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Writing to Read – Reversing the Order for Inexperienced Readers

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I would like to propose that students who have reached college as poor readers begin by learning to read their own writing and the writing of their peers. A syllabus in a reading class for inexperienced readers would contain writing assignments similar to those in a writing class for inexperienced writers. The natural order in our schools has been to "teach" reading to youngsters but allow writing to "happen" informally. Despite, and often, I suspect, because of "teaching" reading as a subject, students reach college without the capacity to read anything with interest. When asked to read, they lose focus and sink into a drowse of daydreaming. Mental activity dwindles. Whatever learning takes place does so out of some minimal behaviorist habit, much the way absent-minded drivers follow signs and take exits, not out of confidence and will. Their own writing is rarely read for pleasure. If the question, "Which comes first for these students, reading or writing" is at all valid, the answer probably depends on another question or two, "'Which immediately requires more activity? Which will engage more of the student's mind and body?"

I would therefore like to suggest that we reverse the order, thereby abruptly requiring that students be considerably more active in their serious use of language. Teachers of reading would begin by asking students to write. Ten minutes of free writing by teachers and students engage everyone as readers and writers, converting all those who partake of the hour into active participants. After ten minutes, everyone has some stake in what is going on. Writing classes customarily move on to whole essays which carry a whole purpose. The great opportunity in combining reading and writing into a single block of classroom time is that time becomes available for an immediate reading of what has been written. Writers serve each other also as readers. Reading teachers who work in conventional time slots may not have to require writing of this kind, but I would urge that they ask their students to bring in writing they are doing for other purposes: letters, English assignments, urban studies assignments, etc. When writers serve as readers, they gain a new awareness of why passages work and why others don't work because they are actively contributing to a process. Think for a minute how inexperienced readers react to a page of published,

printed writing. First, they feel, this is an artifact. It is a finished work. It can affect me, but I cannot affect it. If I am asked to analyze it, it is a one-way action, for the purpose of my understanding it more effectively and more logically. My understanding and my reaction are not solicited. Therefore, I have to *want* to understand it. My motivation must be high. Isn't it a foregone conclusion then, since my motivation may not be terrifically high, that what I say or feel about it really is worthless? Isn't my analyzing it just another charade in a long adolescence of charades? This may be how students have "participated" in reading over the years, through the back door. Now it is true that some students, through gifts of environment or genetics, come to language more assertively, with an energetic sense of the reciprocity involved in speaking and writing. Theirs may simply have been a more talky household, where more verbal exchanges took place over breakfast and more verbal exchanges were solicited. But what of those who don't? The invitation to be active, even at long last, even after years of passivity, can begin to nudge such students into the first uncomfortable realization that writing and reading are reciprocal acts.

Give them, therefore, a piece of writing to be read that is still a work-in-progress. Give then something in flux, with its writer hanging on by his teeth waiting nearby to find out if his words said what he intended them to say. Time to react to written messages is a crucial interval in the recursive stages of both reading and writing, and how much more significant when the reaction can actually *affect* the nature of the message. A student responder to student writing says, "I like what you wrote but *I* didn't think your father was bullying you. What you said made him sound like a reasonable guy," or "Maybe the words you use seem hostile to you because *you* feel hostile, and not because the words are hostile. Maybe your writing hasn't shown *exactly* what he did." The writer takes back the sample essay for reconsideration, revision and rereading to the group. Again, the members of such a class have more at stake in what is going on. Teacher and students alike serve as readers, trying with seriousness and good will, to *affect* the printed page, not merely to absorb it, to break in and bring the monolith to life, to see words as vulnerable as they really are.

My youngest writing friends, those in first and second grades, often show me the stories they write in class with their teacher. I understand these sessions are to be arenas where words are weighed, shouted down, voted in, rearranged, recorded by the teacher on the blackboard, and *then* read again by everyone in class for final adjustments before the teacher bravely prints them on giant pieces of oaktag to be published in the corridor for the school community to read. Such public involvement in language may be something of a standard for all of us, that there is a process *before* publication, to which those of us who write can bear witness. Readers too, it seems to me, ought to be given the right to experience that process if reading is to become a lively, energetic activity. Working from the bottom up, this system follows from kindergarten through the grades. Thinking from the top down, I can add only that my experiences teaching advanced writing courses corroborate this principle. The most active, the most critical "reading" that I encounter among students, occurs in writing workshops where readers and writers work together challenging words in order to produce sentences and works of art that fit ideas.

So, on the first level, that of motivation, writing *before* reading reveals the vulnerability of the sentence, that the work of writing is recursive: we think, we write

to find out, we get reactions, rethink, and rewrite. Reading brief whole pieces of writing enhances the reader's self-confidence because he can carry a whole idea in his head without being interrupted by the end of class or an intervening night. Constant reinterpretation of the details of an adequate main idea is more successful in a short whole piece of writing undertaken for a purpose since it can be handled conveniently in a short span of time.

On the level of the sentence, the same principle applies. I believe the writer can best test how the sentence serves the whole. He can test out the power of sentence patterns and variations he will encounter in his reading. Exercises in writing many kinds of sentences are daily warm-ups for reading texts of varying degrees of difficulty. Of first importance is that the reader understand the grammatical sentence. To put this minimally, every reader should recognize the subject-verb unit as the primary glue of the sentence. Breakdowns in reading arise when that glue is threatened. A threat to the unity Subject and Verb is, in terms of the reader's life, life-threatening. Inexperienced readers cannot rally quickly enough to rescue the sense, of the sentence.

What threatens the subject-verb unit? The most obvious threat, and perhaps the easiest to remedy, is that the subject and verb have meanings the reader can not understand. I don't wish to go into vocabulary training at this time, largely because I believe underprepared college readers, like all beginning readers, should be encouraged to read books and articles for pleasure first, books written in words they are motivated to understand because they are about subjects that interest them. When the context matters, readers find out one way or another what a term means. When writers wish to expand the list of words they can use in their writing they often keep a word hoard in which they enter the words they admire and hope to use. Here again we do not mean $40 words they don't know but good vigorous words that attract them.

A greater threat to the unity of subject and verb is syntactic. It consists of modifiers that intervene between subject and verb and distract the reader. As sentences grow more complex, more agility is required of both reader and writer. The greater the distance between the subject and the verb in a given sentence, the more work the reader must do to carry the suspended subject in his mind until he has a verb to hook it to.

Here again writing can prepare the way for reading. Students might first be asked to write minimal sentences, sentences in which subject and verb are next to each other, e.g. *That woman is my grandmother.* As the writer's wishes grow more complex, so does the sentence. If *that woman* is too general a term, the writer can add modifiers to make *that woman* more specific. *That beautiful woman is my grandmother*. No problem here because *woman* and *is* are still next to each other. Add another modifier: *That beautiful woman serving sandwiches is my grandmother.* Stretch it for another modifier: *That beautiful woman in a yellow bikini serving sandwiches to the short woman in dungarees is my grandmother.* The inexperienced reader who has trouble concentrating may end up with the woman in dungarees as the grandmother. Notice that the reader has had to suspend the subject to the breaking point. By the time the verb comes along the real subject has been put in serious jeopardy.

In the December 1976 issue of ***CCC***, Marilyn S. Sternglass of Indiana University of Pennsylvania writes about the "Composition Teacher as Reading Teacher." In her

article she cites statistics that analyze sentences according to Francis Christensen's schema, the principle of analysis being whether a sentence has modifiers initially, that is, before the S-V unit has been completed. (This is Christensen's cumulative sentence.) One of the reasons for the relative difficulty of reading non-fiction, Christensen suggested, was that in 70% of the sentences in non-fiction, modifiers appear at the front of the sentences or in the middle, thereby forcing readers to carry in their heads a greater load of suspended ideas, unresolved until the verb. In fiction, on the other hand, only 47% of the sentences were so written, leaving the majority of fiction sentences with the SV units snugly together and easier to read.

Students in writing-reading classes can write sentences of all three kinds. I refer you to Christensen's ***Notes Towards a New Rhetoric*** and Virginia Tufte's ***Grammar as Style*** for many examples of these kinds of sentences. Such practice alerts students to the click they need to experience between subject and verb in order to feel gratified by a sentence. It also alerts students to the potential literary power in sentences as well as to problems, such as problems in agreement which arise because of intervening modifiers. Consider, for example, *The price of eggs is high.* Now read these sentences taken from a variety of textbooks (and literary criticism is as laden with intervening modifiers as texts on sociology). While an unfamiliar and technical vocabulary handicaps many readers, readers of these sentences are perhaps more troubled by excessively modified subjects. When many distracting phrases separate subject from verb, the reader loses the continuing sense of the passage.

1. Yet an interest in landscape as such, and our ordinary patience with mere description and observation (as with mere anecdote in conversation or the newspapers), are legitimate in their own way.

   (***THE EXAMPLE OF MELVLLE,*** Warner Berthoff)

2. Research with the semantic differential -- applying it to wide varieties of concepts and dimensions and to different groups of people -- consistently points to three more or less independent factors or basic dimensions.

   (***PSYCHOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION,*** Mussen and Rosenzweig)

3. The total minor scale pattern in Example 22, including the descending natural pattern and the ascending altered pattern, is called the *melodic minor scale.*

   (***TONAL HARMONY IN CONCEPT AND PRACTICE,*** 2nd ed., Allen Forte)

4. The idea that producers will place more on the market when price is high and less when price is low also is intuitively appealing.

   (***PRINCIPLES OF ECONOMICS: MACRO***, rev. ed., Willis L. Peterson)

5. The way in which Athens came to be placed in the circumstances under which her power grew was this.

(***PROBLEMS IN ANCIENT HISTORY***, vol. one, Donald Kagan)

6. The fact that we have written records of Sumerian, or Chinese, or Egyptian -- or for that matter, of languages related to English, like Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin -- which are much older than any writings in English or any other Germanic language obviously does not mean that these languages are any older, but simply that the peoples who spoke them learned to write earlier.

(***AN AMERICAN RHETORIC****,* 3rd ed., William W. Watt)

7. The spores of the tetanus bacillus and the anaerobic bacteria associated with gas gangrene, which find their way to the soil especially through the feces of man and animals, survive there for long periods of time and, upon introduction into wounds, may germinate and cause disease.

(***BACTERIAL AND MYCOTIC INFECTIONS OF MAN****,* 2nd ed., Rene J. Dubo)

There are other threats to the subject-verb unit but one seems to be on the increase. I refer to the habit among contemporary wordsmiths of piling up nouns as modifiers. Among my favorites was an announcement I heard on the radio of a "sewage storage tank explosion." It took some hard listening to understand that a tank had exploded and the tank stored sewage in it. Here's another, this one from a child psych book: childhood personality growth graph. What is the subject of this brief snatch of discourse? a graph. What does the graph record? growth. Of what? growth of personality. What kind? personality during childhood. That jamming together of nouns can rarely be handled the first time over. Beginning readers deserve to be comforted by the truth that all reading matter is not written with equal effectiveness. They should know that any reader would need to double back to figure such a mouthful out: that a childhood personality growth graph is a graph that measures the growth of personality during childhood. What writers can do that readers will rarely do is actually reconstruct such monsters so that they can follow the syntax submerged in the cluster. Readers must become sensitized to general and specific as a pervasive principle of thought, not only for purposes of understanding whole essays, but for purposes of understanding sentences and clusters of words. *Graph* is the most general term in the cluster. The nouns, *childhood* and *personality* and *growth,* fall into a subordinate position as modifiers despite the fact that we are accustomed to encountering them as nouns. As readers we have to bypass them as potential subjects and keep juggling them in our minds as modifiers of something we haven't yet encountered. That is tricky to do when there are no signals. Readers can learn from writing when to double back and emphasize the general term to which they can then

mentally subordinate the more specific terms. Technical reading in particular requires that we attend to nouns to keep track of what is being talked about in the discourse. Signals like adjectival endings help as does the list of subordinators, *although, because, since. when,* etc. which signal to readers the subordinate relationships between complex parts.

Readers can more easily penetrate such complex sentences once they have attempted to write them, just as they can grasp the rhythms of whole pieces once they have attempted through writing to make their own experiences understood to themselves and to others.

Which comes first, reading or writing, is really the contemporary question of the chicken or the egg. Because once you've had the first fifteen hundred years of chickens, you're into chickens *and* eggs from then on.