An X-Word Grammar Collaboration: X-Words and Their Verb Forms  
by Bonny Hart and Tamara Kirson

I am going to school.  
He didn’t go to class.  
He was going yesterday.

How often have we seen verb mistakes like these? How often have we corrected them with little or no effect? The November NYS TESOL Annual Conference gave the authors the chance to share a simple and effective solution to errors such as these with an enthusiastic group of workshop attendees. This logical system is known as X-Word Grammar.

The X-Word Grammar method shows students the consistent relationships between x-words and verb forms, and lets students analyze and correct their own mistakes—even mistakes that they have made habitually.

So what is this miraculous method? It’s not really a miracle, although it may seem like one at times. X-Word Grammar is a linguistics-based approach to teaching grammar that focuses on consistent relationships, or “collaborations,” in grammar. It was developed by Robert Allen, a professor of linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University, in the 1960s. It was carried into the ESOL classroom by his students and is now spreading through a new generation.

**Why Are X-Words So Important?**

The 5 uses of X-words:
1. To ask questions  
2. To make negatives  
3. To find the subject  
4. To add tense  
5. To add meaning

**Discovering the X-Words**

*The brain is designed to perceive and generate patterns.*  
—Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2000)

The English verb phrase consists of 20 x-words and six verb forms that are 100% pattern-based. What are x-words? They are a small group of twenty words, occurring in all English sentences, that shift to make yes-no questions. The chart above defines their essential roles in English grammar. (Traditional grammar calls them helping verbs and modals.) Intermediate and advanced students usually “discover” the x-words for themselves. They are asked to write as many yes/no questions as they can. Each question must start with a different x-word. In the interest of time, however, workshop participants learned the x-words to the tune of “Jingle Bells.”
The Six Verb Forms

There are six forms of every verb in English: BASE, ING (progressive), D-T-N (participle), V/XO and V/XS (simple present), and V/XD (simple past).

We’ve learned the 20 X-words. Let’s review the 6 forms of every verb (except be which has 8!I) Can you complete this chart?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BASE</th>
<th>ING</th>
<th>D-T-N</th>
<th>V/XO</th>
<th>V/XS</th>
<th>V/XD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>work</td>
<td>working</td>
<td>eaten</td>
<td>eat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sleep</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>slept</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Certain verb forms must always appear with certain x-words.
- Certain verb forms must never appear with an x-word.

The 20 x-words and the six forms of the verb combine in rule-based match-ups to make all of the verbs in English.

The Match-ups—The Relationship between X-Words and Verb Forms

The x-words and verbs collaborate with each other in set ways.

Hidden x-words: Did you notice that do, does, and did always go with the BASE form of the verb? That is because the x-words “hides” behind the main verbs, and come out of hiding when you need them. For example, they come out of hiding when you ask a question, leaving the BASE form behind. V/XO, V/XS (present), and V/XD (past) never appear with an x-word; their hidden x-words come out from behind to do their work, leaving the BASE form.

Marie takes the #1 train to school. → Does she take the #1 train to school?
What do these match-ups look like?

The match-ups occur in every English sentence; students have seen them on every page. After students are introduced to the match-ups, they will start to notice them.

Sentence with the x-words and verb forms marked: Match-up:

V/XO
The matchups occur in every English sentence. (do)
X D-T-N
Students have seen them on every page. have d-t-n
X D-T-N
After students are introduced to the match-ups, are d-t-n (passive)
X VB
they will start to notice them. will Vb

Applying the match-ups in the classroom

Reading: One of the beauties of X-Word Grammar is that it can be applied to any reading materials that are being used in class. No “artificial” materials, limited to a particular tense, have to be created. Students can start to identify the x-words and their uses immediately.

In the NYS TESOL Annual Conference workshop, participants used examples from National Geographic’s Reading Explorer series. The readings were theme-based, from saving the pandas to using dogs at airports and exploring animal “laughter.” Each small group was assigned an x-word–verb match-up to find in one of the readings. Then they wrote their own sentence using the same match-up and shared both with the whole group.

In the classroom, you can recycle the same material as a follow-up, as shown below.

1) We know animals can feel fear. 2) They may also feel love since they have strong relationships with each other. 3) So are animal emotions similar to our own? 4) And do animals have a sense of humor?

1. Put an “x” over each x-word that you can see.
2. Mark the main verbs with Vb.
3. There are 2 verbs with a hidden “do.” Put V/XO over each of them.
4. Which x-words are used to ask questions?
5. Which x-words add meaning to their main verbs?
6. Write 2 questions. Begin one question with “are.” Begin the other question with “do.”

Answers:
1. can, may, are, do
2. can feel, may feel, do . . . have
3. know, have (in sentence 2)
4. are, do
5. can, may
6. __________
Writing: To come back to the subject of correcting verb errors in student writing, referring students back to the x-word–verb match-ups will help them learn that these are consistent, never-changing rules with no exceptions.

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I \textcolor{red}{\underline{\text{going}}} to school.

Errors like these can be corrected by circling them and reinforcing the student’s awareness of these straightforward, 100% rules. Now, just like the workshop participants: 1) find the x-words below, 2) take a look at the Match-ups chart, and 3) you’ll easily correct these errors!

He didn’t \textcolor{red}{{went}} to class.
He was \textcolor{red}{\underline{go}} yesterday.
She \textcolor{red}{\underline{can}} to cook dinner.
Tomo has \textcolor{red}{\underline{eat}} dinner already.
Her long black hair is \textcolor{red}{\underline{look}} beautiful all the time.

About Robert Allen
http://xwordgrammar.pbworks.com/w/page/7067837/About%20Robert%20Allen

X-Word Grammar WIKI
http://xwordgrammar.pbworks.com

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