

Improving Grammar: Pushing Back Against AI-Assisted Grammar Technologies by Going Back to Basics

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I spent years learning a foreign language in school. My first Spanish class in seventh grade was full immersion: Señor Arsenault spoke no English, so we relied on mimicry, repetition, and trial-and-error. It often felt like an improv class where mistakes kept the scene alive, often with laughter. In high school, I aced quizzes and tests through the highest classes offered, but I was never anywhere close to fluency. It was much later, living with a host family in Costa Rica and teaching English to children, that I truly learned to use the language. My conversations were full of stumbles and mistakes. Some were embarrassing, like telling my host mother I felt *embarazada* (pregnant) after a long night out, and some confusing, like informing a colleague I had bought *fábrica* (a factory) so my students could make things. These errors were met with laughter, correction, and, eventually, clarity.



Looking back, I recognize something fundamental about learning languages: mistakes aren't just inevitable; they're essential. Fluency emerges from engaging in a messy, improvisational process. For writing center directors and tutors, this same principle—mistakes as generative—offers a frame for how we can approach grammar training and genAI feedback in our centers. Yet, in writing center work, we still often avoid explicit discussions of grammar, even though students—all language learners in some form or another—can benefit from direct engagement with the mechanics of language in the contexts of their own assignments. The stakes, however, are not the same for every writer. Multilingual students often encounter genAI tools that flag or erase legitimate language practices, while bidialectal students may see their home dialects coded as “incorrect.” For monolingual students, the risk is different: they may over-rely on these tools without recognizing how rhetorical context shapes grammar choices.

This piece offers guidance for both a writing center practicum course and continued staff education. It explores what it means to approach grammar in a way that resists both passive genAI acceptance and prescriptive rigidity and argues for an improvisational approach that mirrors the way language is actually learned and used. Just as language learners gain fluency by making and analyzing mistakes, writing consultants can develop confidence in grammar by actively working through examples, questioning AI-generated corrections, and recognizing when a rule should be applied or ignored. By embracing grammar as a dynamic tool rather than a fixed standard, writing centers can empower students to make informed, intentional choices.

THE “WE DON’T DO GRAMMAR” LEGACY

For years, writing centers have distanced themselves from grammar instruction. Many of us were trained with the mantra that writing centers “don’t do grammar,” a stance meant to push back against outdated, reductive perceptions of writing centers as fix-it shops (North). Yet recent

scholarship has complicated—and, in many cases, dismantled—that mantra, showing how the refusal to engage sentence-level work can reinscribe deficit discourses and racialized hierarchies within the writing center itself (Cirillo-McCarthy et al.; Sales; Lockett). As Nancy Grimm reminds us, writing centers’ “good intentions” often mask underlying power dynamics: avoiding grammar entirely can, paradoxically, reproduce the same exclusions it seeks to resist. Scholars have urged a reframing of grammar as rhetorical practice, not mechanical correction, arguing that our avoidance risks abandoning precisely the students most marginalized by linguistic gatekeeping. Others avoid explicit grammar instruction due to concerns about reinforcing a standardized form of English as the default, fearing that to teach grammar is to uphold linguistic hierarchies that marginalize non-dominant varieties of languaging. Bruce Horner et al. similarly argue for resisting monolingualist ideologies in writing pedagogy at large. These concerns are valid. But in our hesitancy to “not do grammar” or to default to its position as a “later-order concern,” have we ceded too much ground and left students without critical engagement on grammatical choices?

In the absence of that engagement, a new authority has quietly stepped in: AI-powered grammar tools. Many conversations with my undergraduate writing consultants often focus on Grammarly, since the tool is built into students’ documents, though Word’s grammar checker and generative platforms like ChatGPT also play a role. These technologies differ—and change so rapidly that it can be hard to keep up—but each risks applying rules indiscriminately and promoting a narrow vision of correctness with limited regard for rhetorical context.

In my writing center, this shift is visible in how students interact with Grammarly. Some open it during consultations, while others arrive with drafts already “cleaned” by the software. Tutors rarely recommend it, yet students often request to check their papers against it. In these moments, consultants observe a recurring pattern: genAI suggestions are accepted quickly with little reflection on why a change was recommended. Of course, not every student uses the tool uncritically. Some find it genuinely helpful, such as multilingual writers who appreciate clear explanations of language patterns. That said, and as Abigail Patchen notes, genAI can help students meet initial goals like improving transitions or grammar, but it cannot replace the reflective, relational, and confidence-building dimensions of tutoring.

The risk is that genAI teaches writers to outsource judgment. These programs enforce a version of correctness that can erase voice and reduce writerly confidence. Students should have the option to engage in a space where grammar can be approached rhetorically, collaboratively, and contextually. Without that option, writing centers risk leaving grammar instruction—and the teaching of judgment itself—to algorithms. To resist this passivity, tutors need a way of talking about grammar that avoids prescriptive rigidity while still engaging the mechanics of language. Rhetorical grammar (Kolln and Gray) offers such a framework, emphasizing that grammatical choices shape meaning and audience response rather than simply conforming to correctness, which fits naturally with the improvisational stance tutors often adopt when they help writers talk through a sentence and test alternatives.

Now could be a time for writing centers to actively reclaim grammar instruction as a rhetorical practice. This doesn’t mean returning to grammar drills or rigid correctness but rather developing consultants’ confidence in explaining why a grammatical choice works or doesn’t in context. Of course, some tutors have a natural intuition about grammar and can articulate it easily; others may be less comfortable naming rules or conventions. Training does not need to turn every consultant into a grammarian, nor could it; instead, it can focus on building rhetorical awareness to recognize how rules shift across genres and disciplines and offer strategies for facilitating conversations. If writing centers are spaces of inquiry, then grammar—one of the most fraught,

consequential aspects of writing—should not be excluded from that inquiry. Given that rhetorical grammar values flexibility and experimentation, it complements the improv-like responsiveness that characterizes much of tutoring.

WRITING CENTER WORK AS IMPROV

Tutoring is inherently improvisational: no two sessions are alike, and consultants must adjust dynamically to each student’s needs. As Jill Stukenberg suggests, effective tutoring works on the principle of “Yes, and...,” building on what writers bring rather than shutting it down. Steve Sherwood extends this idea by framing tutoring as an art that requires *kairos* in terms of knowing when to ask, when to push, and when to let a choice stand. This is especially true for grammar, where no single rulebook can account for every situation. A consultant might pause over a passive construction and ask whether revising strengthens clarity or whether leaving it better fits disciplinary norms. In these moments, artistry lies not in supplying a “right” answer but in keeping the conversation open. Allowing a writer to test a nonstandard construction, then weighing its effect, can turn uncertainty into discovery.

In practice, tutor preparation should focus less on memorizing rules and more on rehearsing responsiveness in the moment. Brief training activities—such as debating an AI-suggested revision or rewriting a sentence multiple ways to test rhythm and emphasis—help consultants experience grammar as improvisation rather than prescription. In an article addressed to tutors working with student writers, Adar Cohen describes improv techniques like Word Ball (rapidly generating words without overthinking) and One-Word Story (building sentences collaboratively) that are meant to energize work with student writers. Both can adapt easily to grammar discussions: Word Ball emphasizes rhythm and modifier placement, while One-Word Story draws attention to how structures accumulate meaning across a sentence. These games reinforce that tutors need not have every answer; what matters is sustaining inquiry and play.

Just as tutors learn to say “Yes, and...” in response to writers’ ideas, they can apply the same stance when working with AI-generated grammar suggestions by slowing down, testing alternatives, and weighing rhetorical effect. In my center, we build this flexibility into training through activities like a Grammar Presentation assignment, which offers structured, low-stakes practice with grammar as rhetorical choice. This foundation enables consultants to respond to writers’ uncertainties and the prescriptive tendencies of genAI tools.

TEACHING GRAMMAR AND RESISTING PASSIVE ACCEPTANCE OF GENAI SUGGESTIONS

While writing center consultants can learn to navigate ambiguity and respond dynamically to each writer’s needs, genAI tools tend to operate differently. When used without much guidance, they often default to narrow senses of language expression and a standardized style of English prose. To be fair to the technology, it is important to acknowledge that genAI can be prompted to provide different kinds of grammar feedback and explanations, and that it sometimes does a better job with certain registers, dialects, or varieties of English than others. In that sense, genAI can be flexible but only when users know how to frame the request effectively and provide context. A writing consultant, by contrast, can recognize the broader context of a student’s writing in real time and respond with thoughtful, flexible guidance rather than fixed prescriptions. While even genAI can be supplied with an audience, purpose, or sample text to tailor its output, the consultant has the advantage of responding collaboratively and improvisationally, making grammar discussions feel like discovery over rule enforcement.

One way I actively work with grammar in my writing center practicum course is through a Grammar Presentation (GP) assignment. Students are required to teach a grammar or punctuation concept using at least two different sources. In addition to designing an interactive in-class activity to reinforce their lesson, they craft a separate handout for asynchronous learning. Because we center grammar—and thus concepts like voice and style as well—throughout the course, it allows us to unpack language politics and policies over several months instead of treating grammar as a one-off unit.

For example, in one GP on pronouns and inclusive language, a student explored the challenges genAI tools face when navigating the singular “they.” After prompting several platforms to work with sentences like *Taylor brought their laptop*, the student noticed that many suggestions either rewrote the sentence to avoid the pronoun entirely or erroneously flagged it as grammatically incorrect. This led to a class-wide discussion about evolving usage norms as well as about how automated feedback can reinforce outdated linguistic rules and, in this case, subtly marginalize nonbinary identities.

Other GPs have focused on passive voice and commas, revealing how even the smallest grammatical choices carry rhetorical weight. In one session, for example, students saw how passive constructions in lab reports or history essays served disciplinary purposes, even as Grammarly flagged them as “weak.” In another, they debated the Oxford comma and tried to discern when the genAI would or would not use it. In an act of improv myself, I was inspired to show my class a common grammar construction I see on LinkedIn, where the posters are clearly using ChatGPT: “The real danger of genAI in writing isn’t automation, but imagination reduced to prediction.” After a presentation on independent clauses and coordinating conjunctions, we stopped to think about what the comma was accomplishing in this context. What would happen if we took it out? What if we tried parallelism instead? What other ways could we revise this sentence to make it sound less like ChatGPT? These moments remind us that the grammatical structure genAI produces comes from somewhere, and what genAI calls an error might instead be a choice.

On my end, I find this approach works better as continual reinforcement that language is not neutral (Horner et al.). However, doing this work and actually knowing the rules helps consultants to feel more confident in their work. As one tutor-in-training mentioned in a course reflection, “I used to avoid grammar questions because I wasn’t sure I had the answers, but now I feel like I can slow down with a writer and figure it out together.” Another noted, “Learning the rules makes me more comfortable questioning AI suggestions instead of just trusting them.” Grammar knowledge, when framed rhetorically, can build agency and the confidence to pause, question, and decide rather than defer.

Once they move from the practicum into regular tutoring, this kind of training has led to writing consultants countering passive acceptance by explicitly discussing genAI feedback with writers. In some sessions, this might mean opening Grammarly or ChatGPT together and reviewing its recommendations line by line; in others, it may involve asking what changes the tool has already made. By slowing down to ask “Why might it have suggested this?” or “Does this revision help your audience understand your point?,” consultants shift the focus from correction to choice. For example, one consultant and student examined Grammarly’s suggestion to combine a series of short sentences into a compound one. The student chose to keep the short sentences because they created urgency in a persuasive piece. In another session, a consultant and writer used ChatGPT to rephrase a technical sentence three different ways, comparing which version best suited the writer’s disciplinary audience. In both cases, the consultant helped the student see

grammar as something to be weighed against purpose and context, not merely “fixed.” As Abigail Patchen and Dani Lester observe in recent *WLN Tutors’ Columns*, students often accept AI-generated feedback uncritically, assuming correctness without understanding its logic. This is particularly concerning when tools like Grammarly reinforce Standardized Academic English (SEAE) norms without considering audience, genre, or the value of linguistic diversity (see, especially, Inoue’s *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*).

Rhetorical grammar offers a productive way to reframe these conversations. It treats grammar as a repertoire of choices that shape meaning and audience response (Kolln and Gray). Introducing this idea early in tutor training helps consultants view grammar as flexible, situational, and expressive—precisely the stance that allows them to question the narrow standards built into genAI tools.

Still, even confident tutors sometimes worry about “not knowing enough.” This is where improvisation becomes crucial. Just as group presentations help tutors see grammar as rhetorical, ongoing staff training can give them concrete ways to navigate uncertainty when genAI feedback—or a writer’s question—complicates a rule. In our center, we frame these as *improv strategies for grammar*: quick, repeatable questions and tactics that shift the focus from correctness to inquiry.

IMPROV MOVES FOR TUTORS: SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIES

Improvising with grammar doesn’t mean having all the answers—it means knowing how to keep the conversation going. We could frame this as a simple decision tree:

1. Identify what type of issue the genAI has flagged (clarity, correctness, or style).
2. Ask whether the suggestion supports the writer’s purpose.
3. If the answer is uncertain, research it together.

To make this practical, we encourage tutors to practice a handful of “moves”:

- **Slow it down:** “What do you notice about this sentence? How might the change the AI suggests affect clarity, rhythm, or emphasis?”
- **Name the purpose:** “Who’s your audience here? Would this version sound more natural to them?”
- **Offer alternatives:** “Let’s look at two or three ways to phrase this—what effect does each have?”
- **Model inquiry:** “I’m not sure either. Let’s look it up together and see what the guides say. Then we can decide whether that fits your goal.”
- **Push back on AI defaults:** “Grammarly flagged this passive voice—do you think making the subject more visible helps your point, or is it better to highlight the process?”
- **Reframe correctness as choice:** “Both versions are technically fine. Which one better matches your style and intention?”

Though these examples look scripted, their purpose is to serve as cues—like prompts in an improv scene—rather than fixed lines to memorize. The goal is to give tutors flexible entry points for spontaneous, rhetorical conversations about grammar. These sample questions could easily become a quick-reference handout that tutors keep at their desks during sessions or serve as

prompts for staff-meeting role plays. If anything like our practicum discussions, the follow-up conversation often highlights how genAI feedback tends to flatten nuance, while consultants can help writers see grammar as a series of informed choices that truly represent their own thinking.

CONCLUSION

At its core, writing center work has never been just about correctness: it has been about inquiry, agency, process, and rhetorical awareness. But the rise of AI-assisted grammar tools challenges this work in new ways, tempting students—and even instructors—into passive acceptance of machine-generated feedback. In this moment, we have a choice: we can allow genAI to dictate grammar instruction, or we can step in to ensure that students engage with language critically. The latter requires embracing grammar as an improvisational act that values mistakes and collaboration as the path to fluency and confidence.

This requires practice. Whether through structured training courses or informal staff meetings, writing centers can integrate exercises that help tutors sharpen their understanding of rhetorical grammar and develop strategies for engaging genAI critically. Directors might, for example, set up short workshops where tutors compare Grammarly's corrections of the same passage with feedback they generate themselves and then discuss the rhetorical consequences of each choice. Another training activity could involve fact-checking AI-produced grammar handouts, identifying what is useful and where the advice oversimplifies or erases nuance. Consultants might also practice "AI role-play," where one acts as the tool and the other pushes back with questions about audience, genre, or purpose, modeling how to guide writers in real sessions. Assignments that require consultants to analyze student writing alongside genAI suggestions provide opportunities to move beyond surface correction and toward critical engagement.

Like actors learning to improvise only after internalizing the rhythm of a scene, tutors need a working grasp of foundational grammar before they can respond flexibly and critically to the choices writers make and the corrections genAI tools propose. It is true that not every consultant comes in with the same level of confidence in this area, but experience shows that all consultants can grow through repeated practice and structured opportunities to test their knowledge. For those who already have strong grammatical intuition, training provides a way to make that tacit knowledge explicit. For others, even modest gains are sufficient to support meaningful conversations, since the goal is not encyclopedic mastery but the ability to ask questions, notice patterns, and help writers reflect. These kinds of activities create space for consultants and writers to grapple with the complexities of language and to consider how grammatical choices interact with style, identity, and rhetorical purpose. For directors, the task is not to produce grammar experts but to build a culture of curiosity where tutors feel confident improvising with writers in the face of genAI's prescriptive tendencies, building more nuanced understandings of genAI output that I imagine will only help when tackling issues that go beyond the sentence level.

Note

This manuscript began as notes from my teaching journal that gradually became a more theoretical piece. At one revision stage, I used ChatGPT to explore how the work might be reframed for a practitioner-scholar audience. I asked prompts such as "How could this argument be clearer for tutors rather than faculty?" and "What sequencing would strengthen the practical takeaway?" The responses offered modest suggestions about organization and emphasis, and they helped me step back from my initial arrangement. They did not determine the direction or substance of the manuscript. The development of examples, refinement of claims, and shaping of the argument took place through my own revision work and, most importantly, through engagement with the editorial team.

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