Who really cares about most little magazines?
Eventually not even their own contributors
who having published a few preliminary sestinas
send their work East to prove they're no longer students.
They need to be recognized as the new arbiters of taste
so they can teach their own graduate workshops.

Where will it end? This grim cycle of workshops
churning out poems for little magazines
no one honestly finds to their taste?
This ever-lengthening column of contributors
scavenging the land for more students
teaching them to write their boot-camp sestinas?

Perhaps there is an afterlife where all contributors
have two workshops, a tasteful little magazine, and sexy students
who worshipfully memorize their every sestina.

# *A Grammatical Excursion*

To many people, even those interested in writing, "grammar" is a dirty word. It sounds stern, forbidding, and worst of all dull. It smacks of the elementary school classroom, of the meaningless dissection of sentences, of onerous burdens laid on the helpless shoulders of children. But if you are really interested in writing poetry, grammar can be something else: a door to rooms you might never otherwise discover, a way to realize and articulate your visions in language.

We asked a number of our students how they felt about grammar. Some were confident they knew their way around a sentence; many felt rusty, unsure whether they could remember much beyond the parts of speech. And others were downright terrified of the whole subject. Like fear of math, fear of grammar seems to be fairly common, rooted either in bad early experiences or an idea that such a mundane topic is deadly to creative inspiration. We can't do much about your third-grade teacher forcing you to diagram sentences, but we can tell you that a working knowledge of the sentence can be an invaluable tool for your development as a writer. If you were a serious musician, you'd know how to read music in both clefs. If you wanted to be a carpenter, you'd know the properties of various kinds of wood. A good chef knows what goes into a sauce, and what ingredients on hand might substitute in a pinch for something that's missing. This isn't to suggest that you couldn't play very well by ear, or learn how

to make beautiful furniture by trial and error, or be a great instinctive cook. You may, in fact, already be writing luminous sentences without realizing it. But the odds are that solidifying your knowledge of grammar can enhance what you already know how to do; and odds are, too, that your sentences *aren't* as interesting, developed, and complex as you might make them.

Many books on creative writing are relatively silent on the subject of grammar. If you take a poetry workshop, you will hear elements of craft such as imagery and line being discussed; you may hear a teacher say something about "varying your sentences," or "using active verbs"—both generally good suggestions. But in all likelihood, you won't hear much discussion of how sentences work, of how, at the sentence level, you can begin to use certain grammatical structures to create richer detail, to develop your ideas, and to produce more sophisticated sentences. This is partly because the way that grammar has been taught in this country has undergone a change, relatively recently; it's only in the past few years that composition specialists have begun to explore more effective ways of doing it. Most of what they've discovered has been applied to teaching expository writing, but we think the methods could be just as useful for poets. If you study this chapter carefully, and practice the techniques in your own work, you'll see your language developing, achieving a greater flexibility and style.

We can't, in a single chapter, begin to cover what is after all a very large subject. So we're going to avoid technical terms as much as possible, and instead try to show you how to incorporate those "certain grammatical structures" we mentioned earlier—the ones that will do all those wonderful things for your writing. You should be familiar with the parts of speech: noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition. If you're lost already, head for the dictionary or a basic grammar text, and be sure you know these terms. (Two good and unintimidating books for the grammar-shy are *The Transitive Vampire* and *Woe Is I*.) You might also find the following poem helpful. It was written for one of your authors, who can't keep the parts of speech straight—proving that you *can* be a poet and not know this stuff. But



since your other author has spent some time teaching it, she thought she'd pass it on.

But first, the poem. It's not only a lesson in grammar, but a clever villanelle—you should recognize the form from the previous chapter.

THE GRAMMAR LESSON

A noun's a thing. A verb's the thing it does.
An adjective is what describes the noun.
In "The can of beets is filled with purple fuzz"

*of* and *with* are prepositions. *The's*
an article, a *can's* a noun,
a noun's a thing. A verb's the thing it does.

A can *can* roll—or not. What isn't was
or might be, *might* meaning not yet known.
"Our can of beets *is* filled with purple fuzz"

is present tense. While words like *our* and *us*
are pronouns—i.e., *it* is moldy, *they* are icky brown.
A noun's a thing; a verb's the thing it does.

*Is* is a helping verb. It helps because
*filled* isn't a full verb. *Can's* what *our* owns
in "*Our* can of beets is filled with purple fuzz."

See? There's almost nothing to it. Just
memorize these rules . . . or write them down!
A noun's a thing, a verb's the thing it does.
The can of beets is filled with purple fuzz.

—Steve Kowit

Now that we've got that straight—or slightly fuzzy—in our minds, let's say that you want to write a poem about your grandmother. So far you have the following lines:

My grandmother stands in the kitchen.
She sings the old songs. Her voice
rises and falls.

Is anything wrong with these lines? They're seemingly clear and direct. But in the writer's mind there are probably a number of images, memories, and ideas that haven't made it onto the page. Many beginning writers aren't aware that they've left most of what's in their head out of their poems. When you say "my grandmother" you see a person, vividly alive, unique, radiating all the things you love. All we readers see are the words "my grandmother." And what about "the kitchen"? You probably have a picture of that kitchen firmly in mind: how the light looks, the aromas, the sound of dishes being washed, where the kitchen table is, whether there are plants on the windowsill or curtains on the window. All three of these lines cry out for greater detail, for more information so that we as readers can experience what you, the writer, are trying to show us. It's possible that your poem could go on and tell us what we need to know in lines that will follow these; but let's say you want to do it here, in each of these sentences, to make them fuller and richer.

How can you say more about your grandmother and the kitchen, to make the scene come alive a bit? One way would be to add an *appositive* to each of these nouns. "Apposition" simply means that one thing is put beside another; an appositive is a word or group of words which explains the original in a little more detail. If you write "My grandmother, Stella," you have created a *noun appositive* for "my grandmother," since "Stella" is also a noun. Now we have a little more information; we know her name, at least. But you may want to tell us more, to use a group of words to describe her: "My grandmother, a tiny woman with long white hair and the face of a Botticelli angel." Now you've used a *noun phrase appositive.* (A *phrase* is a group of words.) You can also add an appositive to "kitchen": "the kitchen, a long, low room filled with the smell of grilling onions and roasting garlic." Now you can put them all together and even add one more appositive, something that tells us a bit more about that "smell of grilling onions" line:

> My grandmother, Stella, a tiny woman
> with long white hair and the face
> of a Botticelli angel,
> stands in the kitchen, a long low room



> filled with the smell
> of grilling onions and roasting garlic,
> a smell I remember from childhood.

Now you've presented the scene in much greater detail than the original. We catch a glimpse of the grandmother, inhale the scent of her kitchen, discover something of the meaning that the image holds for the narrator of the poem—in a sentence which unfolds across seven lines.

From this small example, we hope you might begin to see some of the possibilities of using appositives. Appositives are a way to say more, to go further in the implications of your thought or the details of your memory or experience. They're a way of digging in, a process of discovery at the level of *syntax* (sentence structure).

For practice in recognizing appositives, here are some lines of poetry taken from several writers. The original word or phrase that's being added to is underlined, while the appositive (or appositives—sometimes there's more than one) is in italics. Notice how, in each case, the italicized language tells us *more,* extends and deepens and clarifies the writer's thought or image:

> They crowd <u>their rookery</u>, *the dilapidated outcrop*
> *The ocean gives a bubble-top of glass to at high tide.*
>
> —Mark Jarman,
> "Awakened by Sea Lions"

> I watch you watching the snake
> or gathering <u>the fallen bird</u>,
> <u>the dog in the road</u>, *those stiff bodies*
> *from whom you cannot withhold your tenderness.*
>
> —Ellen Bryant Voigt, "Rescue"

> what, anyway,
> was <u>that sticky infusion</u>, *that rank flavor of blood, that poetry,* by which
> I lived?
>
> —Galway Kinnell, "The Bear"

> I've tried to seal <u>it</u> in,
> *that cross-grained knot*
> *on the opposite wall . . .*
>
> —Stanley Kunitz, "The Knot"

> What did you fear in <u>me</u>, *the child who wore*
> *your hair, the woman who let that black hair*
> *grow long as a banner of darkness . . .*
>
> —Marge Piercy, "My Mother's Body"

> <u>The body of my lady</u>, *the winding valley spine,*
> *the space between the thighs I reach through . . .*
>
> —Gary Snyder, "The Bath"

Not all appositives are nouns; verbs can be set beside other verbs, prepositional phrases beside other prepositional phrases, various kinds of clauses—noun, adjective, adverb—beside other clauses (a *clause* contains a subject and a verb, whereas a phrase doesn't). If we're confusing you, don't worry; though it's nice to know what an adverbial clause is, it's not really necessary. What's important is to be able to recognize similar structures, and then to work them into your own writing. Here, for example, are a few other kinds of appositives:

> On the tiles, the woman <u>whose throat</u>
> <u>is ringed with bandannas</u>, *whose collapse is a stain you want*
> *to step around.* (adjective clause)
>
> —Lynda Hull, "Gateway to Manhattan"

> . . . We moved
> <u>to the mountains</u>, *to a white house set into a notch*
> *above a shallow stream.* (prepositional phrase)
>
> —Charlie Smith, "Kohaku"

> it is not like <u>bringing a forest back</u>, *putting a truckload*
> *of nitrogen in the soil, burning some brush,*
> *planting seedlings, measuring distance*— (verbal phrases)
>
> —Gerald Stern, "The Shirt Poem"



Before we go any further, we want to give you a chance to practice some of these constructions. Following are some sample sentences; study them, and then complete the blanks with your own appositives.

(noun phrases)
MODEL: I wanted to return to <u>that place</u>, *the tiny fishing village in Mexico.*
YOUR SENTENCE: I wanted to return to that place, ________
____________________________________________.

MODEL: I remember the <u>scent of my father</u>, *the cologne and cigarettes, the whisky on his breath.*
YOUR SENTENCE: I remember the scent of my father, ______
______________________________.

MODEL: I was thinking of <u>the soul</u>, *that body of light.*
YOUR SENTENCE: I was thinking of the soul, ____________.

MODEL: <u>All that I love tonight</u>—*your body curled beside mine, the vase of white lilies, the one bird calling from the yard*—might be lost tomorrow.
YOUR SENTENCE: All that I love tonight— ______________
______________________________— might be lost tomorrow.

(prepositional phrases)
MODEL: If you look <u>at the ugliness of the world</u>—*at the homeless woman lying in a doorway, at her dress of rags and bed of old newspapers*—you might see a kind of beauty.
YOUR SENTENCE: If you look at the ugliness of the world—
__________________________—you might see a kind of beauty.

MODEL: <u>After the funeral</u>, *after the flowers and eulogies,* we returned to our lives.
YOUR SENTENCE: After the funeral, __________, we returned to our lives.

(verbs)
MODEL: The seagulls <u>follow</u> the boat, *hover over the white wake.*
YOUR SENTENCE: The seagulls follow the boat, ___________.

MODEL: The child spins in circles, *whirls around until the world spins with her.*
YOUR SENTENCE: The child spins in circles, ____________.

MODEL: They make love, *touch the tenderest places, kiss the boundaries of skin.*
YOUR SENTENCE: They make love, ________________.

(adjective clauses)
MODEL: You were the one who took risks, *who swam naked in the river, who laughed when the cops came.*
YOUR SENTENCE: You were the one who took risks, ________
____________________.

(adjective phrases)
MODEL: The kitchen counter was dirty, *littered with cigarette butts, crowded with unwashed plates.*
YOUR SENTENCE: The kitchen counter was dirty, ________.

MODEL: She's cautious, *afraid to leave the house at night.*
YOUR SENTENCE: She's cautious, ________________.

MODEL: The angels are beautiful, *luminous and full of longing.*
YOUR SENTENCE: The angels are beautiful, ____________.

At this point we suggest—no, *insist*—that you take a break from this chapter. Don't read any further until you've had time to absorb everything we've covered so far. Read some other chapters. Write some poems. Do your laundry. Then, when you're ready, go back and reread the chapter up to this point, and practice more appositives until you're fairly comfortable with them. Take out some drafts of poems, look at your nouns, and see where the addition of some noun appositives would add greater detail. When you've got the hang of that, try other structures, such as the ones in the above sentences. Look for appositives in poems that you've read—yes, they're really there, lots of them. You'll quickly see that there are many more ways to expand sentences, and you may begin to feel confused. That's okay; the important thing is that you are beginning to look at poems *at the level of the sentence*, to pay attention to the parts, even if you can't name them. You'll find that, having studied even this much, the way you read poems will have changed. Changing your writing will take longer, and at first it may feel very awkward. Developing your syntax takes time. Keep reading, and practicing.



Okay. We assume you've taken our advice and been busy with other things, and are now ready for further punishment. Let's return to your original three lines about your grandmother and take the second one:

She sings the old songs.

You could add an appositive to "songs," of course. But suppose it's not the songs you want to talk about, but the singing. Is there a way to do that? Try this:

She sings the old songs, swaying back and forth,
humming the parts she's forgotten, belting out
the words she still remembers.

Now you've added three *verbal phrases* to your sentence. The verb is "sings," but that's not the only action taking place here. A *verbal* is a form of a verb, but it has no subject. Still, we know who's swaying, humming, and belting out the words: your grandmother. Verbals always have an *implied subject:* the subject of the sentence. So, if we were to break down the syntax here, it would look like this:

SUBJECT: She
VERB: sings
VERBALS: swaying, humming, belting out

You can do this with any action that's taking place, by simply adding an "ing" form of a verb. The first line of your poem could have been expanded with an "ing" verbal as well:

My grandmother stands in the kitchen, *washing the dishes.*

or

My grandmother stands in the kitchen, *wearing her plaid bathrobe.*

There are two other kinds of verbals: the "to" form, as in to wash, to shimmer, to love; and the "ed" form (sometimes "en"): bored, excited, driven. Here's how you could have expanded your second line with them:

> She sings the old songs
> *to remind herself of Russia.*
>
> *To comfort me,* she sings
> the old songs.
>
> *Exiled from her country,*
> she still sings the old songs.
>
> *Filled with her memories,*
> she sings the old songs.

Here are some examples of verbals in the work of other poets:

> . . . all her life
> She drank, *dedicated to the act itself* . . .
>
> —Lynn Emanuel, "Frying Trout While Drunk"

> He'd been a clod, he knew, yes, *always aiming toward his vision of the good life, always acting on it.*
>
> —C. K. Williams, "Alzheimer's: The Husband"

> She washed the floor on hands and knees
> below the Black Madonna, *praying*
> *to her god of sorrows and visions* . . .
> —Lynda Hull, "Night Waitress"

> and the hawk hooked
> one exquisite foot
> onto a last thing
>
> *to look deeper*
> *into the yellow reeds*
> *along the edges of the water*
>
> —Mary Oliver, "Hawk"



For practice, try writing your own verbals, following the models below. Verbals, like appositives, don't always appear singly; you can string them together. In the above examples, C. K. Williams uses two. Try to use at least two verbals in each of your sentences. (The implied subjects of the verbals are underlined in each case.)

MODEL: The cat sits before the window, *staring at the garden, anticipating the moment she'll be let out into it.*
YOUR SENTENCE: The cat sits before the window, ________
________________________________________.

MODEL: *Lurching down the street, smelling of cheap wine,* the man approached me.
YOUR SENTENCE: ________________________, the man approached me.

MODEL: *Exhausted, dispirited, temporarily defeated by the world,* you want someone to hold you.
YOUR SENTENCE: ________________________, you want someone to hold you.

MODEL: The boy studies his father *to remember him when he's gone, to fix his image forever in his mind.*
YOUR SENTENCE: The boy studies his father ____________
____________________________.

MODEL: *To love the world, to know it,* one wants to live long.
YOUR SENTENCE: ______________________, one wants to live long.

By this point, you should have an idea of how you can expand your sentences and add detail to them with at least two kinds of grammatical constructions: appositives and verbals. In a well-written poem, many sentences will use these and/or other structures, sometimes repeating them, sometimes mixing them up. When structures are repeated, we call this *parallel structure.* (The King James translation of the Bible is full of it.) When you string together two or more appositives or verbals, you have parallel structure. When you make a list,

you are creating parallel structure, too: "I love the *stars*, the *streetlights*, even the glittering *flecks* in the sidewalks." When you list a series of verbs—"The crow *lifts* its wings, *flies* to the highest branch of the maple tree, *regards* me without curiosity"—that, too, is parallel structure. The preceding "When . . . " sentence, and the two before it, are also an example; parallel structure doesn't just happen *within* sentences. By sensitizing your eye and ear to pick up on how sentences unfold, whether through the repetition of parallelism or the variation of different kinds of structures, you'll not only appreciate the writers you read at another level, but have a valuable tool for developing your own syntax. Here are some lines from poems in which appositives and verbals are used together:

> I watch the orderly stack the day's dead:
> men on one cart, women on the other.
> You sit two feet away, sketching
> and drinking tequila.
>
> —Ai, "Guadalajara Hospital"

Ai uses the appositives "men on one cart, women on the other" to tell us more about "the day's dead," making the description more graphic and disturbing. The action of the "you" in the poem is extended with the verbals "sketching" and "drinking." Bruce Weigl also presents his images in razor-sharp detail:

> . . . another soldier and I
> Lifted the shelter off its blocks
> To expose the home-made toilets:
> Fifty-five gallon drums cut in half
> With crude wood seats that splintered.
>
> —Bruce Weigl,
> "Burning Shit at An Khe"

The verbal "to expose" extends the action of lifting the shelter; the "home-made toilets" are described with an appositive, so that we can



clearly see them. We can even almost *feel* those splinters from the wood seats.

Did Ai and Weigl set out to write sentences that used appositives and verbals in this way? Probably not. What's more likely is that they wanted intense imagery that would enable a reader to imagine those scenes. Ai knew that writing "You sit two feet away" wouldn't be enough; the verbals give us the sharp contrast of dead bodies against the seemingly casual activities of the other person. Weigl realized that "home-made toilets" wouldn't quite convey the memory of them to anyone who hadn't been there. In good writing, this is what happens. You have a sense, as you write and revise, of how to build your sentences so that they flow rhythmically, clearly, vividly. You aren't analyzing them as you go. If you are a pretty good tennis player, you aren't thinking "racket back, step forward, swing, follow through" as you rally; but in order to achieve that level, you probably spent some time practicing the motions, learning the component parts. Think of grammar in this way, too. It's hard going at first, but eventually can become second nature.

There's a lot more to grammar than we can possibly cover in one chapter. But we hope we've given you some options to explore in your own writing.

## IDEAS FOR WRITING

1. Describe all the objects you see from a window in your house or apartment. That should give you lots of nouns; add appositives to them wherever possible, to describe them in greater detail. Let these descriptions trigger a poem about what these things mean to you, or let them remind you of some past incident or event which you include in the poem.
2. Observe an activity: a machine operating, a person doing something, the motions of an animal. Use verbals to capture everything that is happening. When you've captured the action as fully as possible, think about how that action could stand as a

metaphor for how you live your own life; how is the way you do things like the action you've described?

3. Make longer sentences out of the short ones that follow, using lots of sensual details so that a reader can vividly imagine the scene:
   The old man sat in the park.
   She was crying.
   He loved everything about the woods.
   I'm terrified of ______________ . (Fill in a word or words to describe your fears, and go on.)
   It was a beautiful day.

4. Take a draft of a poem and study your sentences. Do they tend to follow a similar pattern? One common problem is static syntax—the same thing, over and over. Many people fall into a repetitive subject–verb construction: "I shot the bear. The bear died. I left it there in the snow. I headed home. My father sat there reading the paper. He asked what had happened. I told him." This can be an effective strategy sometimes, if used deliberately and not unconsciously. If this is your pattern, start fooling around and seeing what you can add to each sentence. Remember that idea of repetition and variation: if you have a lot of long sentences, break them down into short ones occasionally.

5. Take another draft of a poem and underline all the adjectives. Are there a lot of them? Do you tend to load them up before the nouns? Cut out as many as possible. See if there are other ways to describe things without using adjectives. (Another trick: put the adjectives *after* the noun; instead of "my frail weak grandfather lies in his bed" try "my grandfather—frail, weak—lies in his bed.")

6. Write a poem which is *one* long sentence. Make it at least twenty lines.



7. Write a sentence in which you withhold the subject and verb as long as possible; that is, begin with a preposition, or an adverb, and pile up the phrases and clauses.

8. Write a poem which uses a lot of parallel structure. Any time you do something, try and repeat it, to the point of obsession and probably comedy. Then, when you've pushed it as far as you can, go back over it and cut out what you need to in order to make it a good poem.