

Winter 2014

**Review of The War Against Grammar by David Mulroy  
Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 2003 ISBN:  
0-86709-551-2**

David Aguilar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/jostes>

---

**Recommended Citation**

Aguilar, D. (2014). Review of The War Against Grammar by David Mulroy Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 2003 ISBN: 0-86709-551-2. Jostes: The Journal of South Texas English Studies, 4(2), 62-64.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of South Texas English Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact [justin.white@utrgv.edu](mailto:justin.white@utrgv.edu), [william.flores01@utrgv.edu](mailto:william.flores01@utrgv.edu).

Review of *The War Against Grammar* by David Mulroy  
Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 2003  
ISBN: 0-86709-551-2

David Aguilar

As you read this sentence, you are carefully dissecting the meaning of every word, comparing their meanings, and drawing conclusions based on those meanings. In *The War Against Grammar*, David Mulroy, a professor of Classics at UWM, argues that this process—understanding language—is only possible by understanding grammar, and that teachers of English, due to forces put forth by a number of anti-grammar advocates, are neglecting to teach grammar as it should be taught. He concludes that the problems associated with poor verbal skills (e.g., reading and writing scores on standardized tests; and reading and writing in general) can be solved if traditional grammar is reinstated at the early grades. What makes *The War Against Grammar* unique, besides being a polemic, is that it traces the history of educational reform, building up to today’s debate about including formal grammar instruction in the curriculum.

I first read *The War Against Grammar* during my last semester as an undergraduate for my English Studies class. I remember thinking it was a tiny yellow book—a little more than 100 pages—and when my professor noted that the class would be skipping the chapters concerning “unimportant history lessons,” I didn’t give it much thought. In fact, I expected the book to justify what Hillocks and Braddock had published all those years ago. But after going through the assigned chapters, Mulroy’s argument was just the opposite and

proved invaluable, even without the history lessons. Now, after my third reading, I can't stress enough the importance of his historical analysis of grammar. From 1200 B.C. to the era of Shakespeare, Mulroy gives an outstanding account of the rise and falls of civilizations, attributing much to grammar and its instruction. He then compares this account with today's ongoing struggle to keep the liberal arts alive and well, citing publications from the NCTE and ATEG along the way. Mulroy isn't shy about bashing anti-grammarians and pseudo-grammarians either. After all, this is a polemic, and one cannot tiptoe around a pivotal argument such as his.

It should be noted that Mulroy explicitly criticizes liberal arts education in the United States. He does not provide a spelled-out solution for lackluster verbal skills, and he does not attribute these problems entirely to a lack of formal grammar instruction. Instead, this book is a discussion on probable causes of, historical connections to, and future possibilities for traditional grammar instruction. Furthermore, what distinguishes *The War Against Grammar* apart from other arguments on the same subject is that Mulroy strays from the typical America-cares-more-about-science-and-math line of thought and attacks educators *from* the liberal arts and humanities who seem to have forgotten the importance of learning their basics.

This book receives my highest recommendation because (1) Mulroy follows through with his promise "to persuade the reader that formal instruction in grammar ought to be emphasized in K-12 education, especially

in the middle grades, fourth through sixth” (xiii), (2) he makes an honest effort to relate his area of specialty to a wider audience, namely teachers of English, and (3) his is an argument of passion and reason, something I don’t see often.