



Addressing the Grammar Skill Gap

Heritage High School, Littleton, Colorado



“As teachers, we know differentiation is important, but as human beings there is only so much we can do within the time and curriculum constraints in the classroom. IXL helps to fill in the gaps by meeting students where they are and pushing them exactly where they need it.”

Amanda Hurley, 11th grade English teacher

Heritage High School serves more than 1,600 students in a vibrant community in the suburbs of Denver. Heritage has been recognized by Newsweek magazine as one of the nation’s top schools based on access to challenging courses and overall academic achievement. However, English teacher and department chair Amanda Hurley saw a clear need for more consistent grammar and writing instruction. She turned to IXL Language Arts to help her students brush up on their skills and take their writing to the next level.

Who Has Time to Differentiate?

Students arrive at Heritage their freshman year with a broad range of grammar and writing skills, often depending on which middle school they attended. Amanda explains, “Some of our middle schools have comprehensive grammar instruction, and some do not.” When students entered high school with gaps in their knowledge, it was tough for them to catch up.

Amanda saw these skill gaps in her 11th grade Advanced Placement (AP) English Language and Composition class. “Their skills were all over the place, and that was reflected in their writing. When grammar isn’t consistently taught and practiced, they tend to lose it over time. But I didn’t always have the time to review these basic concepts in class.” With such a broad range of foundational skills, it was especially hard to differentiate instruction. Some teachers were using a supplemental grammar program that provided daily practice, but it was not targeted to specific student needs and did not have a noticeable impact.

When Amanda surveyed other English teachers, she found similar frustrations across all grade levels. Amanda and her peers needed a solution that would help struggling students catch up and keep students with advanced skills challenged and engaged.



Meeting Individual Student Needs

Amanda began using IXL Language Arts in the 2015–2016 school year to supplement her instruction and provide targeted support to students who were struggling with specific skills. She assigns skills based on issues that she identifies in students' written work. "With IXL, every student can be working on what they need," she explains. "For one student, that might mean brushing up on comma use, while another student might need to work on building an argument." Occasionally, she identifies a common weak spot and assigns a specific lesson to all of her students.

Amanda makes time in class once a week for students to work on IXL at school. Other assignments can be completed at home. Students must either hit a specific mastery level or put in a minimum time in order to get credit for the assignment. When they are working in class, Amanda relies on the Live Classroom report from IXL Analytics to keep an eye on what students are doing and identify students who could benefit from one-on-one support.

More Time for the "Human Side of Instruction"

With IXL, differentiating for student needs is now easier. "IXL finds their skill level pretty quickly and gets them to a place where they will be challenged without being too frustrated," Amanda says. "It really is a complement to my classroom instruction. The software can figure out what they need and give them the time to practice independently at their own level. That frees me up to spend more time on the human side of instruction: teaching, explaining, and motivating."

Amanda uses the reports in IXL Analytics to help guide her instruction on a weekly basis. "I definitely base my instruction around what I see in IXL," she says. "Sometimes, students surprise me and really fly through things, and I know I don't need to spend classroom time there. Other times I see problem areas that tell me I need to change my plans and reshape the support I am giving my students." Her students are thriving with the more individualized approach to learning. They appreciate the immediate explanations when they get an answer wrong and love the challenge of improving their SmartScores (IXL's proprietary scoring system that measures how well a student understands a skill). Working in the "Challenge Zone" and earning ribbons as they master new skills brings out her students' competitive drive.

Amanda also believes that IXL is helping to prepare her students for college-level thinking and writing. "I'm teaching a college-level course, so I didn't know at first if IXL would be challenging enough. But even my highest scoring students find it difficult to get to a score of 100 in the Challenge Zone. There are absolutely elements that push them and challenge them to rethink their reasoning."



A Model for Success at Heritage High School

Here's how 11th grade teacher Amanda Hurley is using IXL in her AP English Language and Composition classroom:

- Students use IXL Language Arts in class weekly to supplement their AP curriculum. They also complete some assignments as homework.
- Amanda assigns IXL skills to individual students or classes based on the needs she sees in their writing samples and in IXL Analytics.
- Students must hit a specific mastery level or complete a minimum time in the program to get credit.
- While students work in class, Amanda monitors their progress with IXL's Live Classroom report. If a student seems stuck, she offers individual support. She also uses IXL Analytics to inform her instructional plans.