

# Step-by-step grammar

## 1. Noun phrases

**Grammar can be fun, especially for young children, maintains Jim Crinson. Here, he starts a major new series on how to respond to the current pressure to teach grammar, whilst ensuring that this is done in the context of children's own reading and writing.**

Grammar. There's something doleful in the very word, isn't there? Well, not really. I like to think of working with grammar as similar to a visit to the dentist: adults hate going to the dentist, but children don't mind, because the visit hasn't yet become associated with pain. Grammar can be like that.

In this series of articles, I will be sharing with you some of the strategies I have devised that have made grammar interesting to the children in my school. As I describe these strategies, I hope to convert you to my way of looking at grammar. I find this approach helps children both to understand sentence construction for the purposes of their own speaking and writing, and, later, to get off to a good start in learning another modern languages.

### Getting started

Let's jump straight in. Consider the selection of noun phrases in the panel to the right. (I am not going to explain the concept yet, because looking at examples usually makes it clear.)

I wrote this list on the board for a Year 3 class, and asked what they thought might have been happening in the story the phrases came from.

(I did use the word *phrase*, but didn't explain it at this point). The children guessed various things, including that there was a giant, and

a house  
longhighhouse

the darkness  
highdarkness

the cliff  
the sharp cliff

a house  
a big red hou se

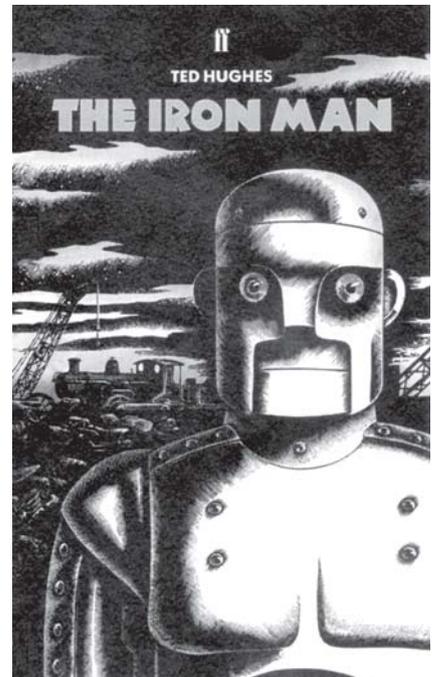
a very very strong wind  
the veryhaye clif

His long cold  
silvery fingers

The horrible sandy  
marsh cligg

the very brink  
the strong wind  
his right foot  
his enormous iron right foot  
the cliff  
nothingness  
his iron legs  
his iron arms  
his great iron ears  
his great iron head  
all the separate pieces  
the sea  
the rocky beach  
the bits and pieces  
an old, sand-logged washed-up  
seaman's boot.

What might have been happening in the story these phrases come from?



that the story took place at the seaside. You will probably have guessed that the phrases came from the opening pages of Ted Hughes's *The Iron Man*. The children were intrigued by the phrases. I asked them which ones they liked best, and many were especially keen on the last one, which is a very good example of how noun phrases can get very large indeed.

### Headwords

I then introduced the idea of a headword. A noun phrase always has a word which is the 'boss', which is its irreducible minimum. In the case of nothingness, the choice is obvious, but what about *an old, sand-logged washed-up seaman's boot*?

Linguists have proposed tests for headwords in noun phrases, but in my experience it is usually obvious which word it is. The last phrase in the list is

The Iron Man came to the top of the cliff.  
How far had he walked? Nobody knows.  
Where had he come from? Nobody knows. How  
was he made? Nobody knows.

Taller than a house, the Iron Man stood at the  
top of the cliff, on the very brink, in the dark-  
ness.

The wind sang through his iron fingers. His  
great iron head, shaped like a dustbin but as big  
as a bedroom, slowly turned to the right, slowly  
turned to the left. His iron ears turned, this way,  
that way. He was hearing the sea. His eyes, like  
headlamps, glowed white, then red, then infra-  
red, searching the sea. Never before had the  
Iron Man seen the sea.

He swayed in the strong wind that pressed  
against his back. He swayed forward, on the  
brink of the high cliff.

11

And his right foot, his enormous iron right  
foot, lifted – up, out, into space, and the Iron  
Man stepped forward, off the cliff, into nothing-  
ness.

CRRRRAAASSSSSH!

Down the cliff the Iron Man came toppling,  
head over heels.

CRASH!

CRASH!

CRASH!

From rock to rock, snag to snag, tumbling  
slowly. And as he crashed and crashed and  
crashed

His iron legs fell off.

His iron arms broke off, and the hands broke  
off the arms.

His great iron ears fell off and his eyes fell out.

His great iron head fell off.

All the separate pieces tumbled, scattered,  
crashing, bumping, clanging, down on to the  
rocky beach far below.

A few rocks tumbled with him.

Then

Silence.

Only the sound of the sea, chewing away at  
the edge of the rocky beach, where the bits and  
pieces of the Iron Man lay scattered far and  
wide, silent and unmoving.

12

Only one of the iron hands, lying beside an  
old, sand-logged, washed-up seaman's boot,  
waved its fingers for a minute, like a crab on its  
back. Then it lay still.

While the stars went on wheeling through the  
sky and the wind went on tugging at the grass  
on the cliff-top and the sea went on boiling and  
booming.

Nobody knew the Iron Man had fallen.

Night passed.

Just before dawn, as the darkness grew blue  
and the shapes of the rocks separated from each  
other, two seagulls flew crying over the rocks.  
They landed on a patch of sand. They had two  
chicks in a nest on the cliff. Now they were  
searching for food.

One of the seagulls flew up – Aaaaark! He  
had seen something. He glided low over the  
sharp rocks. He landed and picked something up.  
Something shiny, round and hard. It was one of  
the Iron Man's eyes. He brought it back to his  
mate. They both looked at this strange thing.  
And the eye looked at them. It rolled from side  
to side looking first at one gull, then at the other.  
The gulls, peering at it, thought it was a strange  
kind of clam, peeping at them from its shell.

Then the other gull flew up, wheeled around  
and landed and picked something up. Some

13

The top of the high, sandy  
muddy cliff

The wild blue sea

His strong iron fingers

The strong noisy  
wind

Two white fat seagulls

Laura

clearly *about* a boot. It is easy enough  
to remove the other bits and pieces in  
the noun phrase (like peeling an  
onion) and reveal the minimum, which  
is a *boot*.

## Underlining

I gave the children photocopies of the  
list and asked them to underline the  
headwords in each phrase, which they  
were all able to do. I then gave them  
copies of the first four pages of the  
book (thanks to the copyright licens-  
ing agreement, the best present schools  
have ever had for the teaching of  
grammar).

I asked the children to underline  
on their copy the noun phrases I had  
pulled out for them. This enabled  
them to identify noun phrases in  
context. I then read the text to them,  
asking them to think about the music  
of the text, the poetry in the prose.  
Next, I asked if the children could see

any phrases they could change, in the  
way that *a boot* could be changed to *an  
old, sand-logged washed up seaman's boot*.  
They highlighted the phrases they  
intended to change, and wrote their  
own version in the spaces on the  
copied pages.

## A change for the better?

The pages were then passed around,  
and the children discussed whether or  
not their changes were an improve-  
ment. A discussion ensued as to  
whether adding things to noun phrases  
(I didn't use terms like adjectives at  
this point) was always a good thing.  
The children realised that phrases  
gained colour from additions, but that  
too much colour made the mixture  
too rich.

I did this with a couple of other  
texts, to reinforce the idea of a noun  
phrase. The procedure will work with  
any text. You need to eliminate one or

two noun phrases which contain other  
material embedded in them (we leave  
these for later: much later). A rule of  
thumb is, if you don't quite understand  
it, don't use it.

The procedure described here  
helps children prepare for:

- ◆ looking at nouns, adjectives, articles  
and other items typically found  
inside the noun phrase
- ◆ seeing how noun phrases combine  
with verb phrases to make up  
clauses and sentences
- ◆ most importantly (in my view),  
looking at how language is used  
effectively and creatively by writers,  
and how we can all do the same.

If you want to consider noun phrases  
further, I recommend David Crystal's  
excellent *Rediscover Grammar*.

Jim Crinson is Headteacher of Colling-  
wood Primary School, North Shields