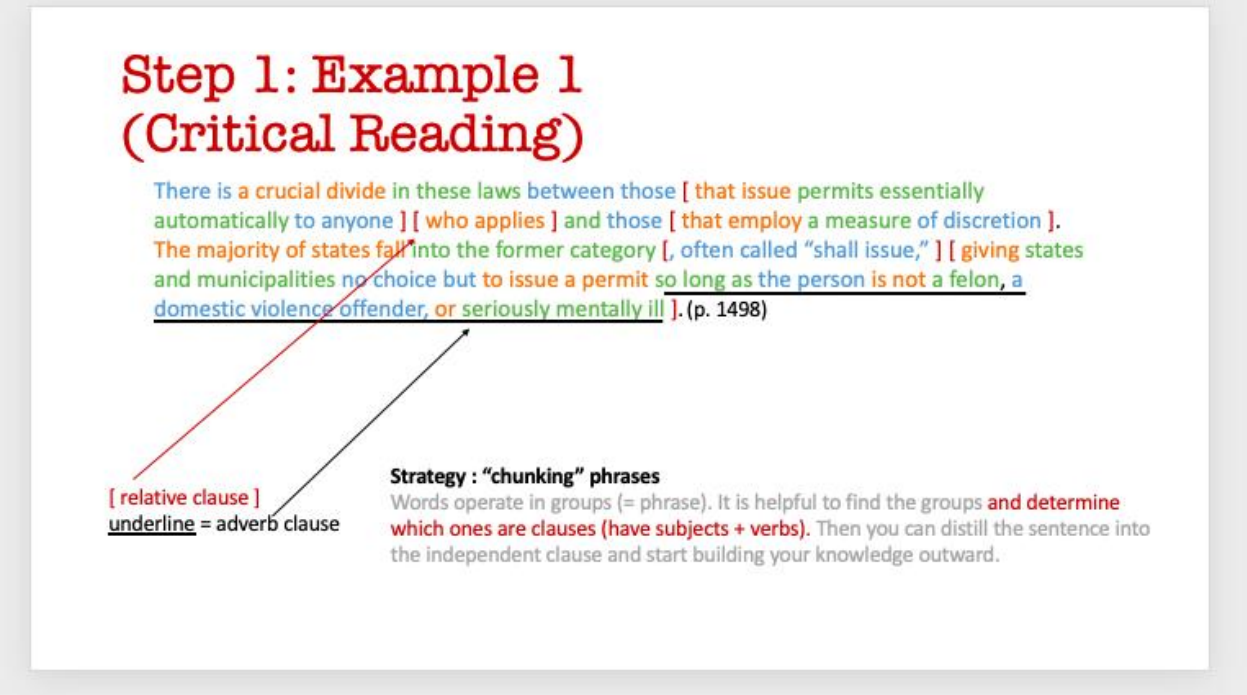

Figure 1. Example of finding groups of words and determining clauses.

Substep 3

Students **focus on the independent clauses**. We accomplish this by "hiding" all the dependent clauses so that students "see" only the independent clauses (see Figure 2). By doing this, students can locate the main ideas of the sentences. In the first sentence, the independent clause *There is a*

crucial divide between [A and B] shows that there are two categories. In the second sentence, the independent clause *The majority of states fall into the former category* shows that most states are in category A.

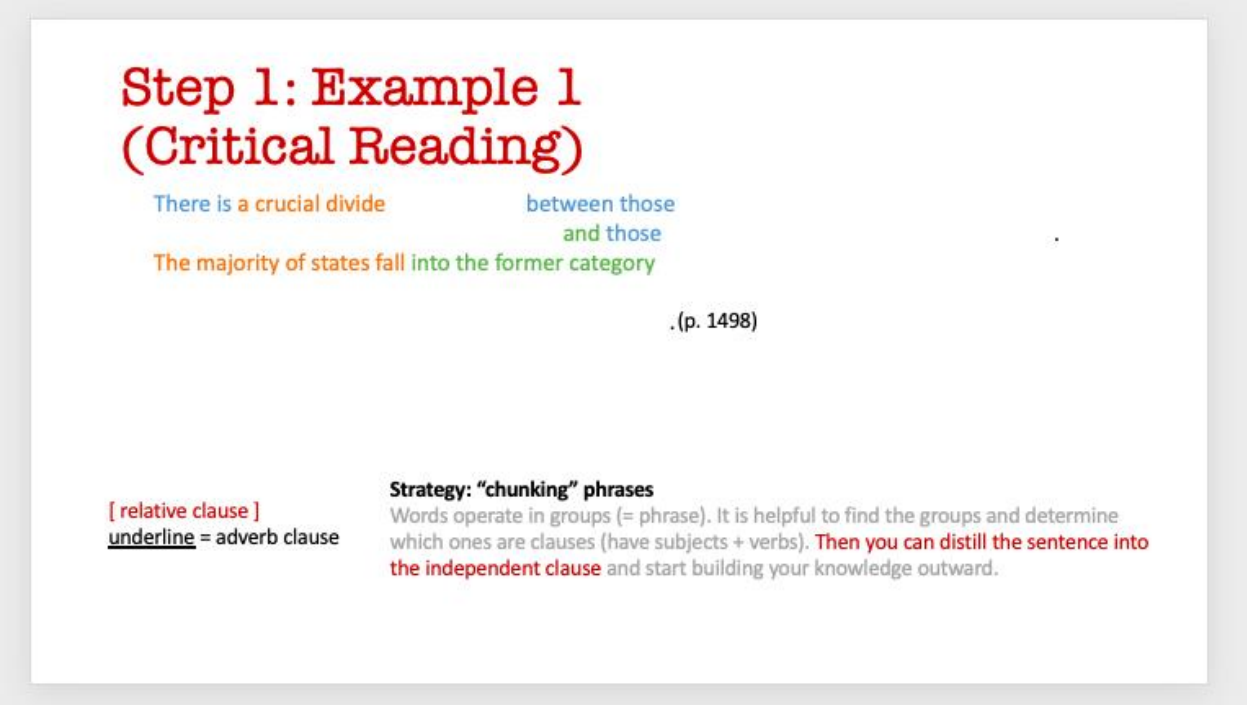

Figure 2. Example of focusing on independent clauses.

Substep 4

Students **build up knowledge** by adding the "hidden" chunks back in one by one. Students can now focus on understanding important details. As one example of an "aha" moment, see Figure 3, which shows how adding in chunks of information affects our understanding of the text. When we add back in the first relative clause, we prompt the students to connect the meanings across the two sentences. This relative clause provides the detailed information: what is true of the majority of states.

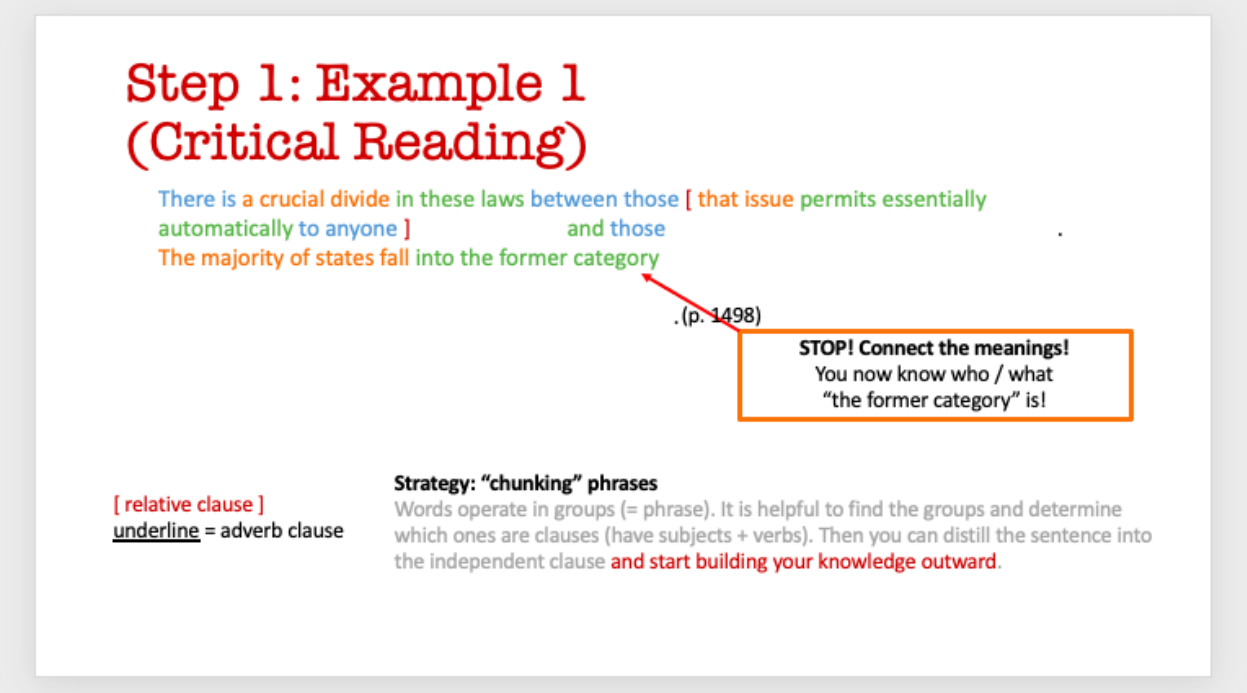

Figure 3. Example of building up knowledge.

In summary, this first step (composed of four substeps) is foundational. It helps learners understand the complex grammar that creates meaning in authentic texts, which is a tool for discovering errors in their writing.

Step 2: Analysis and/or Correction of Teacher-Selected Errors

In Step 2, we select problem sentences from student texts or authentic texts with complex error types and guide students through an analysis in which they detect and correct these errors. Rather than focus on specific activities, this article outlines options for texts, activities, conditions, and type of feedback based on our specific context of English for Law Purposes (see Table 1).

By creating different combinations, students can start to build up their confidence to detect and, ultimately, correct grammar errors. For example, you could create a controlled practice activity using an authentic legal memo that has subject-verb agreement errors inserted. Without any explicit feedback, students could then work in small groups to locate the subject-verb agreement errors and fix them.

Table 1. Options for and Examples of Texts, Activities, Conditions, and Types of Feedback

What **texts** can you mine for errors?	• **Authentic texts:** cases, law review articles, appellate decisions, legal memos • **Student-generated texts:** case briefs, exams, timed writings, scholarly papers

What **activities** can you use?	• **Guided instruction:** Provide texts with errors highlighted or indicated in some way. Model for students how to find and fix errors. • **Focused practice:** Provide a list of decontextualized, discrete errors of one type (e.g., article usage). Have students fix errors. • **Independent practice:** Students use proofreading skills to identify and correct errors in authentic and/or student texts without any highlighting/clues.
What conditions can you present these activities in?	• **In class:** demonstration in front of group or small groups • **In office hours:** individual or small group conferences • **At home:** homework
What **type of feedback** can you provide?	• Highlight error. • Provide metalinguistic feedback. • Explicitly correct error.

In summary, this second step helps learners better understand and discover errors in complex texts, including authentic and student-generated writing. Though Step 2 has students analyze and correct teacher-selected errors, Step 3 pushes students toward recognizing errors in their own writing.

Step 3: Analysis and/or Correction of Student-Selected Errors

The third step repeats many of the previous activities with students—rather than teachers—selecting the texts for analysis (see Step 1) or errors in student-generated texts (see Step 2). In other words, we remove the scaffolding, allowing students to take more ownership of their language development. Students can work individually or in reading/writing pods for this step, receiving feedback either from their peers or from you. Your feedback leads to the final step, the creation of an accuracy log.

Step 4: The Accuracy Log

The final step uses an activity we call the accuracy log (AL) to help learners recognize patterns of errors they have when writing, whether word-level or clause-level. We explain the AL to students as a tool to help them track their frequently occurring error-types so that they can develop strategies to avoid and/or correct these errors.

The AL has four columns that correspond to four features (see Table 2). The first feature is the student's original sentence with one or more errors. The second feature is a corrected sentence. The third feature is an explanation of the type of error(s). The final feature, frequency, indicates how many times a given error occurs in a particular piece of writing; we use this feature because

our goal is not to track every single error, but to use the AL as a way for students to recognize the types of errors that they frequently make.

Table 2. Sample Accuracy Log

Original Sentence* (With Error)	**Corrected Sentence**	**Analysis/Explanation (in your own words and/or using grammatical terms)**	**Frequency of Error (i.e., how many times did you make this error)**
Plaintiff (Lewis) lived in an apartment building **that owned** by one of the defendants.	Two possible corrections 1. Plaintiff (Lewis) lived in an apartment building **that was owned** by one of the defendants. 2. Plaintiff (Lewis) lived in an apartment building **owned** by one of the defendants.	The error occurs in a relative clause that needs a passive voice verb. 1. Passive voice correction (insert the missing *be* verb for the relative clause) 2. Reduced relative clause correction (omit the relative pronoun)	I made this error 2 times.

*The original sentence is adapted from Baffy and Schaetzel (2019, p. 234).

Students tend to struggle most with the analysis (or explanation) of what caused the error (the third feature in Table 2) because it can be difficult to articulate why an error has occurred. However, this feature is critical to the AL because it helps learners move from thinking of error correction as simply responding to a command from the teacher (*The teacher told me to add an –s here*) and toward recognizing—and correcting—the error autonomously (*I see that I need to make this word plural, and that means I need to add an –s*).

Through a scaffolded process, we guide learners toward this self-analysis of recognizing and correcting their errors using the AL. We start by using a teacher-created model containing errors. Students work in groups to proofread for errors, discuss errors they discover, and jointly create an AL. Second, students create their own AL using several samples of their own writing, which allows them to look for frequently occurring patterns rather than focusing on fixing all the errors in one document and making that one document perfect. Third, students receive an unmarked

sample of their writing from the same genre. Students can either correct the unmarked sample by looking for error types already identified in their AL or record additional error types in their AL.

The final step in this scaffolded process is meeting with students to discuss their AL. Often, we find that our conversations focus on that third column, the explanation of the error type, and, more importantly, why learners are making those errors. In short, this cycle helps students better understand where they are in their language development. They move from responding to a simple command to thinking about how they have approached the sentence and how that approach has led them to make a particular error type.

Conclusion

We hope that these four steps help you think of ways to guide your learners into decoding complex grammar, using that decoding skill to improve reading comprehension, and detecting (and correcting) errors in their own writing. We have found that our students have become more confident and independent writers through this process.

References

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Heather Weger *is a lecturer of Legal English at Georgetown University Law Center where she designs and delivers curriculum for multilingual students pursuing a Master of Law (LLM) degree. She also serves as a coeditor for the TESOL Applied Linguistics Interest Section newsletter, AL Forum.*

Julie Lake *is a lecturer of Legal English at Georgetown University Law Center. She relies on her background in linguistics and language-education pedagogy to help multilingual law students navigate the linguistic demands of law school. She is also on the leadership team for TESOL's Career Path Development Professional Learning Network.*