

A Sequence for Teaching the Sentence

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This Instructional Note offers an assignment sequence that invites students and teachers into the rhetorical possibilities of the sentence.

In *Several Short Sentences about Writing*, Verlyn Klinkenborg claims, many times over, that “Your job as a writer is making sentences” (13, see also 47, 56, 67, 78). I cannot read his use of *making* without the Greek *poiesis* (noun, “making, process of making”) in mind, though Klinkenborg does not speak to poets alone. All writers, whatever we write, make sentences, and making does not entail just writing. It includes reading and revision too.

Klinkenborg must remind us of sentences because making them isn’t a concern in most writing courses. We—both teachers and students, readers and writers—can talk about invention, about organization, about citation, about the moves a writer makes, about any number of issues related to writing without actually talking about the sentences themselves. This neglect is understandable. As Elizabeth D. Rankin said back in 1985, “style is out of style” (8). She wrote that at the tail end of the Golden Age of Style, and despite a brief resurgence of scholarly and pedagogical interest—what Paul Butler calls composition’s “Stylistic Turn” (“Introduction” 2)—style remains at the periphery of our discussions about teaching writing. The reasons are many: the sentence seems trite compared to the weight of theory and the need to cover course content; the sentence is ordinary and common, such that it is easy to overlook its rhetoricity; the sentence received such thorough attention in the Golden Age and the Stylistic Turn that there’s the sense we’ve exhausted its pedagogical potential. But also, there’s the tendency for sentence-level instruction to be dominated by convention and grammar, becoming legalistic even, such that both teacher and student feel the pressure to get it right.¹

That very phrase—*the pressure to get it right*—points to the problem. Sentence-level instruction should not be a matter of correctness. It should be a matter of rhetoric, and that is the exigency of the assignments that follow. Students often come to the first-year writing course thinking of sentences solely in terms of correctness. But if we are to teach in line with the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year

Composition,” we must reframe not only how students think about sentences but also how we teach style. The statement reminds us, “A writer’s grasp of conventions in one context does not mean a firm grasp in another.” Conventions, style, grammar, the sentence—these are all contextually dependent. They are situated. They are rhetorical. When the statement says that students finishing first-year writing courses “should develop knowledge of linguistic structures,” the knowledge referenced here is both conventional and rhetorical. And so I read the statement’s definition of rhetorical knowledge—“the ability to analyze contexts and audiences and then to act upon that analysis in comprehending and creating texts”—as speaking to the sentence, to matters of style. Our job as rhetors, after all, is making sentences.

We need, then, to teach students to think of the sentence as Christopher R. Beha does:

These days, when I find that a sentence I’m writing isn’t working, I don’t think about what I want that sentence to look like or to be; I don’t pull it from the page to weigh it in my hand; I don’t worry over its internal balance. I simply ask myself, “What do I need this sentence to *do*?” I ask myself what role the sentence plays in its paragraph, what role the paragraph plays in its scene, the scene in its story. If I can’t answer these questions, even in some inarticulate and intuitive way, then I’ve got a problem, and that problem is bigger than this one sentence. (emphasis in original)

Beha has a sense of the sentence as situated within a piece of discourse. A writer cannot ask “What do I need this sentence to do?” without thinking about audience, about purpose, about context, about style, about syntax, about convention. And to be able to answer that question, a writer needs “to get inside and work inside sentences” (Bartholomae 15); that is, a writer needs assignments that demand close attention to what sentences do on the page.

Others have called for a rhetorical grammar—most notably, Martha Kolln and Loretta Gray, and, later, Laura R. Micciche—and I build on their work by offering the following sequence of seven sentence exercises. They are designed for students to spend time inside sentences. They are designed for students to think about sentences rhetorically, couching discussions of convention and grammar within audience and purpose and context. The purpose here is not for students to memorize figures of speech but to push on a sentence, to prod it, to see what other shapes it might take on the page. These exercises are designed, as Klinkenborg says, “to put students in a state of constant creative turmoil” (“Re:Teaching”), and they are as much reading assignments as they are writing assignments.

The Exercises

Francis Christensen wanted his “students to be sentence acrobats, to dazzle by their syntactic dexterity” (“Generative” 160). It would be nice if, after working through this sequence, students wrote better sentences. But the goal here is not dexterity, nor am I looking for good sentences. Prettiness isn’t what these exercises are after. I want students to be able to interrogate what a “better sentence” is. The goal is a

heightened awareness of what's happening on the page, a heightened awareness of what options a writer has when writing a sentence. Instead of getting lost in the weeds of syntax, these exercises ask students to develop a language for describing how a sentence moves, a method for working with sentences, and a sense of how these words are placed on the page in relation to each other.

For these reasons, a before and after T-unit analysis would not be an effective measure of what these exercises teach. Neither would sentence length. Because these exercises are concerned with rhetorical knowledge, a longer sentence, or a more complex one, isn't always better. Whether these exercises are effective can only be assessed by the students' own reflections on what they've written. In my course, this comes in a cover letter accompanying a final portfolio. There, I can see students write about how rhetoric informs conventions and vice versa. This meta-analysis also comes at the end of each assignment, where I ask students to review their exercise and ask the crucial question Klinkenborg wants us to ask: "Why is the sentence this way and not another way?" (*Several* 34). Granted, the easy answer is that the assignment dictates the sentence be written this way, but the larger question here points to issues of rhetoric, of context, of audience, of purpose. Without the reflection accompanying each assignment, and without the portfolio cover letter, the exercises become busy work. But with them, we can see, and assess, students coming into a richer understanding of the rhetorical work of their sentences.

The exercises ask that students maneuver within an admittedly artificial space; no serious writer would write prose that consisted, for example, of only 6-word sentences. But the arbitrary nature of the exercises speaks to their very purpose. I find that students (and myself, too) all too often and all too easily make sentences without giving any thought to their construction. By imposing constraints, the exercises ask that students pay attention to how their sentences move across the page. I'm giving students a box and asking them to work within it, and the box makes possible ways of thinking and ways of writing that would not be readily apparent if there were no restrictions whatsoever.

On logistics: when these exercises quote other texts, with few exceptions I draw from our course readings. The exercises can be adapted to fit the needs of a course (this sequence is their most current iteration; they evolve each term). I ask that students email me their exercise before class. I make a handout with three or four responses to serve as a starting point for discussion. Our conversation does not focus on correctness but on rhetoric, and by comparing various responses to the assignment, we are able to imagine possibilities for how these exercises might have been written otherwise given this rhetorical situation, the sentence becoming malleable, a place of inquiry.

6-Word Sentences

Write a paragraph on a topic of your choice. The paragraph must be at least 200 words. It must have a title. Here's the catch: every sentence must be 6 words, no longer, no shorter.

After you've written your paragraph, write a second one (with sentences of any length) where you discuss what you notice in writing, and reading, these 6-word sentences.

I open with this exercise because it jostles writers out of sentence complacency. Six words is short enough to be outside the norm for most students' sentence length, but not so short as to be impossible to say anything at all; the exercise wouldn't work with 4-word sentences (too short) nor with 10-word sentences (too easy). This assignment teaches students the importance of variety. Most responses are a series of choppy sentences that proceed, in lock-step fashion, from subject to verb to object. The more successful ones find a way to introduce variety into these 6-word sentences. Some students experiment with polysyllabic words to make their 6-word sentences vary in length. Some find a way to put a comma in the sentence. To get a dependent clause into a 6-word sentence is no small feat. The question of what students notice in reading these sentences is an effort to get them thinking about the effect their sentences can have on readers—a step toward thinking rhetorically about sentences.

Sentence Combining

Sentence combining is a centuries-old practice where a writer takes short sentences and puts them together to make long ones, like this:

The first few days are exciting.

They are extremely busy and tiring.

You could combine those into "The first few days are exciting, extremely busy, and tiring" or "Because the first few days are exciting, they are extremely busy and tiring" or "The first few days are exciting, however they are extremely busy and tiring." Notice how with each combination, the relationship between the short sentences changes, and, consequently, the meaning changes?

Take the 6-word sentences you wrote in your previous exercise and combine them so that there is some variety. I'd like to see one 40-word sentence, one 3-word sentence, a sentence beginning with "however," and (this isn't as tricky as it sounds) a sentence with a parenthetical comment in the middle. Aside from words like "when," "however," "since," "although," you are to use only the words from your 6-word sentences. You can't add content.

After you've combined the sentences, write an additional paragraph where you explain what you did. How has the meaning changed from the 6-word sentences to your paragraph? What is gained by moving away from 6-word sentences? And what is lost—that is, is there something the 6-word sentences do that the combined sentences cannot?

This exercise, like the last, teaches variety, and it also introduces students to the idea that form and content are intimately linked; fiddling with one necessarily means fiddling with the other. The constraints—a 40-word sentence, a 3-word sentence, a sentence with *however*, a sentence with a parenthetical—change each time I use the

assignment, and I choose constraints that imitate what we've seen modeled in our course readings. (The 40-word sentence is a step toward the 100-word sentence I'll soon assign.) In discussion, I've found it instructive to distribute a student's 6-word sentences alongside the paragraph where they are combined. As a class, we consider how meaning has changed through these combinations. Students come to see the shades of meaning between, say, joining two sentences with a semicolon as opposed to a comma and conjunction, and they come to see, too, the wide range of possibilities for how these sentences might come together. The questions of what is gained and lost in moving away from the 6-word sentences again get at rhetoric, at what these sentences are doing on the page and to what effect.

Breaking Up a Long Sentence

Take a look at this 116-word sentence. It opens "On Reading," an essay by Guy Davenport:

To my Aunt Mae—Mary Elizabeth Davenport Morrow (1881–1964), whose diary when I saw it after her death turned out to be a list of places, with dates, she and Uncle Buzzie (Julius Allen Morrow, 1885–1970) had visited over the years, never driving over thirty miles an hour, places like Toccoa Falls, Georgia, and Antreville, South Carolina, as well as random sentences athwart the page, two of which face down indifference, "My father was a horse doctor, but not a common horse doctor" and "Nobody has ever loved me as much as I have loved them"—and a Mrs. Cora Shiflett, a neighbor on East Franklin Street, Anderson, South Carolina, I owe my love of reading. (293)

Read this sentence until you have a sense of what it's saying and doing. You'll have to read it a number of times. Then, break the sentence into short sentences, no sentence longer than 10 words. Each must be grammatically correct. You can't just count 10 words and drop a period. Mess with the sentences a bit, maybe add a few words, to make them complete. For instance, you might write

*Aunt Mae's full name is Mary Elizabeth Davenport Morrow.
She lived from 1881 to 1964.
I saw her diary after her death.
It turned out to be a list of places.
There were dates with the list of places.*

And so on.

After you've broken up the sentence into short sentences, write a paragraph about why you think Davenport would have written this as a 116-word sentence. What does he gain by doing so? What is lost when the sentence is broken up? Is something gained by your short sentences?

This exercise is the inverse of the previous; students have combined sentences, now they pull one apart. Any long sentence can be used, but this Davenport sentence is especially good because it is so complicated. Students struggle with the phrase

“as well as random sentences athwart the page.” What is its role in the sentence? By asking students to break apart the grammatical constructions of the sentence, this exercise is sentence diagramming in disguise. Like the last, it asks students to compare what they’ve written to the original text, this comparison a means of coming at the question of rhetoric by considering other ways these sentences could be strung together and to what effect.

The 100-Word Sentence

Write a 100-word sentence. Here’s some guidance. Start with a short sentence, something like, “The Fremont Bridge went up.” Once you have the starter sentence, then add phrases, like this:

The large ship sounded its horn, and the Fremont Bridge went up.

You can also add to the end of the sentence:

The large ship sounded its horn, and the Fremont Bridge went up, but only after waiting for the northbound traffic to clear off.

And you can add to the middle of the sentence:

The large ship sounded its horn, and the Fremont Bridge (which is the most used drawbridge in the country, raising some 30 times a day, and whose bridge tender must have the most wonderful job) went up, but only after waiting for the northbound traffic to clear off.

Look at that. My 5-word sentence has grown to 48.

Your 100-word sentence must use at least one although, since, or because phrase:

Although he had come south from Alaska, past the San Juan Islands, through the Ballard Locks, under the Ballard Bridge, and down the ship canal, the captain was still not yet in port: the large ship sounded its horn, and the Fremont Bridge (which is the most used drawbridge in the country, raising some 30 times a day, and whose bridge tender must have the most wonderful job) went up, but only after waiting for the northbound traffic to clear off.

I’d like your sentence to include a parenthetical comment as well as a comment set off by em dashes:

Although he had come south from Alaska, past the San Juan Islands, through the Ballard Locks—where, a few months ago, a gray whale had swam and where, in July, you can see the salmon run—under the Ballard Bridge, and down the ship canal, the captain was still not yet in port: the large ship sounded its horn, and the Fremont Bridge (which is the most used drawbridge in the country, raising some 30 times a day, and whose bridge tender must have the most wonderful job) went up, but only after waiting for the northbound traffic to clear off.

And here I am at 101 words.

Don’t just start a sentence and then keep adding things onto it and then try and try to add more and more words to the sentence until it gets up to 100 words because this easily turns into a run-on sentence and it isn’t fun to write and it isn’t fun to

read. That last sentence is 53 words, and it's atrocious. Instead, build your sentence with chunks and phrases added here and there. When you turn in your sentence, I want to see each stage of its construction, as I've demonstrated above using bold font.

After you've written your 100-word sentence, write a paragraph where you discuss it in relation to your 6-word sentences. What does each allow you to do as a writer? What does each ask of the reader?

After combining sentences and then pulling apart a big one, students are now ready to write their own long sentence. I've tried in years past simply asking students to write a 100-word sentence based on what their handbook says about punctuation and independent and dependent clauses. This didn't work. Students were hung up by the grammar, distracted by the technicalities of syntax even though they use it every day. By sequencing the construction of this sentence chunk by chunk, students are free from the weight of grammar terminology—appositive, subjunctive, dependent clause, indirect object, and so on—and instead rely on their experiential knowledge of how sentences work. Every student can write a 100-word sentence if written in stages. The length of 100 words is somewhat arbitrary (I choose it because 100 is a nice, round number) but the requirement for a parenthetical and an em-dash clause is not: I want students to experiment with a dual-voiced discourse, commenting upon what's already been said in the sentence. I steer the discussion toward asking when someone might actually want to write a long sentence, and I bring the 316-word sentence from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (292–93) and the paragraphs surrounding it to discuss how context—political, social, textual—can influence sentence length.

Cutting in Half

Take the following paragraph, from Kathleen Jamie's essay "The Hvalsalen," where she describes walking under a blue whale skeleton hanging from the ceiling of a museum:

Of course, the blue whale was largest of all. I decided to walk under its full length, and count my steps. First, I walked under the smooth horizontal arch of the jaw, and its palate, where the baleen had once hung, sheets of age-browned bone. Then came the solid complications of the skull, now under the barrel of the ribcage, the ribs curving down, enclosing and protecting nothing but air. I kept walking, counting. As I passed the basking shark I surreptitiously touched its cold skin, rough as sandpaper. I passed a dolphin, small and lithe, and making for the door. Still the blue whale went on overhead. Above the basking shark hung a huge sunfish, an eerie-looking object hanging from a wire, more like a black moon with an eye. Still I walked on, counting until the spine ended. Fifty-seven paces. Less an animal, more a narrative. The ancient mariner. (97)

This paragraph is 151 words. Cut it in half, down to 75. Then, cut the paragraph in half again, down to 38.

After you've cut the paragraph down twice, write a paragraph where you explain your method. What did you decide to cut and to keep? How did you make that decision? What guided your revisions? After you've explained your method, compare the doubly cut version to the original. Which is better? Why? What is gained and what is lost through your revision?

This exercise furthers the discussion of rhetoric in the past few assignments by asking that students discern what is essential to a sentence and what is not. Students are quick to cut Jamie's adjectives, yet "The ancient mariner" somehow survives most edits. In discussion, I distribute a handout with a dozen or so versions of the 38-word revision. I ask what similarities we see in them, and I ask why certain phrases make it through two rounds of editing while others do not. The classroom is often divided on which is better—the original, the 75-word, or the 38-word—and this exercise prompts questions of what "better" is, which, again, brings the discussion back to rhetoric, to questions of audience, purpose, and context.

Imitation

For centuries, writers have learned to write sentences through imitation. We read the writing of others, notice something we like, then we imitate it. We could do worse than imitate and then steal the syntax of good writers.

Here's an example. In How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One, Stanley Fish calls attention to this sentence, by John Updike, describing the home run Ted Williams hit in his final at-bat in Fenway Park: "It was in the books while it was still in the sky." After marveling at it, Fish writes some imitations: "It was in my stomach before it was off the shelf." "She was enrolled at Harvard before she was conceived." "He had won the match before the first serve." "They were celebrating while the other team was still at bat" (9–10). Fish knows his imitations pale in comparison to the original, but he also now has a tool in his back pocket, a sentence form he might utilize when the situation demands.

Your task is to imitate sentences. Here are three, taken from our readings this quarter. From Ben Lerner's "Contest of Words: High School Debate and the Demise of Public Speech":

In a public school closed to the public, in a suit that felt like a costume, while pretending to argue about public policy, I, in all my adolescent awkwardness, would be seized, however briefly, by an experience of prosody. (62)

From Mary Louise Pratt's "Art of the Contact Zone":

If one thinks of cultures, or literatures, as discrete, coherently structured, monolingual edifices, Guaman Poma's text, and indeed any autoethnographic work, appears anomalous or chaotic—as it apparently did to the European scholars Pietschmann spoke to in 1912. If one does not think of cultures this way, then Guaman Poma's text is simply heterogeneous, as the Andean region was itself and remains today. (36)

From Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood*:

On the catch—the grounder, the fly, the line drive—you could snag a baseball in your mitt, where it stayed, snap, like a mouse locked in its trap, not like some pumpkin of a softball you merely halted, with a terrible sound like a splat. (100)

The key to doing this assignment is to first spend time inside each sentence. Think about what it does and how it does it. Once you have a feel for what the syntax is doing and how it is doing it, plug your own content into the sentence. Retain the syntax as best you can. Keep all the original punctuation. Write one imitation of each sentence.

Then, pick one of the three and write a paragraph about what you see the original doing. That is, how would you describe the movement of the sentence? What is it doing on the page? What is it doing within its original context? And what did you do in imitating it?

This exercise is a variation of “Breaking Up a Long Sentence” in that students must again discern how the parts of a sentence go together. I choose sentences to imitate that are doing something interesting grammatically, stylistically, rhetorically. (I chose the Lerner sentence, for example, for its layers of phrases and how Lerner separates his subject from his verb, the Pratt for its repeated sentence structure, the Dillard for its punctuation.) I’m not necessarily hoping that students will internalize these forms but that they inhabit the sentences of others and, by doing so, learn how these sentences operate. Imitation can lead to internalization, yes, but so too it teaches close reading. After imitating another’s sentences, students can then address questions of rhetoric again: given its original context, why write the sentence like this? What does this sentence allow the writer to do? What might it allow you to do?

Rewrite It 15 Ways

Raymond Queneau's Exercises in Style is a curious book. It retells the same story of a scuffle on a bus 99 times 99 different ways. Queneau had heard Bach's The Art of Fugue played at the Salle Pleyel in the 1930s, and “What particularly struck Queneau about this piece was that, although based on a rather slight theme, its variations ‘proliferated almost to infinity.’ It would be interesting, he thought, to create a similar work of literature” (Wright, “Notes” 4). When he had 12 versions of the story in 1942, he sent it to a publisher. The editor, confused, rejected them. Queneau kept writing, amassing 99 exercises by 1946 (he eventually wrote over 120 of them), and his exercises have been translated into 35 languages.

For your final sentence exercise, start with a sentence no more than 15 words long. Now, taking a cue from Queneau, rewrite it 15 different ways. And, again like Queneau, give each of your rewrites a title of its own that somehow speaks to what you’re doing in that rewrite.

After you’ve got your 15 rewrites, write a paragraph where you consider whether it is still the same sentence. That is, how does the meaning change when the sentence changes? Or does the meaning change? And what version of the sentence is the best—and under what circumstances?

Rewriting a sentence 15 different ways asks students how style shapes content (an issue raised earlier in the sequence by sentence combining). I save this exercise for the end of the sequence because it is, I think, the hardest. Students must imagine other ways a sentence might move across the page, and to do so they imitate Queneau's method. It is, as Queneau's translator Barbara Wright says of his work, an "exploration into the possibilities of language" (Preface 14). Christensen claims, "Grammar maps out the possible; rhetoric narrows the possible down to the desirable or effective" ("Sentence" 52); this assignment asks students to push on the bounds of what is possible so that they may come to know what is desirable.



I close with a few pieces of student writing. The first is a 100-word sentence, written by an international student describing a visitor to the bakery where she worked back home in China.

Although people who work at there do not like his fur falling on the floor, after Danny and Sara finished their work, Barkley (who was adopted when its former host could not take care of him, and he is a Golden Retriever) went to the bread of life bakery with them to look for Grace, despite knowing that he was not allow to go in, because he knew—people who work in the bakery love him so, so, so much, and they also going to miss him a lot if he weren't there—his favorite sandwich bread is baked at there.²

There are conventional issues here, mostly concerning verbs, but I set them aside to look at what this student does as a writer. This is a fairly complicated sentence. It has people working at a bakery, Danny and Sara finishing work, Barkley going to the bakery, Barkley knowing his favorite bread is there, along with people at the bakery loving this dog, a dog given up by his former owner. The student has combined all this into a single sentence, one that moves quite deftly as it juggles multiple narratives. There's an agility here that could easily be overlooked when multilingual students are not given space to play with language and when instructors get too hung up on phrases like "at there." All too often the writing of multilingual students is graded for grammar and convention alone, and these sentence exercises work against that impulse, inviting all students, whatever their command of the language, to experiment with what their sentences might do. Why shouldn't learning to write include seeing how far you can push a sentence before it falls apart?

The following responds to the "Cutting in Half" exercise. I include the student's cuts to Jamie's paragraph as well as her analysis of what she's done:

Revision 1 (74 words) First I walked under the smooth horizontal arch of the jaw, and its palate, where the baleen had once hung, sheets of age-browned bone. Then came the solid complications of the skull, the ribs curving down, enclosing and protecting nothing but air. I kept walking. As I passed the basking shark I touched its cold skin, rough as sandpaper. The blue whale went on overhead. Above it hung a huge sunfish. The ancient mariner.

Revision 2 (40 words) First I walked under the jaw where the baleen once hung. Then came the skull, and the ribs curving down. I passed the basking shark and touched it. The blue whale was above me. Above it hung a huge sunfish.

Commentary From the very beginning of this sentence exercise, I knew that I was going to cut the first two sentences, considering the fact that they were all descriptive and had no real relation to explaining the writer's experience at the museum. Then, I decided to continue cutting out filler words and sentences, hoping that this would cut the paragraph in half since, in my opinion, those descriptions didn't need to be there to convey the idea of the museum that Jaime is trying to convey. But, once all of the filler words were out of the paragraph, there was still too many words to have considered that cut in half. Then I decided to cut out some of the extra words that were in the sentence to make the analysis of the museum seem more professional in the sense of learning about whales and less childish, like going to the museum to learn about whales. After cutting out the more professional filler words, I was able to make the first cut of words, 75, and was still able to understand Jaime's purpose of writing about her experience at the whale museum. After cutting the paragraph in half again, I feel like most of the meaning and purpose that was once in the paragraph was lost. The idea of being at a marine life museum is still there in the second revision, but the reason why Jaime wrote the paper is gone. There is no more description of what the skeleton looks like, what other marine life is at the museum or the importance of whales to the writer, just the idea that she is talking about whales. In the first revision, I think a little more clarity on why she's writing is gained, but there is still a loss of Jaime's idea of how beautiful she believes the whales really are.

I am interested in how this student describes her work. Offering a taxonomy, of sorts, of how words function in the sentence, she designates some "filler words" and others "more professional filler words." She doesn't articulate fully the difference between a "professional" and a "childish" way of looking at whale skeletons, and since hers isn't a full essay that doesn't bother me. Rather, I'm drawn to her reading practice, to how she works methodically, categorizing words by their function and from that categorization—a product of her rhetorical analysis of Jamie's sentences—she makes her revision. She closes noticing that her revisions lack something. The first gains some clarity but at the loss of mystery, of beauty, and the second simply loses everything, or, as she says, "the reason why Jamie wrote the paper is gone." In a drive toward brevity, the student has realized that perhaps those filler words do accomplish something after all, and the claim that opened her response unravels. I do not read this as a failure on the part of the student. Far from it. In this unraveling, I see a student coming to a fuller understanding of what role Jamie's sentences play within this paragraph, a fuller understanding of what sentences do on the page, and a fuller understanding, too, of what might make a word necessary given its job in a sentence.

A third student, in response to his "Breaking Up a Long Sentence" exercise, writes, "What is gained from writing short sentences? I would say that the information is more concise and easier to digest overall. The language is simplified in a way so that each individual piece of information is easy to follow and understand."

At this point, I'm expecting an endorsement of clarity, but the student goes somewhere else: "However, I don't think that this ease of comprehension translates to the understanding of the whole paragraph. While 'My father was a horse doctor' is made very easy to understand on its own, isolating it from the cohesive structure of the sentence makes it difficult to figure out how that bit of information relates to the larger whole." Here, I see a student beginning to realize that short sentences aren't necessarily better sentences. He's starting to think about how these sentences function in relation to others. He's seeing his sentences not as discrete, a-rhetorical units but as parts of a larger whole. He continues: "Also, the writing doesn't flow at all. It feels like a laundry list. It feels like a second-grader wrote it." Simplicity, it seems, comes at a cost.

In his portfolio cover letter, the same student writes how the exercises "show that I can break up complex sentences into simpler forms. However, I feel like I could have better utilized this skill in my own writing to increase the clarity of my ideas." This student, who in the passages quoted above pushed against short sentences, now wonders how to utilize simpler sentences to write clearly, problematic as he now knows that is. In asking how these exercises can make his writing clearer, he is addressing rhetoric, since clarity always depends on the relationship between reader and writer. Short sentences may be clear, but they risk making the writer sound childish. Yet, against that, a writer ought to be clear, right? How, then, does a writer balance this expectation (pressure, even) to be clear with the reality that complex sentences do important rhetorical work—as do simple ones—not only for the writer's ethos but also for advancing an argument? As a result of these exercises, a seemingly innocuous concept like "clarity," something the student has never before challenged, has been troubled. This student is now thinking rhetorically about syntax, asking the kind of hard questions concerning style any serious writer must attend to when making sentences—which is, after all, his job as a writer. ◀

Acknowledgments

I thank Owen Ewald for help with the Greek and also Holly Hassel and her TETYC reviewers for their insightful feedback on earlier drafts of this piece.

Notes

1. I've made this argument elsewhere; see Moe. For more on the demise of the sentence, see also Butler; Connors; Johnson and Pace; Vandenberg.

2. Convention would require [*sic*] throughout this paragraph. Rather than insert [*sic*] into student writing—which muddies the text, distracts from what the student accomplishes as a writer, and reinforces the notion that what distinguishes student writing is error—consider this footnote a blanket [*sic*] for all quoted material.

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