

Long Beach City College
SABBATICAL LEAVE PROPOSAL

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For full 2012-2013 academic year

1. Briefly state the purpose of your sabbatical leave.

LBCC students seeking to satisfy the English requirement for transfer or graduation face significant obstacles in improving their English skills. Though English classes must focus on a wide range of skills such as critical thinking and reading, composition, research, and analysis, the need to help students incapable of communicating in standard written English—that is, in grammatically correct English—arises in every level of the composition sequence. Those students who cannot write correctly find themselves at a distinct disadvantage not only in their English classes but also in their many other classes that require clear prose and written communication. Currently, a mere 13% of incoming LBCC students test at the college-ready English level. Therefore, we have a large population of students who need at the least a review, and at the most, an introduction, to standard written English.

The grammar books that are available are not appropriate for our students. Of course, regardless of students' needs, English grammar is viewed by many as a source of horror; the mere topic calls up terrifying images of diagrammed sentences, punctuation drills, and dreadful terms like “predicate nominative.” Many grammar textbooks, unhappily, justify such dread. Stultifying approaches to this complex topic baffle our students; online resources call up arcane controversies or childlike drills; ESL textbooks are not appropriate to our students who have spoken English their entire lives. Further complicating matters for the college English instructor is that many textbooks veer between two extremes: too cursory an approach, a mere survey assuming knowledge not held by our students; or too thorough, an approach appropriate to a graduate-level course in linguistics, providing far too much information for our students to assimilate, let alone deal with in addition to other composition imperatives. In addition to these problems, many textbooks available for English instructors present for our students a shocking and often final obstacle: extraordinarily high cost.

I propose to create a complete grammar pedagogy appropriate to LBCC students enrolled in our composition sequence. This will require a ladder approach: I will create an integrated approach to grammar instruction that will replace the need for textbooks at all levels of our composition classes, as well as satisfying the more complex demands of the College Grammar class. Thus my project will address needs from the most basic understanding of the sentence to those students—often English and Creative Writing majors or those who wish to teach—who seek a more advanced understanding of the structure, usage, and controversies of the English language.

The initial portion of my project will include research and critique of available literature and planning the strategies most relevant to LBCC students; the latter half of the project will apply this research to tangible products: a detailed course calendar, classroom materials, explanations of grammatical concepts, and multiple exercises that allow students to apply, practice, and master the concepts so important to improving their writing.

2. Give all pertinent details of your proposed plan. This should include all activities, projects, research, itinerary, study, employment, expected outcomes, relationships with current coursework, etc. connected with your proposed leave.

One of my favorite classes to teach is English 24, College Grammar. Yet despite my enthusiasm, I find myself constantly bound to and frustrated by the textbooks available for this class. Many are thoughtful and interesting; I admire the virtues of several. None of them, however, meets our students' needs. Let me provide some examples. For example, Martha Kolln's *Rhetorical Grammar*, an innovative approach that links grammatical concepts to composition and rhetoric, begins in chapter one by assuming that our students can not only grasp such concepts as complements and direct objects but also identify the seven main types of English sentence. Our students often enter the class, unfortunately, without a concept of what a verb is or where it might appear in a sentence. Thus, using Kolln's text requires the instructor to scramble to provide materials that could fill three chapters before hers even opens. Kolln's longer work, the authoritative *Understanding English Grammar*, compounds this problem by adding nuanced, sophisticated, and entirely overwhelming discussions of the concepts she presents. Other texts present different problems. *Grammar for Language Arts Teachers*, by Alice Calderonello, Virginia Martin and Kristine Blair, provides an intelligent discussion of how to think about learning grammar and nicely ties basic concepts to clause structure. However, despite these attributes, the text is densely written and formatted, has few exercises, and strikes our students as irrelevant to their interest (only a few are there to learn how to teach). So too, the best option for the class I have found—*English Grammar: Language as Human Behavior*, by Anita Barry—unfortunately breaks her chapters into a study of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, etc., without linking these discussions to clause structure until very late in the book. Thus, though it is a solid approach in some ways, the book fails those students who wish to address such common problems as run-on sentences, comma splices, and fragments; nor does it help students think about the subtleties of coordination or subordination. As the instructor, of course, I have found ways to compensate for these weaknesses—I make up handouts, I lecture on additional concepts, I have students construct their own sentences, I photocopy supplementary materials, I direct students to online resources. In my scant spare time, I can find ways, in other words, to make the course work. None of these, however, makes up for what I see as a flawed approach to the pedagogy of grammar. I need time to think through how to present these concepts clearly and well. I need to compose cogent explanations. I need to make up exercises—many exercises—that allow students time to make these concepts their own. Furthermore, I need to consider how these advanced concepts can be integrated into composition classes so that the teaching of grammar is not just less frightful but rather truly useful to the student who needs to write well and to the professor who must teach it.

Therefore, I see my project developing to address primarily the following questions:

I. What resources are currently available to professors wishing to cover grammar?

- Survey of existing literature
 - Advanced grammar textbooks
 - Composition/Rhetoric textbooks that address usage
 - Handbooks
 - ESL textbooks and approaches
 - Online resources

II. Considering the limitations of existing materials regarding our student population, how should these concepts be approached?

- Mapping of important concepts
 - Correlation to English 24 course outline
 - Correlation to course outlines of composition classes
 - English 801 A & B, English 105, English 1
 - Exploration of links to Success Center activities

0. How can these difficult concepts be best understood, explained, and applied?

- Writing the book
 - Explanatory sections
 - Exercises
 - Formatting

3. Provide a timeline indicating how the activities in your plan will be completed within the time frame of the proposed leave.

- By mid-October 2012, I expect to finish the survey of existing literature (Section I in response to Question #2 above).
- By the end of Fall 2012, I will have mapped out important concepts and my approach and outlined the necessary elements (II).
- By the end of Spring 2013, I will have written the book, including partitions for various composition classes as well as a complete approach to English 24 (III).

4. Describe how the proposed leave will contribute to your professional development, including how it relates to your current assignment.

The main joys and trials of the English professor often revolve around our grading—of essays, often in abundance, and often in great need of critical response. Thus, whether it be for our composition or literature classes, those of us in the English department spend an inordinate amount of our time outside the classroom responding to our students’ writing. This substantial effort relates in two significant ways to my project:

1. As much as writing instructors would like to focus on students’ ideas and creativity and style and thinking, the need to address issues of language competency intrudes upon—indeed, permeates—our responses. Unless students can communicate clearly, they will be judged harshly. The LBCC placement test for our English classes (typical as it is) judges students’ knowledge of English. The judgments students will face when transferring, when submitting future compositions, when applying for jobs, will often rest on their ability to use English well. Grammatical precision is the single most common standard by which others judge language competency; yet it is also very difficult to teach well. Though we professors may mark “run-on sentence” in the margins, students’ grasp of what to do with that information remains hazy. My project aims to help both ends of this dialogue—the instructor who makes note of such errors and the student who hopes to fix them.

2. As an instructor who spends much of her time responding to essays, I often find that the time and reflection necessary to construct an entire pedagogical approach to grammatical issues—a new book or books, in other words—eludes me every semester. My students in English 24 have chosen a class that focuses on grammar; those in English 105 or even English 1 Honors, however, often need such instruction just as much as those in the grammar class, whether they know it or not. I have found ways to address these needs, of course. But I would like to do so more thoroughly, and I have a number of ideas I would very much like to expand on more fully.

I first taught English 24 during my first semester at LBCC as a full-time instructor. Despite my initial panic at having been assigned such a class—a class that I had never contemplated teaching during my graduate work—the course ended up being my favorite that first semester. My fondness for the subject has only grown as I have come to appreciate the subtleties of the topic and the many ways in which I can make it a fun and engaging class for the students attending. Countless semesters, students (unaware of the vague insult implied!) remark to me that they have really enjoyed what they had been certain would be a terribly boring class. It is a success, yes—but I think it could be made better. Thus, this sabbatical project relates directly to my professional development and to my current assignment. I would like the time to develop my pedagogy more comprehensively, to consider how to bring together grammar instruction and composition pedagogy, to design exercises directly relevant to our LBCC students. I've been wanting to tackle this project for fourteen years and would relish the chance to do so.

5. Describe how the proposed leave will benefit the college and students.

My proposal would benefit LBCC's students—not merely for their time in English classes but, ideally, in any classes requiring written communication—in that my project addresses specific needs students have in English grammar and usage. Because students often try to survive their classes without purchasing these very expensive grammar textbooks, readily available materials further increase their chances of success in their English classes. And given that the project will be made available to my colleagues in the English department, many of whom are constantly searching for appropriate texts for their composition classes, these materials will benefit other instructors as well as students.

6. List and describe the specific, tangible products you will bring to the college within 90 days after you return to your assignment.

Describing the final, tangible product as a book seems to me somewhat misleading, as it suggests one bound text for a particular class. Rather, what I have in mind resembles in concept perhaps a video game with successive levels related to students' or instructors' need or desire for more instruction or practice. These materials will include the following: a clear sequencing of information relating to composition courses and student skills; explanations, both theoretical and practical, of grammatical concepts and standard American English usage; application of those concepts to common problems found in student writing; and multiple exercises relating to each of the above. (The dearth of useful exercises in most textbooks—especially for students who need extra time and application for a concept to 'stick'—will be addressed in my materials).

7. Describe how you will share the outcomes of your proposed leave with other interested parties upon your return.

These materials will be made available to English LBCC faculty in a variety of ways. Ideally, I would present my ideas in a Flex Day-type workshop in which I can explain my pedagogy and how to use the materials related to it. Of course, these materials could be placed on reserve in the library and the English department for instructors' use and distributed electronically.

8, If applicable, please disclose any additional sources of employment earnings during the proposed leave.

I will receive no additional compensation during my sabbatical.