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Many books and articles that deal with the problems of teaching freshman composition are aimed at the teacher whose students are inadequately prepared for college level writing or are unable to effectively organize their thoughts and translate them clearly and concisely onto paper. But what about the student who comes into the classroom with respectable writing skills and no glaring problems that can't be fixed in a few short classes? Is this student really as accomplished as he seems? Or does his apparent language competency mask underlying uncertainties? I am convinced that it does. My experience has convinced me that the student who writes by instinct is often as unaware of basic sentence structures as are his more unfortunate classmates who are not as gifted as he.

My students were from average, middle-class homes, and all displayed good speech patterns. Furthermore, the majority of them had scored decently on their college board examinations; a few had even done exceptionally well. Yet they all possessed the same difficulties that plague most students fresh out of high school writing courses. Their first in-class composition, a diagnostic essay, was clearly a disaster in both organization and punctuation. These initial efforts contained a collection of random thoughts in no way related to each other which led nowhere. One student didn't even bother to follow the topic that I had provided, "If I have only one life, let me live it as a _____," but blithely wrote about the glories and mysteries of the sea instead. As far as punctuation was concerned, the purpose of the semicolon was totally unknown. It appeared occasionally in all the wrong places and not at all where it was needed. Still, with all this, one fact stood out clearly; none of my students was guilty of using that bane of an English teacher's existence the sentence fragment. As disorganized and incoherent as many of these early essays were, every sentence was complete. Much could be done with students who, at their worst, still managed to write in complete sentences. Smugly I congratulated myself on my good fortune of having acquired such a potentially accomplished class and looked forward to a semester that I felt with a little effort would be a "breeze."

I tackled the faulty punctuation first, and my alert class responded to this lesson at once. Rapidly they confronted the colon, semicolon, dash, and quotation marks.

Then I introduced the concept of the topic sentence and how to follow its lead in the rest of the paragraph. Again I was not disappointed. The class wrote out exercises on constructing good topic sentences, and the results were impressive. I followed this success with a class on parts of speech and another on spelling principles. Now I was ready to sit back and assess my students' skills once their major problems had been removed. The next essay, however, was a letdown. The results were not bad, nor were they good; they were merely bland. It is difficult to pinpoint why an essay is dull and lackluster. It just is, that's all. I reread this batch of compositions many times in an effort to analyze what was wrong with them. I had to be able to tell a student why his grade was low when his essay was mechanically flawless.

During the third reading, I focused on the sentences themselves out of context with the rest of the paper. One thing was obvious. The complex sentence was almost as unknown as the semicolon had been. The relative clause appeared to be another non-existent entity. One student wrote an essay composed entirely of compound sentences. From this I decided to construct my example of how not to write and finish up with a lecture on sentence variety. I mimeographed the following paragraph and distributed it to the rest of the class:

I am small for a basketball player, but I am a good shooter. I have some speed, but not nearly enough. Right now I have a large handicap to overcome, but I know I can do it. It is hard when you're not proven, and you have to prove yourself. I know I can prove myself, and I am willing to work. For me basketball is a challenge, and it always will be. It is also fun, and this is why I enjoy it. I may not become a pro player, but I would like to try. Someday I know I will become very good, and perhaps I can make it my profession. This is my goal, and this is my dream.

When I asked the class what was wrong with this paragraph, no one knew. Despite my prodding and hints to examine the structure of each sentence, I still got no answer. In general the class felt that the student who composed this paragraph did a fairly good job. One young man suggested taking out some of the "and's" and "but's" and ending some sentences sooner, but he had no thought of changing the wording of the sentences or of compressing them.

I gave up and did not divulge why this paragraph was weak. I would let my students find out for themselves through sentence construction and sentence combining. With luck this knowledge would then carry over into their own writing.

Frank O'Hare's Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1973) seemed to offer the ideal approach for improving writing style and demonstrating the available options when constructing sentences. For the first assignment I asked the class to write a series of simple sentences. Robert Scholes and Carl H. Klaus in Elements of Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 33-64, suggest both a descriptive and a narrative technique for arranging thoughts in chronological order. Since freshmen usually must be spoon-fed their assignments and are at a loss when simply told to write anything, I thought these pages would aid them. However, they did not have to use this format when putting together their own sentences.

I reviewed the simple sentence and the fact that it contains one independent clause and no subordinate clauses. As an added feature, I asked the class not to use any modifiers or compound subjects or predicates. I wanted the sentences to be as elementary as possible. Then we would build from there.

What was handed in at the next session was completely unbelievable. I received paper after paper of sentence fragments, an error that had

practically illiterate. He doesn't see the connection between writing in an English class and anything else he writes in the real world. He gives his teacher what she wants just to get a grade, but leaves all his new skills behind him when he leaves the course. At least I had expected my class to use what they had learned until the end of the semester. This was really too much.

Once again the sentences were returned for revision. The class was compelled to add the desired commas before my eyes. Perhaps this would make an impression.

As for the sentences themselves, many of the clauses were connected with "since," "because," and "then" (minus the preceding semicolon, of course). Some sentences were too run-on. Clearly these writers didn't know when to stop when stringing clauses together.

I gave up all hope when it came to complex sentences, but I defined them anyway as containing one independent clause and at least one subordinate clause. The results were surprisingly good. This time I had had an ally--student psychology. Final grades were approaching rapidly. The class regarded its first two exercises as fiascos. Would another failure result in lower grades? Suddenly everyone cared very much to write complex sentences that were correct and interesting. I was called on the phone and even visited in my office by students eager to ascertain that they were truly following my directions. If only they had been this conscientious earlier.

With the successful completion of this latest assignment, even the history of the asparagus took on new dimension.

The succulent, green asparagus grows on a farm where it is harvested by a farmer. After being sold to a merchant, the middleman, the tender asparagus arrives at the supermarket to be bought by my mother who shops regularly. Since this is my favorite vegetable, she steams the tiny green tips and immerses them in Hollandaise just for me. I eat until I am full.

The students now had all three assignments in their hands and could examine their various sentences side by side. When I asked them which sentences they thought sounded the best, they chose the complex without exception. Then one girl asked a question that was so appropriate to the whole concept that I was trying to teach that it was hard to believe that I had not prompted her. "If you have an entire essay composed of only one kind of sentence," she asked, "wouldn't that be awfully boring?" I was delighted. Despite all the false starts, the message had gotten through. Sentence variety is the key to colorful compositions.

I passed out the following paragraph borrowed from one girl's group of compound sentences and once again asked why this excerpt would be considered weak.

I went to a dance with Ken, and I danced every dance. I am a good dancer, but this was too much for me. My feet hurt, and I had to sit down before going home. My feet were sore, so I kicked off my shoes. I tried to put them back on again, but my feet were too swollen. Ken had to carry me to the car without my shoes, and I was very embarrassed. I will never dance that much again, and I mean it.

As soon as they received the paper, my pupils shouted almost in unison that the sentences were all compound. I referred them back to the other paper I had handed out weeks earlier by the challenged basketball player. Again the reaction was the same. The sentences were all compound.

This was not the end of my experiment. We worked together for two more class sessions in modifying all the nouns and building paragraphs containing the best elements of all the sentences. I stressed that whether a writer uses simple, compound, or complex sentences is entirely his choice. I wanted my charges to get away from being led by their own words. This had happened too often in the past. A student whose essay is unfolding well often suddenly follows a minor point he is making and entirely departs from his subject. I also showed how strong a short, simple sentence can be after a series of complicated complex ones. We discussed dull sentences that begin "It is ..." or "There are...", and indicated how the information that follows can usually be incorporated into other sentences. The class, which was deeply involved in term papers at this time, was extremely receptive to this lesson.

I feel that dealing with student writing at the sentence level is an effective way of clearing out wordiness and of making the student acknowledge that there are alternate ways of saying the same thing. My only regret is that I did not start this earlier, but I had no idea that the class would spend so much time on simple sentences. I had been deceived into believing that my students had already mastered this skill from the results of their diagnostic essay. The trouble was I did not realize that they wrote as they spoke and as their families spoke at home. They were used to handling complete thoughts, but they weren't really aware of what they were doing. A teacher who encounters a student who never uses sentence fragments assumes that the student knows better. Often times he does not; he is writing instinctively.

These exercises also gave me new insight into the students' attitudes. As evidenced by their carelessness in not applying what they learned in one class to the work written in another, they do not take freshman composition seriously. They see it as busy work doled out to keep them occupied. To them, this course is only something to get through. They are unwilling to apply themselves unless threatened with a lowered grade.

Yet all of my students had the potential to become adequate writers. When they did put forth some effort, the results reflected it. Rearranging sentences is ideal for a class like this because the work is not overwhelming, taken in conjunction with the regularly assigned essays.

I wish I had had more time to spend on further sentence combining, but still I count this whole episode as a success. My class did learn to recognize different types of sentences and to use them themselves with

ease. Whether or not this skill carries over into future essays is anyone's guess. However, I am satisfied and intend to use this type of lesson plan again.

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