Teaching grammar has been mandated in statutory curriculum documents in England since 1988 and the new National Curriculum requires substantially more explicit attention to grammar than any previous iterations. Internationally, at the same time, other jurisdictions are re-introducing grammar to their curricula (for example, Australia) or increasing the focus on grammar in national writing assessments. In the United States, the Common Core State Standards include a set of anchor Language Standards. Yet despite this, research evidence from many Anglophone countries continues to suggest that metalinguistic knowledge is an area of challenge for many teachers. This is attributable to two contextual factors. Firstly, following the Dartmouth Conference in the USA in 1966, and the widespread view of professionals and educationalists that the formal teaching of grammar had no beneficial impact on students’ competences as speakers, readers or writers, grammar teaching was subsequently largely abandoned in Anglophone countries. A consequence of this is that current cohorts of English teachers were themselves not taught grammar at school. A second reason for the lower levels of grammatical content knowledge in England may be that at the point of entry to postgraduate teacher education courses, there appears to be a distinct preference for teachers who have come through the literature degree route, at the same time as there is a shortage of applicants from a linguistics route.

Curriculum expectations that students will have explicit knowledge of grammar combined with the tendency towards an absence of grammatical content knowledge in the academic experiences of English teachers generate very specific challenges for pedagogical practice and student learning. This is not simply declarative content knowledge of grammar as a system, but crucially pedagogical knowledge of how to teach grammar, and how to make connections between grammar and text. Drawing on data from three mixed-methods studies, including an RCT, funded respectively by the ESRC, Pearson, and EEF, this paper will consider the role of teachers’ grammatical knowledge, both content and pedagogical content knowledge, in mediating learning about writing in the classroom. It will also address the ‘discourses of derision’ that surround teachers’ subject knowledge in this area, and the challenges posed by the absence of a clear pedagogical rationale for the inclusion of grammar in the curriculum. If grammar matters, then policy-makers and professionals need to take account of the interplay between content and pedagogy to generate practices in the teaching of writing which are genuinely pedagogically powerful.