4 Flexing the Students' Sentence Sense

The previous two chapters suggested ways to help make students aware of language structure and ways to help them understand and practice basic grammatical terminology. This chapter focuses on students' innate sense of the sentence and on how students can strengthen that ability and put it to good use. The chapter is related to the grammar goals of writing in Standard English and of understanding how the structure of sentences affects the clarity of texts.

Sentence Boundaries

Often we teach students to identify sentence fragments by checking for a verb, a subject, and completeness of thought. But if you are not familiar with it already, you should also try the very practical approach to such errors described by Rei Noguchi, author of *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities* and a professor at California State University, Northridge. Noguchi's approach is a simple and effective way to help students find their own basic writing errors. The pragmatic tests he describes draw on the innate sentence sense of native speakers. Noguchi points out, for example, that a group of words is a complete sentence if it makes sense after a frame such as *They refused to believe that.* Neither a run-on sentence nor a fragment will sound right in that context. Take the fragment *Whatever you could do to help my sister. They refused to believe that whatever you could do to help my sister* will not sound sensible or complete to a native English speaker.

Native speakers also have the ability to turn sentences into several types of questions, such as *Isn't it fair?*, *Why isn't it fair?*, and *It isn't fair, is it?* Such questions are useful for a number of purposes, one of which is to help identify run-on sentences. A sentence might not appear at first to the student as two sentences run together, but the error is more visible if the student attempts to turn it into a question. A student might write, for example, *You weren't in class for a whole month, it isn't fair.* If you ask the student to turn the statement into a question, the student could produce either *Weren't you in class for a whole month, it isn't fair?* or *You weren't in class for a whole month, it isn't fair, is it?* You can show the student that in both these versions, part of the sentence is a ques-

tion but part of it is not, a division that shows there are actually two sentences present. If the student writes *Weren't you in class for a whole month, it isn't fair, is it?*, it is not difficult to show the student that this strange-sounding sentence is actually two questions.

Students should be encouraged not only to correct fragments and run-ons but also to experiment with them. In *Image Grammar*, Harry Noden explains that students can imitate the way professional writers use fragments to emphasize breaks and separation of images. Similarly, students can try their hand at writing extended sentences to create a sense of flow or acceleration or mass. His discussion of long and run-on sentences is especially interesting. As an example from professional writing, Noden quotes a 126-word sentence by the writer Tom Wolfe from *The Right Stuff* that conveys the intense feeling of acceleration in an F-100 fighter jet. Noden then offers a sentence written by Emelia Hiltner, an eighth-grade student, in which she adds multiple phrases and clauses to create the picture of a fire out of control:

> The fire roared, rushing from building to building, devouring everything in its path, destroying and wasting, hot and hungry, quick and powerful, like a starving beast, flames licking towards the sky, as sirens screamed and firemen shot gallons of water, taking away the life of the fire. But they were too late. (98)

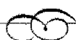
According to Noden,

> Meaning takes precedence over rules. Teaching this notion to students can actually strengthen their understanding of conventions, rather than diluting it as some teachers might expect. When teachers help students see conventions as an aid to meaning, struggling students can better recognize when fragments and run-ons don't work, and confident students can better understand why writers break the rules. (98)

VIGNETTE: GRAMMATICAL CHOICES, SENTENCE BOUNDARIES, AND RHETORICAL EFFECTS

Writing sentences on a board and asking students to compare them and choose from them is a surefire way to generate discussion. Students can't resist disagreeing, complaining, and revising. Here, such an exercise leads, as it often does, to important ideas about conventional correctness and sty-

listic options. What points would you like your students to absorb about sentence boundaries, and what are some "choice" exercises that might help them get there?



Tim Reilly begins his Monday ninth-grade English class like this: "I'm gonna tell you a story. Actually, three stories. Here they are." Tim writes on the board:

1. The shark bit his leg to the bone.
2. To the bone, the shark bit his leg.
3. The shark bit his leg. To the bone.

"Now. Are these three stories the same?"

"Yeah," says Nate. "The same thing happens. Just the words is different."

"What words are different?" Tim asks.

Nate pauses, looking at the three sentences. Tim can see him mentally counting and comparing the words. "Well, the words is the same, but they in a different place. It mean the same."

"Which of these stories do you think is the most violent?"

The kids start calling out, eager to give their opinions on the rhetorical effects of phrase and clause placement, though they are not using these terms. After some consideration and debate, most agree that version 3 is the most violent, the most dramatic.

"It's because first you hear that a shark did some biting on the guy's leg. Then after you got that, you hear it's down to the bone. That makes it more harsh-like," Ali says.

"But that ain't a sentence," Paul insists. "You can't say that in a story."

"Why can't you?" Tim asks.

Paul looks surprised. "You gotta write in complete sentences."

"But tell me: if you're writing a story and you want the story to be exciting and dramatic and violent and graphic, and writing a phrase as a sentence will do that for you, why would you not go for it?"

The kids protest that the rules have always been that anything they write for their English teacher has to be in complete sentences. Even in social studies and science, their teachers want complete sentences.

"We get points off if we don't have a sentence," Jaime says.

"Have you ever seen stand-alone phrases in a story?" Tim asks, aware that he's used an unfamiliar term and hoping that the students will figure it out in context.

"A what?" Kevin asks.

"A stand-alone phrase," Tim repeats. "What do you think that means?"

"That's like a phrase that thinks it's a sentence. Like *to the bone.*"

Tim nods. "Look for stand-alone phrases in your novel." The class is reading *The Old Man and the Sea.* He waits for them to find stylistic fragments. They find several, including:

> "Then he said aloud, 'I wish I had the boy. To help me and to see this.'"

"That's a thought," Tim explains. "Thoughts don't have to be written in complete sentences. Neither do the things we say. The dialogue. And if we want to emphasize something in a story, to make it more dramatic, we can write it as a stand-alone phrase. Some people call that a stylistic fragment. It's a piece of a sentence that the writer wants to stand alone for some reason."

"So how are we supposed to do it?" Kristen wants to know.

"You're supposed to do what your readers expect, so they will know what you mean. Usually, that means complete sentences, but not always. You can write a stylistic fragment if you have a good reason. One good reason is to make your words sound natural."

Some of Tim's students get it; some aren't ready to make fine distinctions in their written language. Tim's lesson about stylistic fragments isn't over. He will build on the shark story to teach emphasis, word order, and voice. Tim's instruction in the subtleties of grammatical choices and how they affect meaning will be ongoing and informed by literature and real language.

—Amy Benjamin

Sentence Flexibility

Inexperienced writers find it difficult to make changes in the sentences they have written. Expanding sentences, rearranging the parts of a sentence, combining sentences—these skills do not come easily. So any exercises that help students acquire sentence flexibility have value. Although the following methods do not require the students to know

grammatical terminology, your class discussions of sentence arrangement will remain limited and awkward unless the students can name the basic sentence parts.

Sentence Combining

Sentence combining is a tested method for improving the maturity of student writing. Beginning with the work of Kellogg Hunt, Frank O'Hare, William Strong, and others in the 1960s and 1970s, studies have shown that sentence-combining exercises are effective in building certain writing skills. Students progress from simple exercises in insertion and combining in the early grades toward exercises in embedding one clause in another (Strong). Doing so involves making decisions about conjunctions such as *and* and *but;* relative pronouns such as *who, that,* and *which;* punctuation; and ellipsis (the omission of words). Practice in manipulating word groups within and between sentences helps the revising process become gradually more automatic for writers of all ages. They learn to hear and hold sentences in their heads more easily as they revise. As a result, they struggle less to find sentence structures that express their ideas. Several good books with sentence-combining exercises are available; see the works in "Sources and Resources" by Killgallon; Kischner and Wollin; Morenberg and Sommers; and Strong.

Sentence Imitation

While sentence combining is a technique that students need some time and practice to get the hang of, sentence imitation can be used more easily and spontaneously because—well, it's imitation. Give your students a model sentence and ask them to write one like it. Depending on your purpose, the sentence could be an example of a grammatical structure you are teaching, a type of sentence (such as a dramatically short one), or simply one that is admirable in some way. Students write their version of the sentence, imitating its key features. They then go on to include examples of the model pattern in their papers. This practice integrates reading skill, stylistic experimentation, and grammatical understanding.

Code-Switching

The term *code-switching* is often applied to the differences in the way people speak depending on the context of their conversation (see Chapter 2), but it is a useful concept for working on sentence flexibility as well. Ask students to write the same assignment in different ways in

order to adapt to different audiences and purposes: "Suppose you were in a minor car accident. Write out how you would describe it to your friends, your parents, a police officer." Students should explore differences in word choice, tone, and sentence structure.

VIGNETTE: SENTENCE IMITATION

This teacher employs a grammar/writing instructional strategy that has ancient roots: having students imitate the sentences of well-known writers. The teacher selects a model sentence that is both a striking one in the literary work and one whose pattern will be new but manageable to student writers. Notice the teacher's flexibility about some of the details in the model sentence and the options for students implicit in the direction to use a similar sentence anywhere in their next paper. Look over the literature that you teach for sentences that might serve as models for imitation.

Mr. Held's English class has been discussing Alice Walker's story "Everyday Use." Now, toward the end of class, it's time to make one addition to their next writing assignment: the students will be writing a sentence modeled on a sentence from the story.

"Let's go back to the start of the story and look at Walker's writing style. Isaiah, would you read the opening paragraph? Loud and slow."

Isaiah clears his throat and sits forward. "'I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.'"

"Thank you. Take a minute to look at the sentences. What do you notice about any of them?

Austin asks, "What are the 'grooves'"?

Mr. Held takes him back to the sentence. "Yes, that's a little puzzling. Austin, read the full sentence again, out loud."

Austin reads, "'When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny irregular grooves,

anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.' Okay, there's sand around the clay part of the yard and they rake it or something so that it's wavy. I think I've seen that kind of thing."

"Okay. Other comments on the sentences or the writing style here, just in this paragraph?"

"It's very descriptive," Anjali says.

"Explain, please."

"Well, that long sentence tells you a lot about the clay yard and how everyone can sit there and enjoy the breeze. It's cooler than being in the house. Shouldn't there be an *is* after *edges*? It should be 'the fine sand around the edges *is* lined with tiny irregular grooves,' shouldn't it? It sounds funny."

"You can leave out the verb when you have already used the same verb before it and this is a second phrase with the same pattern. It's like writing, *My shoes are black, my shirt, yellow.*"

Mr. Held continues. "Let's look at the core of the sentence, which comes after the opening clause that starts with *When.* We go through the two *when* things that happen and then we come to the sentence subject, which is *anyone.* What is the verb that goes with *anyone*? What does *anyone* do?"

"*Come.* Anyone can come."

"Okay. Right."

"What about *sit*?"

"Okay. That too."

"*Look up.* Isn't that a verb here?

"Yes it is. That's three verbs for *anyone.* 'Anyone can come and sit and look up.' Is that it?"

"*Wait.*"

"Good. Four verbs. This is the basic pattern of the sentence I want you to try to imitate for your next paper. I'll put it on the board. It starts with *when.* It goes like this: When something is or does something and something is something—you can put in the second *is*, and you can use a different verb if you want—then a person can this and this and this and this. That's four verbs. Notice that after the third and fourth verbs there are some descriptive words, and you can try to work some into your sentence. Let's practice. Try writing out a sentence like this, following this pattern on the board, about anything."

Mr. Held gives the students a few minutes, until he sees that most of them have written something. "What do you have?"

"When I get up early and it's still dark out, I yawn and drag myself around and force myself to eat breakfast and get to school."

"When my friend Dave comes over and we play video games, we can sit there for hours and play the game and talk about it and compete with each other."

"When my mother gets home from work and takes off her coat, she smiles and kisses me and sits down and starts to talk about her day."

As these three examples show, students can usually find content that fits well with the particular grammatical characteristics of a model sentence the teacher gives them. The process makes them conscious of sentence structure and gives them the satisfying experience of using a sentence pattern they might not have written otherwise.

—Brock Haussamen

The Rhetoric of the Sentence

Grammatical choices have rhetorical effects. *Rhetoric* refers to the way we arrange language to have the desired effect on our readers or listeners. We organize our sentences differently depending on who our audience is, what we want to emphasize, and how we want to sound. Sentences work together with other sentences to form paragraphs, poems, and conversations that we hope communicate effectively. You can introduce your students to these links between sentence structure and the effectiveness of language. In this section, we discuss a couple of topics in this area, but be aware that it is a large one, and Martha Kolln's *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices and Rhetorical Effects* and Joseph Williams's *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* can tell you much more.

Traditional grammar defines *subject* and *predicate* as the topic of the sentence and what is being said about it, respectively, and then leaves them at that. But the terms are more than just two more words in the list of ways sentences can be divided up. If the sentence is the unit of a language that expresses an idea, then the subject-predicate structure is the arrangement that makes this expression possible. When people make meaning, they make predicates about subjects.

Using examples from literature, from newspapers, and from their own papers, students can learn to look at all kinds of sentences as the selection of a topic (in most sentences, the subject) and the making of a comment about it (the predicate). By observing this pattern, they can

see the repetition of the subject/topic across sentences, a progression that gives a paragraph its cohesion. In the following example, the grammatical subjects are underlined and the complete predicates are italicized.

> *Not for the first time,* an argument *had broken out over breakfast at number four, Privet Drive.* Mr. Vernon Dursley *had been woken in the early hours of the morning by a loud, hooting noise from his nephew Harry's room.*
>
> *"Third time this week!"* he *roared across the table. "If you can't control that owl,* it*'ll have to go!"*
>
> Harry *tried, yet again, to explain.*
>
> *"*She*'s bored,"* he *said. "*She*'s used to flying around outside."* (The opening of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets,* J. K. Rowling, Scholastic Press, 1999)

Ask students to make a list of the sentence subjects in a paragraph. Then show them that those subjects are the topic under discussion. They are what the paragraph is about; if the sentence subjects are too different from one another, then the paragraph is confusing. In the example here, the discussion focuses on the argument between Harry and his uncle about the owl. (Students might notice as well that Mr. Dursley refers to the owl quite impersonally as *it,* while Harry uses *she.*)

Another rhetorical pattern that is profoundly important is the distinction between familiar information and new information within the sentence. Its basic principle is that in most (not all) sentences the information early in the sentence, including the sentence subject itself, is known or familiar to the reader who has read the previous sentences; the material in the predicate, the sentence's comment on the subject or topic, is new. The known-new pattern adds a new dimension to such grammar topics as pronouns (which are usually links to known information in that the pronoun refers back to something or someone), transitional expressions, and careful selection of a sentence's grammatical subject.

The excerpt from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* shows this pattern in both straightforward and subtle ways. At the end, the pronouns *he* and *she* present familiar information, since the reader knows their antecedents. More subtly, "Mr. Vernon Dursley," at the start of the second sentence, is not exactly familiar information (this is the opening of the book), but it is information that the reader is prepared for because the previous sentence ends with the reference to the address at "number four, Privet Drive."

The known-new pattern coincides with another important rhetorical feature of sentences: the tendency for the vital information to fall

toward the end of the sentence, a tendency known as *end focus*. The new information toward the end of the sentence naturally receives the most attention. In speech, the speaker usually gives it the most stress. In contrast, as the examples from *Chamber of Secrets* show, the subject is generally known information; in fact, it's often a pronoun.

Writers and speakers have options for varying the arrangement of sentences in order to place the new or important information where it will receive the proper attention. One option is the passive voice. Let's look again at the second sentence from the *Chamber of Secrets* excerpt, a sentence in the passive voice:

> Mr. Vernon Dursley had been woken in the early hours of the morning by a loud, hooting noise from his nephew Harry's room.

If this sentence had been written in the active voice, with the hooting noise as the sentence subject and the waking as an activity rather than an effect, the first three sentences would look like this:

> Not for the first time, an argument had broken out over breakfast at number four, Privet Drive. A loud, hooting noise from his nephew Harry's room had woken Mr. Vernon Dursley in the early hours of the morning.
>
> "Third time this week!" he roared across the table.

For the reader just opening the book and starting to read, this second sentence, with its opening reference to the hooting noise, would probably seem startling. The noise seems unconnected to the known information about the breakfast argument in the previous sentence. By comparison, the original version opens with Mr. Dursley, a party to the argument, and then settles in to focus on the loud noise that is the topic of discussion for the next few sentences. The passive voice allows the information in the sentence to fall in the most effective order.

In addition to the passive voice, we use other common devices to organize our sentences so that the emphasis falls where we want it to. One of them is known as the cleft structure, so called because the sentence is cleaved or divided and rearranged. The *it*-cleft begins with *it* and places the stress on the word or phrase that comes a couple of words later. We often use the *it*-cleft spontaneously. Instead of saying, "They finally showed up at four o'clock," we might say, for emphasis, "It was four o'clock when they finally showed up." The *what*-cleft is also common: "What I liked best about the dinner was the dessert" (instead of "I liked the dessert best").

In addition to cleft sentences, the use of the expletive *there* (*expletive* means it has no meaning but is only filling a place in the sentence

structure) can also help the writer put the stress where she or he wants it. The *there*-transformation, as it is called, does not usually rearrange a sentence to the same degree that a cleft-transformation does, but it delays the sentence subject for a couple of words, putting it after the verb *to be*, giving it greater focus. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," for example, Martin Luther King Jr. might have written, *Of course, nothing about this kind of civil disobedience is new;* instead he wrote, *Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience.* The *there* version focuses our attention strongly on *nothing new.*

These notions of using the passive voice and using *it*s and *there*s to open sentences may sound controversial to you. It's possible that you, as well as our students, have been told to avoid the passive voice and not to start sentences with empty *it*s and *there*s. These are grammar myths. Although young students learning to write may overuse such techniques at times, it's also true that skilled writers—and all of us when we are speaking—use them to control emphasis, to manipulate and vary the pattern of known and new information.

VIGNETTE: TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS THE KNOWN-NEW PATTERN

Most sentences move from familiar information to new information. And the familiar or given information in a sentence was new information in an earlier sentence, usually in its predicate. (In Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, *for example, Linda says to Willy, "But you didn't rest your mind. Your mind is overactive, and the mind is what counts, dear."* Mind *becomes the familiar or known information in the second sentence after being introduced in the predicate of the first sentence.) This pattern of flow and connection is neglected in the teaching of grammar, and that's a shame because it has many uses. Here, Amy Benjamin uses it to help an English language learner. What are other English lessons in which it might be valuable?*

In teaching English language learners how to retell stories, I've found the known-new principle extremely helpful. Here's how we do it: Let's say that my ninth-grade student Thalita knows a story. It could be a story that her class has read, or a movie, or something she's seen on television. I want her to advance her English skills by retelling, or

summarizing, the story using the known-new principle of textual cohesion to guide her from one sentence to the next. I give Thalita a graphic organizer that looks like this:

Sentence 1:____________________/____________________

Sentence 2:____________________/____________________

Sentence 3:____________________/____________________

Sentence 4:____________________/____________________

Sentence 5:____________________/____________________

Thalita and I will use the organizer to set up the textual feed from the predicate of each sentence, after the slash mark, to the following sentence.

Me: Tell me about Romeo and Juliet.

Thalita: I don't understand the words.

Me: I know the words are hard. Just tell me: Who are Romeo and Juliet?

Thalita: Boyfriend and girlfriend.

Me: Are they young or old?

Thalita: Young.

Me: Romeo and Juliet are young lovers. That's your first sentence. *Lovers* is another word for "boyfriend and girlfriend."

After Thalita writes this for sentence 1, I need to transition her into sentence 2, advancing this information. I ask her to circle *young lovers.*

I say, "Now let's say something about Romeo and Juliet, the young lovers. Let's start the next sentence with 'They.' 'They . . . ' Tell me something about them."

She says, "They have problem."

I explain that we use *a* if there is one problem. If there are many problems, then we don't use *a.*

"There is many."

"Just add *s* to show many."

"They have problems." She writes the sentence down and then I ask her to circle *problems.*

"Now you can talk about their problems. Start with one of their problems. You can start your next sentence with 'A problem' or 'One of their problems' and then say what the problem is."

"A problem is their parents."

"Good. Now you can talk about their parents."

"Is OK?"

"Is what OK?"

"Is OK you have 'problems' and 'problems' in the next?"

"That's fine. It shows you are still talking about the same thing. Every new sentence needs to say something more about the sentence you just finished."

Thalita writes: "They are parents do not like they lovers. They are fight."

Obviously, Thalita is not ready for grammatical terms such as *subject, predicate, referent,* and *pronoun.* But I need to have these terms and categories in my head if I am to be midwife to Thalita's emergent English language skills. For now, I'll keep these terms invisible to her, coaxing one sentence out of another as we go along.

Here are some prompts that help Thalita get from one sentence to the next:

- "Here's another way to say this."
- "We can take this group of words and call them 'it' or 'this' in the next sentence."
- "What do they do next?" (This prompts an action verb.)
- "Now we can call these words ________." (This prompts a synonym or collective noun.)
- Once Thalita has a cohesive sequence of simple sentences, we can add detail through adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases.
    - To prompt adjectives, I ask, "What kind?" "What does it look like?"
    - To prompt adverbs, I ask, "When?" "How?"
    - To prompt prepositional phrases, I ask, "When?" "Where?"

Thalita's placement in a mainstream ninth-grade classroom where students are reading a Shakespearean play may seem overwhelming to her and to me. But relying on the known-new pattern helps her understand the basics of the story and advances her English language skills. As Friar Lawrence advises: "Wisely and slow. They stumble that run fast."

—Amy Benjamin