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# PATTERNS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR BASIC WRITERS

Research in the language patterns that experienced writers use has now reached the point of providing useful suggestions for helping basic writing students achieve rapid and effective growth in writing. Shaughnessy, Hunt, Christensen, Williams, and the sentence combiners are among the many composition researchers and instructors who have observed that written English is different from spoken English, different enough for Shaughnessy to refer to "the 'dialect' of written formal English" (51). Basic writing students are normally competent users of oral language. In basic writing classes, discussions are intelligible, full of important ideas, at best even entertaining. But what goes wrong when these speakers write?

Some composition instructors might answer that basic writers often do not explore in enough depth the content they choose to write about, so they include the information that readers expect. Other instructors believe that basic writers have not learned to imagine their audiences. Others might add that clear writing requires basic writers to conceive a clear sense of their purposes for writing. While these answers offer insight into problems faced by basic writers, another variable is present. Once students have explored content, imagined audience, and defined the purpose, how should they use language when involved in the act of writing?

Basic writers must acquire the patterns—lexical and syntactic—that experienced writers use. Because these patterns can be identified, they can be taught. Because these patterns are not merely stylistic, but inherent to the time and space demands of writing, they should be taught. Teaching basic writers the specific, recurring patterns they need to par-

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ticipate in the dialect of writing opens possibilities for basic writers to select patterns consciously as they restructure their writing habits. In one student's words, "Previous to working with the patterns, I would write blindly going only on my instinct. Now as I write little light bulbs turn on inside my head as I begin to recognize language patterns." Conscious management of written patterns, even though this is only one dimension of writing growth, serves to adjust the habits of orality to the demands of literacy. To support this claim, I intend here (1) to review and interpret the results of six seldom-applied studies on the lexical and syntactic differences between spoken and written English and to refer to some widely recognized studies of language development that contain corresponding information, (2) to suggest focal points for teaching the patterns of writing to students who do not assimilate them through reading and writing alone, and (3) to demonstrate pattern use as identified by the research cited here in case studies of individual students and studies of class groups. In describing studies of class groups, I will also describe the instrument I have developed to measure patterns in writing, "the Lexigram."

In spite of awareness among composition researchers that orality and literacy are distinct forms of communication, few have systematically compared the lexicogrammar of spoken and written texts. As I have reviewed the work of those who have, I find that different studies have produced quite similar results. Consistently, some lexical and syntactic patterns appear more often in spoken texts, others in written texts. Although variations occur in definitions of language patterns and in methods of measurement used by researchers in different studies, I find the consistency in the results unobscured. From studies by Harrell, O'Donnell, Kroll, Cayer and Sacks, Gilbert, and Chafe, spanning three decades, I have compiled a list of the patterns found in writing. The common approach in all six studies was to compare spoken and written English texts, produced in each instance by the same subjects. The content, kinds of communicators and audiences, and purposes for communicating varied widely. This scope in data collection supports the position that the patterns found more frequently in written than in spoken texts were required as part of the act of writing itself. The list of language patterns appears in an Appendix to this essay.

In interpreting the information in the list and considering how it might be applied to the needs of basic writers, Bateson's perception of language processes provides a useful starting point: Language is a matter of naming and grouping (xxiv-v). The term *lexicogrammatical*, coined by Halliday, captures the same idea. Language is a combination of the words or names and the syntactic patterns or word groups that language users have available. In addition, Halliday's term implies interaction between the naming and grouping processes, an interaction that develops from the function the language is produced to serve.

Oral language is learned in natural settings where speakers are in close proximity and familiar with their listeners and the interactive circumstances. In such situations, speaking is inherently a paratactic act.

Speakers need not name precisely nor elaborate upon what their listeners perceive in their surroundings or already know from experiences shared with the speaker, so their word groups can be chunks or main clauses—*doer/doing* relationships with *where* and *when* (sometimes *how* or *why*) adverbs attached, usually in the form of prepositional phrases. Speakers, using paratactic language patterns, will string main clauses together as they receive additional information through their sense impressions. They do this either without judging the relative importance of the information at the time of utterance or by using intonation, facial expressions, or body language to signal import. Speakers often do not need the linguistic devices of extensive naming, extended coordination, subordination, relativization, or free modifiers. Describing the patterns of speech as closely linked to the physical environment and previous experiences does not suggest that speaking requires a more simple thinking process than writing, or is less fit to convey complicated ideas. Essentially, speaking is a more people-attuned process, less dependent than is writing upon purely linguistic means for communication. In some of the studies I cite above (especially those by O'Donnell and Chafe), the data show that even individuals who have become versatile users of language will retain some paratactic patterns when speaking. Basic writers, then, continue to write using the naming (lexical) and grouping (syntactic) patterns they acquired when they learned to speak. Consequently, in basic writing, subjects of sentences are almost always animate *doers* (often pronouns) or a substitute idiom (*it rained*), and strings of main clauses show up as run-on sentences.

Written language, instead of reflecting natural discourse in the way that oral language does, is produced in an artificial environment. Writing serves the purpose of extending communication through time and space. The naming and grouping in writing accommodate this function, making writing a hypotactic act that requires specialized language skills. The writer is alone, removed from both the action depicted and from an audience. Thus, the writer must use precise names, especially in subject position to establish a frame of reference for readers. The writer, distanced from any particular instance, can move readily from one instance to another, thus generalizing and abstracting. Nonanimate nouns in the subject slot of clauses facilitate abstractions. Many nonanimate nouns are converted verbs and adjectives—the nominalizations Williams has described. While Williams warns mature writers against too much nominalization and urges them to return to the human subject in sentences to achieve clarity and readability, most basic writers do not even use nominalizations.

Next, the writer needs to amplify precise names with descriptions—the prenominal adjective and relative clause from the list of written patterns I have compiled—in order to reconstruct the experiences to be shared with readers. In addition to precise naming and describing, the writer assigns significance to ideas, omitting some, while choosing others and ranking them. Thus, the writer is designing hierarchies of information, needing very much now the linguistic devices of extended coordina-

tion, subordination, and relativization. As soon as the less important or repeated ideas have been added, the writer can delete from the clauses that carry them by removing unnecessary subjects (often pronouns) and nonessential verbs (often *be*). Parts of coordinated and subordinated clauses may be deleted. Also through deletion, usually of relative clauses, the free modifier evolves. Essentially, free modifiers which retain a verb are participle phrases (i.e., Updike: "a clarinet *wandering* across like a crack on a pond" not "a clarinet *which was wandering* across like a crack on a pond"). The free modifiers which retain a complement noun or adjective are appositives (i.e., Bradbury: "It towered thirty feet above half of the trees, *a great evil god*" not "It towered thirty feet above half of the trees. *It looked like a great* evil god").[1] The research on spoken and written patterns indicates that free modifiers result from deletion rather than from chunking. This is the case because writers are obligated to set up sentences so missing words can be accounted for by readers, whereas speakers may compensate for any lack of understanding among listeners with more chunks or even gestures. Finally, writers may choose to move free modifiers within a sentence to express a focus. Free modifiers, and also adverbial subordinate clauses and relative clauses, in the writing of students who are not familiar with the patterns often become unintended sentence fragments.

While each student will develop individual pattern use, characteristically, basic writers do not use nonanimate nouns to name subjects of sentences precisely and do not use the hypotactic word grouping techniques of extended coordination, subordination, relativization, or deletion to free modifiers. Whether used abundantly or sparingly to conform to the requirements of content, purpose, or style, these are the patterns of writing which students must acquire as they become writers.

Thomas Farrell, from his work with ghetto students, has reached a similar conclusion: "In short, the movement from the oral state of mind to the literate involves a radical transformation of cognitive capacities and this transformation is effected . . . by learning certain linguistic practices" (479). The linguistic practices for naming and grouping in written English appear to be acquired for the most part unconsciously by fluent writers, but not by basic writers. However, the evidence from case and class studies in the third section of this article demonstrates that writing patterns can be acquired consciously by most basic writers. I believe composition instructors can open possibilities for basic writers by directly teaching writing patterns and the options among them.

The foregoing speaking/writing data combined with the information on acquisition of written language can be viewed as the basis for a developmental description of written language, a rationale for teaching the language of writing. If my reference to language patterns recalls for readers experiences with sentence combining, such a rationale was primarily what sentence combining lacked. When sentence combining was introduced to writing students without rhetorical purpose, the word play eventually degenerated into exercises without meaning for either students or teachers. In the same way, the study of traditional grammar

—especially of errors—has become meaningless apart from the context of a piece of writing and more significant goals for the development of the writer. If instruction in written language pattern may one day be soundly based on a developmental description of language, how should instruction in the patterns be incorporated into the larger design for composition instruction?

Procedures for direct instruction in the patterns of writing must vary for individual teachers and individual students. It is my purpose in this essay to discuss and illustrate the research on written language patterns rather than the procedures for teaching these patterns. Nevertheless, I would like to set the frame of reference for the case and class studies with five focal points for instruction. I found these procedures helped make learning the patterns of writing useful for the basic writers whose language development is described in the studies.

The affective environment in a basic writing classroom is always of first concern. A writing classroom should be a community of learners who feel free to cultivate their ideas for writing with each other and then share their written products in various stages of development. In such a group, language must be discussed in terms of its functions and effective use, not its correctness or incorrectness. Basic writers must come to feel that they own their language, that their language comes from them rather than being imposed upon them. Often basic writers are just beginning to move in their thinking from fact collection to analysis, synthesis, evaluation. The comfort zone in the classroom must support this growth. My personal preference is to make assignments that require students consciously to shift back and forth between narrative and analytical discourse forms, while selecting their own content.

Second, basic writers need to begin to reason about how language works. They are receptive to discovering that there is a system in language, that differences exist between oral and written patterns, that writers move through predictable stages in the acquisition of language. Basic writers are often familiar with systems in numbers, automobile engines, computers and business machines, assembly lines, food processing, merchandising, even athletic competition. Many students, like the one I quoted in the introduction to this essay, are relieved to discover there is a system through which they can approach written language. I recommend individual conferences, built into class time when possible, to help students begin to recognize the pattern habits in their own writing and apply the system in written language to bring about the changes they seek in their own styles.

Third, the patterns that have been introduced or discovered must be applied in student writing. I have found the best course for teaching written language patterns to be a five-hour course. A longer course might be better. One-third of the class time is allocated to working with the patterns, one-third is spent discussing ideas and styles from reading assignments, the final third is devoted to preparing and sharing writing. Patterns are practiced and examined in class through sentences that students produce. Students are then expected to use the patterns again,

as needed, in the papers they write. In my opinion, exercises, drills, or workbooks are not acceptable methods for working with language patterns. The "action" is in what the students can produce on their own.

Fourth, as students learn more about the pattern choices they have as writers, they need to learn less about the errors that might occur. When students try patterns that are unfamiliar to them, errors often increase. As pattern use continues, errors decrease and pattern application becomes increasingly appropriate. When a student cannot master a pattern without errors, this is usually a signal that a pattern that precedes it in the language acquisition sequence has not been mastered. For example, students who have not mastered relative clauses often cannot produce participle phrases without errors.

Fifth, I mention above a rationale for teaching the language of writing; by this I mean reasons for selecting which patterns to teach. Writing students can be taught to rely upon the recurring patterns and accept the irregularities as idioms. Only grammarians, not writers, need to identify every word in a sentence. Teaching the patterns begins with the *doer/doing* relationship in the clause—subject and verb—not with the parts of speech which are static. I teach students to become aware of and use effectively the subject, verb, and complement slots in clauses, then to build sentences by adding modifiers around these base parts as needed. Most basic writers are delighted to learn that there are only a limited number of modifiers—the exact number depending on how the modifier patterns are defined. Currently I identify eight modifiers and ask students to practice the ones they are not using. Writers gain nothing from practicing patterns they are already using adequately as speakers—usually noun clauses, infinitives, *where* and *when* adverbs, even single-word adjectives. Still, although most basic writers are comfortable using prepositional phrases, this is a useful pattern to emphasize because experienced writers use many more than do students. Also, I ask basic writers to use more nonanimate nouns in the subject slot of sentences, prepositional phrases, adverbial subordinate clauses, relative clauses, participle phrases, and appositives. Most of all, I ask them to use these patterns in the context of communicating their ideas.

Wendy and Ed—first year students in an open-door community college at the time they wrote the material presented here—were instructed using the procedures I have outlined. I have selected the work of these students as representing different levels of pattern acquisition. Wendy's writing was paratactic. She needed to learn first to coordinate, especially clause parts, and then to subordinate. Ed's writing was already becoming hypotactic. He needed to refine the subordinate clause and acquire the relative clause. Then he was able to move quickly to deleting to free modifiers and to some nominalizing. The samples below, each approximately 200 words (except Wendy's pre-course writing) show the patterns that Wendy and Ed learned to use more frequently from their pre-course to their post-course writing.

Besides the increased frequency of written patterns, two more observations can be made from the following samples. First, many kinds of

errors decreased even though the students studied patterns, not errors. The error reduction can reasonably be attributed to increased pattern mastery because no essay was revised after an instructor responded to it.

Second, the *shared sayings*[2] that basic writers often rely upon are conspicuous in these samples. I define the shared saying as a word group in widespread use that student writers have acquired in the same way they learn single words—through repetition. The relative clauses in *everything that I've always wanted* or *the best time we've ever had* are no more produced by individual students than are the participles in the phrases *chewing gum*, *towering trees*, or *Scotch-guarded car seats*. These syntactic units are repeated by all of us until they are *stiff as a board* or *old as the hills*, even though many are not conspicuous enough to call attention to themselves as trite phrases. Nevertheless, such word groups are certainly a reiteration of shared experiences—shared sayings. Thus, a student who has not mastered a pattern may produce it on occasion in writing, having acquired it as a shared saying. Increased specificness of content within a pattern becomes a clue that reveals the pattern was actually produced by the student writer in order to manage the content at hand. The combined measures of the effectiveness of instruction in the patterns of writing are increased frequency in the use of writing patterns, reduced errors when varied patterns are employed, and increasingly specific content and appropriateness in the patterns produced.

Wendy's pre-course writing followed her speaking patterns: strings of main clauses modified largely by prepositional phrases telling *where* and *when*, and animate *doers* or *it* in the subject slot of clauses.

*Wendy's pre-course writing: personal essay*

1 Today is a very good day. I had my favorite class first hour
2 it was phiscial phittness, I also like the teachure alot hes Mr.
3 Prentiss. I worked last night untill one thirtey, it was hard get-
4 ting up at eight o clock in the morning. It was sixtey degrees
5 out today Very nice not to hot not to cold. We had a test in
6 my Phisical Phitness class and I did very good. I half to work
7 very hard at my Basic math class, Im not very good in math.
8 Tonight I half to work five o clock until nine o clock I hope
9 it goes by very fast. Well I hope you have a good day, I plan to.

In this pre-course sample, Wendy has coordinated clauses and placed a nonanimate noun in subject position only once while she used no adverbial subordinate clauses and no relative clauses. If *Very nice not to hot not to cold* (line 5) could be considered a free modifier, immediately it can be recognized as a shared saying. Wendy has used two *that* clauses (line 9) in the complement slot and the infinitive *to work* (lines 6 and 8) twice in the same position. From the data that compared patterns in spoken and written texts, *that* and *to* complements appeared as often in speaking as in writing. This kind of clause juncture may resemble coordination more closely than subordination, at least from the perspective

of language acquisition. One of Wendy's complement clauses in *I hope you have a good day* (line 9) is, of course, the classic shared saying.

*Wendy's post-course writing: personal essay*

1 The Autumn woods on a morning in October is very beautiful,
2 interesting, and offers very healthy exercise if you take time
3 to enjoy it. At this time of the day the woods is noisey with
4 the sounds of squirlls and chipmuncks moving around getting
5 there work done before the snow falls. Overhead you can see
6 flocks of birds chirping while they fly south to their winter
7 homes. Walking along you may start to get wet from the frost,
8 melting on the leaves. We have walked about a mile, and now
9 we are just about finished. Your heart is beating faster now,
10 and your lungs expand faster from the brisk walk. You can feel
11 the muscles in your legs are tired from the walk, but is' a very
12 enjoyable way of getting exercise. The walk is over with and
13 its' time to leave the colorful woods. Getting into your car and
14 driving away you feel good about seeing the beautiful colors
15 of the woods and the pleasant way of getting exercise.

Rhetorically, Wendy's post-course writing became more colorful because she included more details. Her organization was chronological and her narrative focused upon the idea of pleasant exercise out-of-doors. In terms of writing patterns, Wendy began to coordinate more skillfully, now also coordinating parts of clauses as well as complete main clauses. She used three adverbial subordinate clauses—two *when* clauses (lines 5-6) and one *if* clause (lines 2-3). It appears that she became comfortable enough with subordination to delete two introductory subordinate *when* clauses—*Walking along* (line 7) and *Getting into your car and driving away* (lines 13-14).

Many of the details Wendy added to this piece of writing were introduced in prepositional phrases, a pattern she had come to recognize. While her pre-course writing contained eight *where* and *when* prepositional phrases in end-of-sentence position, her post-course writing contained 19 in varied positions, including 5 that carried *how* and *why* information.

In naming, while Wendy wrote in the second person which worked well for her narrative, she now used eight animate and eight nonanimate subjects; she could vary the content in the subject slot and at the same time use a greater selection of active verbs. Wendy was not ready for and did not receive instruction in nominalization. I think it is fascinating to observe Wendy change the function of the verb *get* from deleted clauses *Getting into your car* (line 13) and *getting there work done* (lines 4-5) to nominalization of *getting* (lines 12 and 15). In my opinion, such play on this single verb may indicate that basic writers initiate syntactic growth around a limited number of lexical items.

Wendy also used five participles or participle phrases that postmodified nouns in object positions: *of squirlls and chipmuncks moving around/getting there work/done* (lines 4-5), *of birds chirping* (line 6), *from the frost melting, on the leaves* (lines 7-8). I would like to claim that since Wendy had studied deleting relative clauses to participle phrases, she could now produce free modifiers. I do not think this is so, however, because Wendy did not spontaneously use the relative clause at all. Thus, she was probably not ready to master that pattern or its deletion. A possible explanation is that Wendy could have produced and deleted subordinate clauses as she did in lines 4-5 (*of squirlls and chipmuncks/while they were/moving around and getting there work done*). Another possibility is that Wendy's participles can all be explained as shared sayings. She could have become conscious of *-ing* words in class and simply used all she could, but this is not the same as learning to produce a pattern independently, although it could be a first step. Wendy's work offers a strong argument, I believe, for teaching students at their levels of readiness and for helping them conceptualize the patterns they are expected to produce.

Ed's pre-course writing showed use of more patterns than Wendy's, but a lack of control of the patterns he attempted.

*Ed's pre-course writing: personal essay*

1 He lives near a beautiful river; in the Northern Forest's of
2 Michigan. Where the Mighty Oaks loom overhead. Where the
3 ferns grow, green and bushy. Where the sounds of the forest
4 echoes its' song. Its' a place where, the wisdom of the wild,
5 is something to be experienced.

6 My father, and him go fishing every day. To see him there
7 proud, and fierce the awesome power, but still beautifully
8 graceful. His speed is unmatched by anything in the forest, but
9 he's a shy and gental creature. Always loyal, and there when
10 I need him, yet said to be the worlds most ferocious dog. The
11 second largest breed of hound, a Russian Wolfhound, or Borzoi.

12 He's smart, for a dog almost to smart for his own good. He's
13 one of the moodiest dogs I've ever seen, and very emotional
14 in his own way. Sometimes he gets so mad; he won't look at
15 me, he will look the other way. He can be stubborn as a mule,
16 and won't move no matter what, and you can't drag him. He
17 will stiffen up like a board, and won't move until you leave
18 him alone.

19 He's not like other dogs; he doesn't pester you all the time. He
20 leaves you alone, and expects the same from you. He reminds
21 me of Mister Spock, from the series Star Trek, he tries to hide
22 his emotions, for this reason he's easy to take for granted.

In this pre-writing, Ed has coordinated clauses and parts of clauses.

In addition, he has used adverbial subordinate clauses—three *where* clauses (lines 2, 2-3, 3) and two *when* clauses (lines 9 and 17). However, his punctuation shows that he is still uncertain of what constitutes a sentence.

Ed used two word groups that could be considered comparative clauses in the third paragraph, *stubborn as a mule* (line 15) and *stiffen up like a board* (line 17). He also used one relative clause, *(that) I've ever seen* (line 13). The comparative clauses clearly belong to our national stockpile of shared sayings; the relative clause is also a shared saying, although not as distinctive and, therefore, not as easy to recognize as such. The clause Ed used in lines 4-5, *a place where, the wisdom of the wild, is something to be experienced,* must be noted separately because although it contains adverbial information, it can be classified as a relative clause. Thus, in terms of building hierarchies in language, Ed in his pre-course writing was using extended coordination and subordination, but only beginning to try the relative clause.

Even though Ed was not producing relative clauses freely in his pre-course writing, he did use two appositives and one postmodifier participle phrase. Ed used the appositives *a Russian Wolfhound, or Borzoi* (line 11) and *for a dog almost to smart for his own good* (line 12). He used the postmodifier participle phrase *said to be* (line 10). These instances, too, sound more like shared sayings than Ed's individual voice.

From Ed's post-course writing, I have selected two short excerpts from narrative and analytical discourse—which together equal his pre-course writing in length—in order to illustrate how written patterns vary and how they are consistent across genres.

*Ed's post-course writing 1: narrative*

1 After eight hours on an airplane, we were loaded on buses that
2 were bound for the pier. As we weaved down narrow streets,
3 I would catch a glimpse of it everytime that we passed a va-
4 cant lot. I had seen it from the air when we circled to land
5 and now I was there standing on the pier right next to it, the
6 U.S.S. Nimitz. It was the world's largest nuclear-powered
7 aircraft-carrier, one thousand feet from stem to stern, a massive
8 gray hulk of steel which cast an ominous shadow on whoever
9 dared to approach.

10 I stood there and felt somewhat humbled by this giant beast
11 as it stood there ready for any task asked of it. It made us feel
12 insignificant, like ants at the base of the mound. We could sense
13 the awesome destructive power hidden within.

*Ed's post-course writing 2: analytical essay*

14 Genetic Engineering, the new era of feast or famine, and with
15 it comes the renewed promise of eliminating human suffering.
16 This is the scientific and medical communities' latest effort to
17 inflict a new cure upon us. What worries me about genetic
18 engineering is our past record of problem solving. It seems to
19 me that everytime we solve a problem we inadvertently create
20 two new ones.

21 However, I must agree that all the possibilities associated with
22 genetic alterations should be looked at with the hope of cor-
23 recting some genetic disorders. I think we have a moral obliga-
24 tion to explore all our options as long as we don't use humans
25 as guinea pigs.

In his post-course writing, Ed has strengthened his control of coordination, and of adverbial subordination. Of special note, he has extended his use of relativization. Ed used four relative clauses in these excerpts from his narrative—*that were bound for the pier* (lines 1-2), *that we passed a vacant lot* (lines 3-4), and *which cast an ominous shadow* (line 8); from his analytical essay—*(that) we solve a problem* (line 19). I can hypothesize that Ed produced most of these relative clauses instead of merely repeating shared sayings because he used more of them and because they contain more content-specific words than the relative clause from his pre-writing, *(that) I've ever seen.* Interestingly, two of these relative clauses are built upon adverbial information and modify the same word *everytime*. As with Wendy's *getting*, this suggests the lexicogrammatical nature of pattern acquisition and may show a transition stage from subordination to relativization.

Ed also demonstrated increased use of deleted patterns. In his narrative Ed produced three appositives—*the U.S.S. Nimitz* (line 6), *one thousand feet from stem to stern* (line 7), and *a massive gray hulk of steel* (lines 7-8). I consider these more representative of Ed's own voice than the appositive in his analytical essay, *the new era of feast or famine* (line 14), which probably came from a source Ed had been reading about genetic engineering. I question analysis on all pieces of student writing that might have been influenced by outside sources because, with no plagiarism involved, short word groups are as easy to shift from one piece of writing to another as single words.

Three participle phrases appear in this excerpt from Ed's narrative—*there standing on the pier* (line 5),[3] *task asked of it* (line 11), and *power hidden within* (line 13)—and one appears in the lines from his analytical essay—*possibilities associated with genetic alterations* (lines 21-22). Again, both the increased frequency in Ed's use of the participle phrase and the increased specificity of content within most of the phrases indicate that he probably produced some of the word groups by deleting his own clauses.

Ed's growth in naming is also quite interesting. In his pre-course writing, Ed used more than three times as many animate as nonanimate words in the subject position of clauses. In his post-course narrative, Ed used exactly twice as many animate as nonanimate subjects, but in his post-course analytical writing, he used one less animate than nonanimate subject. Thus, while Ed developed in the use of the nonanimate subject in both kinds of writing, he needed nonanimate subjects more often in his analytical writing.

Overall, during his composition course, Ed's pattern use became increasingly hypotactic, his errors of all kinds decreased with no intervention by an instructor, and his syntactic groups included more content-specific names. Because Ed began his composition course at a higher level of language skill than did Wendy, he, more than Wendy, was able to leave the course in more comfortable control of all the patterns he would need as a writer.

Ed and Wendy are only two basic writing students, but their writing pattern acquisition is typical of that of students in over a hundred case studies that I have completed during a five-year period. The written pattern acquisition of each student has individual characteristics that vary with that student's personality and learning style, but the common characteristics are consistent with the data from the speaking/writing and language development research I have cited.

Recent case studies have been made more efficient by the use of an instrument which I have developed and called the Lexigram.[4] Its name is derived from the term for Halliday's concept. It measures key patterns of writing. This instrument, while still in an early stage of development, has made possible the analysis of written pattern use not just for individual students, but for small class groups. I have applied the Lexigram to 200-word samples of comparable pre-course and post-course writing by college composition students who write like Ed and Wendy.

The Lexigram measures five lexicogrammatical patterns that from the research I cite, and from early case studies, seem to be the clearest signals of writing competency: (1) nonanimate noun in subject position, (2) relative clause, (3) participle phrase, (4) appositive, and (5) series of prepositional phrases—three or more. The guidelines for the Lexigram have been developed so that not only frequency, but also correct use and content-specific use (to the extent possible) have been included in the measure. The five patterns are varied enough to apply equally well to different genres—for example, while more nonanimate subjects often appear in analytical than in narrative writing, the reverse is often true for participle phrases. Likewise, nominalizations may be offset by relative clauses.

In a 200-word sample, most writers will produce from one to fifteen instances of the patterns measured by the Lexigram. Wendy, for example, received a score of 2 on the Lexigram for her pre-course writing and a score of 9 in her post-course writing, showing she had increased her instances of pattern use during one semester by 7. Ed scored 5 in his pre-course writing and 14 post-course, showing an increase of 9. Writers

who score between 0 and 5 are described using the Lexigram as being on Level I of writing development, writers between 6 and 10 on Level II, and writers from 11 to 15+ on Level III. Level III is competent writing. *Competent* is a more appropriate term than *good* here in that *competent* describes writing that demonstrates the skills to perform the task required, while *good* applied to writing suggests insight and imagination that may or may not accompany competency.

The Lexigram was applied to nine members of a community college composition class[5]—four students whose pre-course writing received scores on Level I, four students on Level II, and one student on Level III. As had Wendy and Ed in other classes, these students were instructed in writing patterns as I have described. The average increase in frequency of pattern use of all nine students in their post-course writing was 4.37. The students on Level I showed the greatest average increase of 5.75 instances of pattern use for their semester's work; those on Level II showed an increase of 4; the student on Level III showed no change.

Was it necessary for the basic writers in the class to receive instruction in patterns of writing, or could the students have developed in their use of writing patterns merely by writing often and revising well? To address this question, students from a similar composition class were instructed by means of frequent writing assignments and revision techniques, but without any direct instruction in writing patterns. Of nine members randomly selected from this class, two students received scores on Level I in their pre-course writing and seven received scores of Level II. The average increase in frequency of pattern use for these students in their post-writing was .71, far below the 4.37 average increase of the group that had been instructed in writing patterns. In this second class, the students on Level I showed an increase of 1 more instance of pattern use as a result of their semester of writing; the students on Level II showed an average decrease of .29. I can hypothesize from these results that direct instruction in the patterns of writing made the difference and made more difference for basic writers.

Another class group must be mentioned. Nine community college students from a third class received instruction in the patterns of writing, but these students were enrolled in a two-hour course and were not asked to write frequently during the semester. In this group, six students received a score on Level I on their pre-course writing, and three received a score on Level II. The average increase in frequency of pattern use for all students in this class on their post-course writing was 3.16, the Level I writers increasing an average of 4.33 instances of pattern use, the Level II writers an average of 2. Thus, even when students were taught and did learn the patterns they needed as writers, they did not acquire the patterns as successfully without frequent writing opportunities—compared to the students asked to repeatedly apply their learning about language in their own writing.

The above data, although the number of students measured is yet small, indicate that students who receive direct instruction in the patterns and who write frequently assimilate the patterns best. Another

question remains: Does teaching the patterns of writing help students produce writing that is *generally* considered good? Thinking about this question would be limited by accepting one instructor's or even one faculty's standards for good writing. The Bedford-prizewinning essays, written by students from many institutions on diverse subjects for varied purposes and evaluated by 39 screeners and eight judges from many institutions, provide one representative standard for good writing. When the Lexigram was used on ten randomly selected 200-word samples from the prizewinning essays, all ten writers scored on Level III with a frequency of pattern use ranging from 11 to 20. The mean pattern use in these samples of writing is 14.62. In contrast, the mean pattern use in the prewriting of my most recent basic writing class of 18 students is 3.11.

Although there is still much to learn about describing and measuring development of written language, research into the lexicogrammar of spoken and written English and on language acquisition has accumulated to the point where results can be applied to instruction for basic writers. Lexical and syntactic patterns that basic writers must acquire in order to become competent writers have been identified, at least in part, and can be incorporated into a rationale for teaching the language of writing. We can begin to see, in Shaughnessy's words, "what lies below the prescriptive bits and pieces of instruction" (292). Basic writers who learn to consciously manage written patterns become better writers. Composition instruction can open possibilities for basic writers when it leads students to explore ideas, anticipate purposes for writing and cultural expectations of audiences, and, in addition, manage written language articulately.

## APPENDIX

### Language Patterns Appearing in Writing

#### Patterns Appearing More Frequently in Written than in Spoken Texts in All Six Studies or in All Studies in Which the Researchers Selected the Pattern to Measure

Nominalizations
Prenominal adjectives
Relative clauses
Participle phrases
Total subordinate clauses

**Patterns Appearing More Frequently in Written than in Spoken Texts in More than One Study**

Nonanimate nouns in subject position
Gerunds as a separate form of nominalization or nonanimate noun
Appositives
Absolutes as a separate form of participle phrase
Conjoined phrases (i.e., verb phrases, adjective phrases, or noun phrases)
Sequences of prepositional phrases
Prepositional phrases that are postmodifiers of nouns
Ellipsis, often accompanying conjoining (Meaning is retained within a deleted clause as contrasted with a chunk in speaking which may not have been produced as a clause.)
*How* and *why* adverbs (single words, infinitives, prepositional phrases, subordinate clauses)
Passive voice verbs
Perfect tense verbs
Locus of complexity distributed between subject and predicate (More complicated patterns located in subject as well as in predicate.)
More and longer T-units

**Patterns in Which There Were No Differences or Only Slight Differences between Spoken and Written Texts in More than One Study**

Infinitives
Complement clauses (*that* and *to* clauses)
*Where* adverbs (as single words, prepositional phrases)
*Be* verb clauses
Progressive verbs

## Notes

[1]Hunt observed that appositives appeared frequently in the writing of students in grade 8, while participle phrases did not appear frequently until writers were beyond grade 12. Appostives may well be produced by writers in two ways—by deleting coordination and by deleting relativization.

[2]Bartholomae uses the term *commonplace* to describe what I think is a similar observation. However, he intends *commonplace* to emphasize the cultural dimension of oft-repeated ideas. I intend *shared sayings* to emphasize the lexicogrammatical dimension.

[3]In Ed's clause *I was there standing on the pier, was standing* could be the complete verb. I prefer to describe *was* as the verb that links the adverb *there* to the subject and *standing on the pier* as a participle phrase because I think this explanation captures the writer's intent. I realize, however, that this is a subjective choice.

[4]The Lexigram was developed under a grant to Delta College, "Improving Retention through Assessment," Title III, US Department of Education, G008541212.

[5]The class members whose writing is included in these figures are the ones who produced sets of texts that met the requirements of the study: pre- and post-course texts of adequate length of comparable genre, and free from possible intervention by outside sources.

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