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## Why Teach Traditional Grammar?

### A. There are a number of reasons that could be categorized as bad or insufficient reasons:

1. It's easy; once I've learned the grammar text and mastered the exercises, it's almost no effort to prepare for a class and teach it.
2. It's the way we've always done it.
3. It's countercultural: if the NCTE disapproves, that makes me happy; if all the research shows that increased grammar instruction may have a deleterious effect on improvement in student writing, I'm glad to be perverse and buck the trends.

### B. But there are also good reasons to teach grammar:

1. It provides a relatively brief system of analysis that allows people to name and describe the basic features of phrases and clauses in English, the sort of basic knowledge that every educated person should have. I think that a case can be made for its importance as basic knowledge, apart from its ability to help students with their writing.
2. It provides a working vocabulary—a set of names—by means of which it is possible to carry on a conversation with others (writers with editors, teachers with students, etc.) regarding the elements and the structures of sentences and paragraphs. Such a list can be more or less comprehensive, depending on the nature of the conversation (see *Appendix A* at the end of this handout).

For example, basic knowledge of traditional grammar provides the knowledge (and vocabulary) needed for addressing **more than half** of the **Top Twenty Errors in College Writing** (*St. Martin's Handbook*, 2009):

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Wrong word   | <b>11. Missing comma with a nonrestrictive element</b>             |
| <b>2. Missing comma after an introductory element</b>   | <b>12. Unnecessary shift in verb tense</b>                         |
| 3. Incomplete or missing documentation  | <b>13. Missing comma in a compound sentence</b>                    |
| <b>4. Vague pronoun reference</b>   | 14. Unnecessary or missing apostrophe (including <i>its/it's</i> ) |
| 5. Spelling (including homonyms)  | <b>15. Fused (run-on) sentence</b>                                 |
| 6. Mechanical error with quotation  | <b>16. Comma splice</b>  |
| <b>7. Unnecessary comma</b>   | <b>17. Lack of pronoun-antecedent agreement</b>                    |
| 8. Unnecessary or missing capitalization  | 18. Poorly integrated quotation                                    |
| 9. Missing word   | 19. Unnecessary or missing hyphen                                  |
| <b>10. Faulty sentence structure [mixed structure, faulty predication, non-parallel construction]</b> | <b>20. Sentence fragment</b>                                       |

3. It can be applied in a focused way to specific problems that arise in the writing class—mini-lessons that focus on subject-verb agreement, for instance, or the punctuation of compound sentences, or various problems from the shift family.

4. It can provide the foundation for the acquisition of various valuable skills: sentence variety (including sentence-combining exercises; see *Appendix B*); adjusting style and grammar to genre, audience, and purpose; using the passive voice skillfully; becoming a better reader of quite different genres.

Note, for example, what may be the most salient grammatical features of scientific and technical writing, features that separate these prose genres from what most English teachers endorse: **passive style, nominal style, noun strings, and jargon**. See *Appendix C* for materials I’ve put together for seminarians at Calvin Theological Seminary.

6. Knowledge of traditional grammar can be a very helpful means of describing and explaining some of the key differences between spoken (informal) English and written (Standard) English:

- *I am taller than **her*** versus *I am taller than **she***: “than” as a preposition and as a subordinating conjunction
  - *That was the **funnest** weekend* versus *We had a great deal of **fun** that weekend*: “fun” as an adjective and as a noun.
  - *We had a **real** good time* versus *We had a **really** good time*: “real” as an adverb and “really” as an adverb
  - *Between you and **I*** versus *Between you and **me***
  - *I **nearly** ate the whole pizza* versus *I ate **nearly** the whole pizza*
-

7. It can be a gateway or a complement to language play, the sort of activity we pass over or neglect at our peril. Consider two arguments for the centrality of language play in the language-arts curriculum:

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David Crystal, *Language Play* (London: Penguin Books, 1998)

“The aim of this book is to . . . ask why the playful (or ‘ludic’) function of language is important for our appreciation of language as a whole. Ludic language has traditionally been a badly neglected subject of linguistic enquiry—at best treated as a topic of marginal interest, at worst never mentioned at all. Yet it should be at the heart of any thinking we do about linguistic issues.” (p. 1)

“I look back over the course of child language acquisition, and suggest that, if we do have a ‘language instinct,’ as some authors have maintained, then it is indeed chiefly for language play. I shall go so far as to claim that it is a sign of communicative breakdown, or even pathology, when people avoid playing with language.” (pp. 7/8)

“That is why a school world without language play is so alien, and perhaps one of the reasons why the progress of so many children towards literacy and advanced language skills has been so slow. . . .

I cannot prove it, but I do believe that the more children are given opportunities to play with language and respond to language play, as they move up through the school, the more sophisticated will be their eventual prowess in the verbal arts.” (p. 220)

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B. Guy Cook, *Language Play, Language Learning* (London: Oxford UP, 2000)

“Here is a phenomenon worth investigating, and one which has on the whole been neglected, or at least sidelined, in the study of language and language learning. In this book I shall bring together a range of normally dissociated activities under the heading of language play, though there is clearly a great deal of work to be done to specify more precisely both the similarities and the differences between them. The claim of this book is that although language play is manifested through a variety of different activities, these are expressions of a single underlying phenomenon, which is of particular relevance to mental adaptation, for individuals, for societies, and for the species. Though it appears superfluous, it is not actually so. Disconnection from reality, disruption and subversion of social structures, and the introduction of random elements have particular benefits for all of us, and that is perhaps why we are so fond of them, even when they are forbidden. They are there to be exploited to our advantage in many areas of human activity, including language learning. The general purpose of this book is to offer an exploration, and at least a partial explanation, of why and how this might be so.” (pp. 4/5)

“One intention of this book has been to consider what might happen if, in the study of language and of language learning, we try to turn the usual order of importance inside out: to make the periphery the centre and the centre the periphery, so that language play is no longer seen as a trivial and optional extra but as the source of language knowledge, use, and activity. In order to do this, we need to engage in a willing suspension of deeply-rooted attitudes towards language play, and to its role in language teaching in particular: to discipline ourselves to see it as profound as well as trivial, as adult as well as childlike, as something which precedes rather than follows on from other more ‘useful’ activities. Above all we should not see it as something to fill a free moment, only to be guiltily abandoned when a more important duty appears.” (pp. 204/205)

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7a. Who better than a grammarian to introduce students to the pleasures of **semantic and syntactic ambiguity**?

Headlines from *Columbia Journalism Review*, via William K. Shetter

British Left Waffles on Falklands

Man Accused of Shooting Neighbor, Dog Held for Trial

President to Sell College to High School Students

Red Tape Holds up New Bridge

Yellow Perch Decline to be Studied

Murder Suspect Gets Appointed Attorney

Jacksonville Pornography Free, Officials Say

Manufacturer Discharged into River

Frozen Embryos Ruled Children

Infant Abducted from Hospital Safe

TV Networks Agree to Police Violence

Large Church Plans Collapse

French Offer Terrorist Reward

N.J. Jails for Women in Need of a Facelift

Smithsonian May Cancel Bombing of Japan Exhibits

Crowds Rushing to See Pope Trample 6 to Death

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## 7b. And eggcorns?

The Eggcorn Database

<http://eggcorns.lascribe.net/>

Eggcorns—a sample from the opening pages

- \* ethnic routes FOR ethnic roots
- \* (go (at it)) hammer and thongs FOR hammer and tongs
- \* pigeon English FOR pidgin English
- \* a hair's breath FOR hair's breadth
- \* a mute point FOR moot point
- \* a pigment of someone's imagination FOR a figment of someone's imagination
- \* a posable thumb FOR opposable thumb
- \* a shoe-in FOR a shoo-in
- \* a shot across the bough FOR a shot across the bow
- \* a tough road to hoe FOR a tough row to hoe
- \* eggcorn FOR acorn
- \* ad homonym FOR ad hominem
- \* to do FOR ado
- \* airways FOR airwaves
- \* all for not FOR all for naught
- \* all goes well FOR augurs well
- \* all total FOR all told
- \* Old-Timer's FOR Alzheimer's
- \* anchors away FOR anchors aweigh
- \* and hoc FOR ad hoc
- \* and hominem FOR ad hominem
- \* and nauseam FOR ad nauseam
- \* antidotal FOR anecdotal
- \* another words FOR in other words
- \* uphaul FOR appall
- \* auger well FOR augur well
- \* back and call FOR beck and call
- \* backpeddle FOR backpedal
- \* bailing wire FOR baling wire
- \* baited breath FOR bated breath
- \* ban together FOR band together
- \* banty about FOR bandy about
- \* bobwire FOR barbed wire
- \* bare in mind FOR bear in mind
- \* wheelbarrel FOR wheelbarrow
- \* bean stock FOR beanstalk
- \* bear-faced lie FOR bare-faced lie
- \* bear-knuckled FOR bare-knuckled
- \* bedside manor FOR bedside manner
- \* bellweather FOR bellwether

### 7c. And malapropisms?

Modern Malapropisms [and Mondegreens], as published in *New York Magazine*, Sept. 17, 1990, pp. 122, 123; Competition 683

1. They avoided him like the bluebonnet plague.
2. I hear the country's deficit has been caused by the failure of the savings alone.
3. "Because you come to me with Nazi love . . ."
4. It was a case of love at Versailles.
5. In Algiers, they spend most of their time at the cashbar.
6. Get down, Moses.
7. The douche, you say!
8. He successfully shot abrasive quail.
9. ". . . just an old sweet song keeps George Hearn on my mind."
10. "Come, Comte de Tallyrand, tally me banana . . ."
11. We had a parting of the waves.
12. Nip it in the butt.
13. Some viruses can lie doormat for years.
14. One letter is worth a thousand words.
15. To each his zone.
16. "All's Well That Ends Swell."
17. Blood is thicker sans water.
18. And now, for your listening pleasure, Duke Ellington's famous "Take A Train."
19. No more negotiating, it's a dumb deal.
20. Michelangelo painted the sixteenth chapel.
21. He's a wolf in cheap clothing.
22. 'Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved a doll.
23. He's having open-house surgery.
24. She's a C.P.A.—a citified public accountant.
25. All I want from you kids is a little piece of quiet.
26. "My candle burns at both ends:  
It will not last the night;  
But ah, my foes and oh, my friends.  
It gives a lousy light."
27. The chickens are coming home to roast.
28. . . . to get something like that going, you really need a cattle list.
29. I do not cowtail to anyone.
30. He's got one of those sight-seeing dogs.
31. Love is never having to say your story.
32. Who cares if he had a Chip & Dale mirror?
33. It's a long road to hold.
34. All work and no pay makes Jack a dull boy.
35. My sister has extra-century perception
36. A fool and his monkey are soon parted.

37. She went to her gynecologist for a DMZ.
38. Before he graduates, he's going to take an attitude test.
39. "Somebody calls you, you answer quite slowly,  
The girl with colitis goes by."
40. I am Iraq, I am an island.
41. "And we'll have fun fun fun  
Till her daddy takes the T-bill away."
42. He has a lazy-fare attitude.
43. I went to the school of Fort Knox.
44. Her boyfriend is one of those kids with an earring and a jacket with sequence on it.
45. "I wandered, lonely as a crowd . . . ."
46. I've come up with a great idea, but I have to flush it out.
47. "Life is a cabernet, old chum . . . ."
48. She's a member of Green Peas.
49. All work and no play makes Jack adult boy.
50. He's always telling those cop-and-bull stories.
51. If you ask me, I'm nothing, but my analyst says I have no selfish scheme.
52. Damn the torpedoes: Fools speed ahead.
53. I'm caught between a rug and a hard place.
54. They have the right of M & M domain.
55. Roses are blooming in jeopardy.
56. Have a nice stay.
57. A fool and his money are some party.
58. Of course hindsight is 50-50.
59. A watched pot never boils over.
60. A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and wow.
61. She got pregnant and then they signed up for LeMans classes.
62. . . . and then it spread like wild flowers.
63. FDR and his Far Side chats.
64. "Bringing in the cheese, bringing in the cheese:  
We will come rejoicing, bringing in the cheese."
65. Since he started meditation, he's been trying to reach the state of Nevada.
66. ". . . and the Rockette's red glare, the blondes bursting in air."
67. I got so nervous I was tongue-tired.
68. What a truly generous gift: it was truly underserved.
69. I love Mexican food, but I can't stand those hollow pain peppers.
70. All's fear in love and war.
71. "Age cannot wither, nor custom stale  
Her infant variety."
72. Modern ethics reflects a condom leap toward caution.
73. Teenage Mute and Injured Turtles.
74. Does a bear sit in the woods?

English Grammar  
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## Appendix A

### List of Basic Grammatical Terms for the System of Traditional Grammar (50) and for the Remediation of Errors (18)

Subject	Simple sentence
Verb	Compound sentence
Complement	Complex sentence
Noun	Compound-complex sentence
Pronoun	Adverb clause
Personal pronoun	Elliptical clause
Indefinite pronoun	Adjective clause
Demonstrative pronoun	Noun clause
Reflexive pronoun	Relative pronoun
Intensive pronoun	Restrictive clause/modifier
Interrogative pronoun	Nonrestrictive clause/modifier
Possessive pronoun	Gerund (phrase)
Reciprocal pronoun	Infinitive (phrase)
Adjective	Participial (phrase)
Adverb	Absolute phrase
Preposition	
Object of a preposition	Subject-verb agreement
Prepositional phrase	Antecedent
Coordinating Conjunction	Sentence fragment
Subordinating Conjunction	Fused or run-on sentence
Expletive ( <i>it</i> and <i>there</i> )	Comma splice
Transitive verb	Misplaced modifier
Intransitive verb	Squinting modifier
Subjective complement	Dangling modifier
Predicate noun (nominative)	Broad reference
Predicate adjective	Parallel construction
Direct object	Incomplete comparison
Indirect object	Shift in number
Objective complement	Shift in person
Active voice	Shift in case
Passive voice	Shift in tense
Auxiliary verb	Shift in voice
Indicative mood	Shift in mood
Imperative mood	Faulty predication
Subjunctive mood	

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## **Appendix B: Sentence-Combining: Absolute Phrases and Cumulative Sentences**

**I. Combine the sentences below**, using whatever techniques of combining seem appropriate.

A. His hair was wet. He walked into the kitchen.

B. He came home in disgrace. His money was gone.

C. He finally realized that he had overestimated his abilities. His fortune had been reduced to nothing.

D. The case was closed. No further investigation was allowed.

E. The young woman laughed quietly. Her mind was racing to think of an answer.

F. His skates were flashing on the ice. John was a beautiful sight to behold.

G. The primaries were over. The contest became more interesting.

H. His clothes were a grimy mess. His eyes were dull and sullen. His lips were pulled back in a poisonous sneer. The grammarian sauntered into the teacher's lounge.

I. She came running into the yard. The dog was nipping at her heels.

J. His fear of grammar was diminishing. He began to write more interesting sentences.

K. The snow was nearly gone. He began to organize his gardening supplies.

L. The 15th of March was no longer a threat. Julie stopped looking for potential assassins among her friends.

M. The wind was blowing. The temperature was falling. The first day of spring was a disappointment again.

N. New wave music had lost its momentum. Sado-masochism enjoyed a brief and painful vogue.

O. The spirit of the team had been broken. Only a long series of scheduled games remained.

P. Their achievement was about to be recognized. The students felt gratitude for the rigors they had been forced to accept.

## II. Absolute Phrases, and How to Build Them

- A. The rain had started.      We abandoned our tents.  
 The rain having started.      We abandoned our tents.

The rain having started, we abandoned our tents.

- B. The police recovered eight of the paintings. Three of the paintings were badly damaged.  
 Three of the paintings being badly damaged.  
 Three of them badly damaged.

The police recovered eight of the paintings, three of them badly damaged.

- C. The mob reached the palace gates. Its leader was a burly, redhaired sailor.  
 Its leader being a burly, redhaired sailor.  
 Its leader a burly, redhaired sailor.

The mob reached the palace gates, its leader a burly, redhaired sailor.

- D. The fish was left on the ice.  
 Its eyes were staring blankly.  
 Its gills were opening and closing rhythmically.  
 Its body was moving more and more slowly.

## III. Sentence Combining: The Cumulative Sentence

- A. The singer stepped into the footlights.  
 He grinned down at the girls.  
 His mouth formed a kiss.

The singer stepped into the footlights,  
 grinning at the girls,  
 his mouth forming a kiss.

- B. Election results come in slowly.  
 The small precincts report first.  
 They provide data for predictions.

Election results come in slowly,  
 the small precincts reporting first,  
 providing data for predictions.

- C. Dancers moved in syncopation.  
 They were nodding.  
 They were jerking.  
 Their faces were transfixed.

- D. The cat came with a leap.  
 The cat was tan.  
 The cat was tawny.  
 The cat sprang on its prey.

- E. She was tall and gaunt.  
 She was shimmering in sequins.  
 Her face was frozen in a smile.  
 The smile was waxy.

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## Appendix C: Sentence and Paragraph Revision

### Preachers, Agents, and Actions How to Depopulate Your Prose (Or Not)

#### A. Writing generally focuses on objects (things), people, or abstractions

1. **The mountains and valleys of that region** had been observed and studied for years by the Nabataeans. **The runoff from the rain** followed paths that had been developing for centuries. **The valley floors** were either dry or swollen with rain. **The slightly higher parts of the valleys** were dry unless the floods pushed above the normal flood plain. **Vegetation** grew only where the streams had a more or less regular existence. **And water that pooled after a downpour** usually disappeared within days.

2. **The Nabataeans** observed and studied the mountains and valleys of the region for many years. **They** noted the paths that the runoff from the rains usually followed, paths that had been developing for centuries. **They** also saw that the valley floors were either very dry or swollen with rain and that the slightly higher parts of the valleys were dry unless the floods pushed above the normal flood plain. **They** knew that vegetation grew only where the streams had more or less regular existence and that the water that pooled after a downpour usually disappeared within days.

3. **Observation and study of the mountains and valleys of that region** revealed **basic information**. **The establishment of paths for the rainfall** had been developing for centuries. **The alternation between dryness and flooding** characterized the valley floors, and **persistent dryness was the state of the slightly higher parts of the valleys** unless there were **rainfall excesses** that caused a **flood plain surplus**. **The growth of vegetation** was restricted to those areas in which there was a **regular flow of water**. And **the pooling of water after a downpour** was typically of **very short duration**.

**B. But the human mind (among speakers and writers of English, at least) seems to want to process information in a particular way: agent—action—goal**

It does this very well if that information is presented as **subject—verb—complement**.

**C. If the genre, purpose, occasion, variety, and audience allow, that's probably how we should present information in our sentences, as much as possible.**

**D. Exceptions to that general rule: when the agent is unknown or of little significance in context; in scientific writing; in technical writing:**

- passive style
- nominal style
- noun strings
- jargon

**E. How to depopulate your prose—how to make people disappear from your sentences:**

1. write about things, not people
  2. write about abstractions, not people
  3. use the passive voice
  4. use the nominal style
  5. use noun strings
  6. use the so-called ergative verbs
- verbs that fit into this paradigm:
    - a. The sun melted the ice. (active voice, transitive verb)
    - b. The ice was melted by the sun. (passive voice, transitive verb)
    - c. The ice melted. (intransitive verb, non-agent subject)**
  - or this one:
    - a. I drive the car easily. (active voice, transitive verb)
    - b. The car is driven easily. (passive voice, transitive verb)
    - c. The car drives easily. (intransitive verb, non-agent subject)**

**F. Practice**

1. At the beginning of the hour, the students learned the new material quickly and well.
  
2. Their professors were eager learners, too.
  
3. The visitor encouraged them all, noticing, however, that he was the oldest person in the room.
  
4. Everyone was surprised that the time went by so quickly.
  
5. They found that sentence revision was more interesting than they had thought it could be.
  
6. **Can you revise this (ergative) poem in order to supply agents and actions?**

**Imprecation**

May agonies accumulate:

May skin char and blister,  
Lungs constrict,  
Teeth grind,  
Bones break,  
Flesh bruise,  
Thoughts coarsen,  
Mind boggle.

May miseries increase.

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English Grammar

### **A. Recognizing Active and Passive Voice Verbs**

#### ACTIVE VOICE

#### PASSIVE VOICE

- |                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1. I destroyed the manuscript. | 1. The manuscript was destroyed by me. |
| 2. She is sanding the desk.    | 2. The desk is being sanded by her.    |
| 3. She will read the book.     | 3. The book will be read by her.       |
| 4. Priscilla chose John.       | 4. John was chosen by Priscilla.       |
| 5.                             | 5. That house was built by me.         |
| 6. I wrote a book.             | 6.                                     |
| 7.                             | 7. The president was elected.          |
| 8.                             | 8. I had been told nothing.            |
| 9. I consider her intelligent. | 9.                                     |
| 10.                            | 10. The barn was painted teal.         |
| 11.                            | 11. She was elected president.         |

### **B. The Passive Style**

1. Your request for an exception to the rule was denied at the September meeting.
2. The decision will be made and the winners will be announced soon.
3. Many complaints have been brought against you since we were first notified of the incident.
4. The passive style is used by many bureaucrats so that the responsibility for their actions can remain obscured.
5. The passive style is considered a virtue in much scientific writing because the emphasis of such writing is put on the process and the product, not on the person.

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English Grammar: **Nominalization**

Definition: Nominalization is the replacement of a strong verb or modifier with the noun form of that word.

Examples:	<u>VERB</u>	<u>NOMINALIZATION</u>	<u>MODIFIER</u>	<u>NOMINALIZATION</u>
	decide	decision	precisely	precision
	select	selection	deliberately	deliberation
	need	need		stubborn      stubbornness
	prepare	preparation	similar	similarity

1. There was precision in the preparation of the data.
2. She exhibited considerable intelligence in regard to that.
3. There is a need for reanalysis of our data.
4. We conducted an investigation of it.
5. A need exists for greater candidate selection efficiency.
6. A review was done of the relevant regulations.
7. We had a discussion of the matter.
8. The establishment of a different approach on the part of the committee has become a necessity.
9. There is a student loan repayment reliability study need.
10. There is the possibility of prior approval of it.

—from J. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*.

“Respect and consideration for other residents in the community necessitates that excessive noise will not be tolerated.” (—from the *Calvin Student Handbook*)

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 English Grammar: **Noun Strings**

Definition: A noun string

1. The Calvin College English Department conference room coffee pot spigot drips constantly.
2. Please alert the missile guidance control center personnel office of your concerns about unusual job stress manifestations.
3. The ordinary Army snow shovel handle length specification requirement is met by very few commercially available snow shovels in Michigan.
4. The evening assembly was dominated by an unpleasant platform committee rules argument.
5. The typical English teacher education program description satisfied even the abnormal Calvin College secondary education English major.
6. Avoid the nearest defective emergency exit window release lever.
7. No one knows an obnoxious teaching methods seminar leader.
8. They labored with ambiguous sentence pattern conundrums.

Other examples:

1. abnormal information processing behavior
2. medical maintenance level evaluation procedures
3. early childhood thought disorder misdiagnosis
4. Review an emotionally impaired teacher education program.
5. Calvin Alumni Association Faculty Grant Committee Recipient Selection Procedure 2008-2009
6. Child tax credit repayment program
7. academic regalia coordination; facility usage guidelines

## Jargon Generators

**A. Education:** Select any sequence of three digits between 1 and 9 and read off the appropriate jargon expression from the three columns. For example, 5-2-8 gives us “instructional simulation subsystems,” which sounds somehow convincing.

A	B	C
1. curricular	research	project
2. behavioral	simulation	validation
3. programmed	implementation	assessment
4. cognitive	examination	objectives
5. instructional	participation	resources
6. integrated	syllabus	concept
7. audio–visual	innovation	module
8. interdisciplinary	communication	subsystems
9. multi–media	learning	evaluation

## B. Business and Administration

0. integrated	management	options
1. total	organizational	flexibility
2. systematized	monitored	capability
3. parallel	reciprocal	mobility
4. functional	digital	programming
5. responsive	logistical	concept
6. optional	transitional	time–phase
7. synchronized	incremental	projection
8. compatible	third–generation	hardware
9. balanced	policy	contingency

—from Committee on Public Doublespeak, NCTE