

CONSTANCE HALE'S

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS



RESOURCES TO USE

WITH *SIN AND SYNTAX*:

HOW TO CRAFT

WICKED GOOD PROSE



CONSTANCE HALE

**Constance Hale's
Lesson Plans for Teachers**

Resources to be used with

Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wicked Good Prose

(Three Rivers Press, 2013)

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

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Published 2018

For more information, visit sinandsyntax.com.

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Praise for Constance Hale's Lesson Plans for Teachers

When I write about good writing, works by Constance Hale are high on the lists I recommend. She has the unique capacity to teach language strategies that are centuries old and adapt and apply them to the digital age. Her dogged creativity has now given us something more: a set of lesson plans for teachers. I have written a bunch of books on writing and language. You will find lessons in them, but not a precise, coherent path of learning that teachers can present to students—some eager, others not so much. This e-book is an act of generosity you will rarely find in a world where some textbooks cost more than \$100. Not only is Connie virtually giving away the digital version, but she is inviting teachers to photocopy the handouts so that students can have them for free and then apply the lessons. When I was in high school, I bought copies of *Mad Magazine*, a satirical work for young wise guys like me—and some wise girls. The cost of each issue was 25 cents. Underneath that price was the word *Cheap!* It was a compliment back then, and Connie has brought back that playfulness and generosity, helping teachers lead students down a path of discovery that covers not only the conventions of language but also the spirit that turns reluctant readers and writers into lifelong learners. Buy her books, and use these lesson plans.

—Roy Peter Clark, author of *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*

For anyone who hated grammar as a kid and struggles with writing today, Constance Hale is your friend. She makes learning to write approachable, intelligible, and entertaining. She has combined her many years of experience into these lesson plans, an essential resource for anyone who teaches writing and wants to share the love of language with students.

—Laura Fraser, journalist, author of *An Italian Affair*, and writing teacher at the San Francisco Writers' Grotto

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Glad tidings for writing and composition educators! A teaching guide using Hale’s famously hip and heartfelt approach to grammar, style, and voice—overflowing with unique ideas, prompts, and lively passages. Driven by Hale’s love of word-power, it’s further informed by her many compassionate workshops for writers at all levels. A smashingly helpful and pleasurable way into better writing and the teaching of it.

—Arthur Plotnik, author of *Spunk and Bite: A Writer's Guide to Bold, Contemporary Style*

Constance Hale’s terrific lesson plans give practical, fun ideas for elucidating basic and sophisticated elements of style in the classroom. I wish I’d had this guide when I taught composition, and I will borrow more than a few ideas for teaching voice and tone, especially. What other guide gives examples from both Charlotte Brontë and Muhammad Ali? Highly recommended.

—Lindsey Crittenden, author of the memoir *The Water Will Hold You* and honored instructor in writing, UC Berkeley Extension

When young people truly understand the nuances of English grammar, they understand the elements of transformative speaking, writing, and thinking. Nothing could be more important in this moment of our history. Engaging, elucidating, and entertaining, *Constance Hale’s Lesson Plans for Teachers* is a must for any teacher who cares to make a difference in education.

—Steven Laffoley, award-winning author, teacher, and headmaster of the Halifax Grammar School in Nova Scotia

Constance Hale understands how to captivate young minds. Students so often ask about grammar’s relevancy. She provides answers galore and makes grammar fun at the same time. But she does more than that. She helps build strong writers by showing students the nuances of sentences. This should be required reading for high school English and college composition teachers.

—Alexa Hunter, English teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District

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A note to you.

Are you a teacher trying to help struggling writers perk up their prose? Would you like to learn a little about language yourself as you put together lesson plans for your wards?

Touché! These two suites of lesson plans complement the 2013 edition of *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wicked Good Prose*. Whether or not you actually use the book in the classroom, the idea is to share presentations, exercises, and writing prompts that I have developed for workshops all over the country. Some of these exercises and prompts appear in the book as “catechisms.” Others I have road-tested with students of varying ages and levels of accomplishment.

The lessons, especially in Suite One, are organized to correspond to chapters of the book, but introductory material at the beginning of each lesson gives you some room to play. Depending on how your classes are organized, you can stretch the lessons out for an entire year or compress them into a semester. You may want to focus on Suite One (“Working With Words” and “Working With Sentences”) if you are working especially on grammar. If you are teaching more advanced writers, you might want to skip right to Suite Two (“Making Music”). In some cases, I have given different iterations of exercises for different age levels. When there are handouts or answer keys, they are collected at the end of the chapter. The handouts are available in downloadable PDF form on my website:
<http://sinandsyntax.com/teachers/>.

I include some additional reading, especially on verbs, from *Vex*, *Hex*, *Smash*, *Smooch*. (All page numbers will refer to the most recent

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editions of my books.) I also offer links to related posts and essays I've written for websites.

I am humbly submitting all this to you. You teachers are doing yeoman's work and deserve unending praise. I am not a full-time teacher and have never had to work with core curricula or state or federal guidelines. *You* are the ones to figure out how best to use this material. I just hope it makes your job a little easier.

One caveat and a few pleas: This is a labor of love. I chose to self-publish these lesson plans to keep the cost low for teachers. They have been lightly edited. So please be charitable when you see typos or infelicities. Please send me your corrections, your own ideas, and your feedback on this material. My goal is simply to be as helpful as I can to everyone genuinely trying to teach others to write in a more sophisticated fashion. And to have a little fun in doing so.

Feel free to print pages for your students, but please ask other teachers to download their own copies. This material is copyrighted, and the slight fee is intended to cover some of my hard costs.

Do encourage students or colleagues to visit sinandsyntax.com (especially the area for teachers called "Talking School") and follow me on Twitter and Facebook. I'm trying to build a community of those who care about language.

Enjoy, and keep in touch!

Connie Hale

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Suite One: Working With Words

Week One

A Whole New Way With Words

Reading

Sin and Syntax: "Introduction" and "Words"

"Got Style?" on my website: sinandsyntax.com/blog/got-style

Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch: pages 260–62 and "Epilogue" (also titled "Got Style?")

"Cool Tools" section of sinandsyntax.com, with lists of books on grammar, usage, and style

Lesson and discussion

I launch my classes by setting a tone that is friendly and fun. I want to help students relax—because most of us feel oddly anxious about grammar—and I want to explore their ideas about grammar. I tell my own story of growing up speaking Hawaiian Creole and standard English and the kind of linguistic schizophrenia that induced.

Let's get students talking about what they think grammar is and is not, and whether we need it to be good writers, by reading this quote from Joan Didion: "Grammar is a piano I play by ear, since I seem to have been out of school the year the rules were mentioned. All I know about grammar is its infinite power." Discuss their responses to the quote. Do they, like Didion, feel that they were absent the day/month/year the rules were taught? Can they remember when and how in their lives they picked up grammar (or not)?

For older students, let's also explore whether they speak or study other languages, and how that influences their understanding of English. (I welcome the sharing of jokes, embarrassing stories, or secret anxieties. Sometimes I invite students to scribble "grammar gaffes" or examples of "scrambled syntax" on a whiteboard,

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blackboard, or giant Post-it. I save these and come back to them at the appropriate time in the course.)

Another class discussion might focus on “Cool Tools” for the writer, starting with dictionaries. Talk about how important a good dictionary is, because it contains reliable information and also notes. Bring in a few dictionaries to compare, and take a look at the Microsoft Word dictionary and Dictionary.com. Compare how those stack up against the entries in a bound dictionary released by one of the most reputable publishers (Merriam-Webster, American Heritage, Random House, or Oxford). Deconstruct a good dictionary entry, noting the information it contains about parts of speech, etymology, usage, and definitions. This is a good moment to talk about using a good thesaurus, a visual dictionary, and other resources that help us be precise in the words we choose. (Good resources for this discussion include posts on sinandsyntax.com under “Cool Tools.” I am a fan of “Word of the Day” feature from visualthesaurus.com, which is produced by linguists at Thinkmap. And I am a fan of online tools for those who are visual learners: Thinkmap’s subscription-only thesaurus and Visuwords’ free online graphical dictionary (visuwords.com).

Dedicate another discussion to the idea of usage, exploring how it differs from grammar. We can use some of our good dictionaries to read the definitions of *grammar*, *syntax*, *usage*, and *style*. Point out that many people confuse usage errors—or spelling and punctuation errors—with grammatical errors. A useful resource might be the posts on grammar, style, and usage at sinandsyntax.com. The opening of Chapter 12 of *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* (pages 260–62) is another good resource. And I’m a big fan of Grammar Girl (quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar).

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I also like to discuss slang (which I much enjoy but students think they must avoid) and jargon (which I do not enjoy but students sometimes think is acceptable). For a starting point on these subjects, try pages 21–22 and 225–26 of *Sin and Syntax*.

At last, it's time to introduce the parts of speech. Words fall into different categories or buckets—and some words fall into more than one. *Sin and Syntax* recaps this on page 12, and *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* recaps some of the history on pages 90–92. To wit:

The “parts of speech” may have been dreamed up by the ancient Greek Dionysius Thrax, who counted eight discrete categories: *adverbs, articles, conjunctions, nouns, participles, prepositions, pronouns, and verbs*. But Romans had no use for articles, so they scrapped them and added interjections. Early English grammarians adopted the Latin list, then added and subtracted elements, eventually folding articles into the adjectives category and ditching participles. We were left with our Magic Eight: *nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections*.

Students may have learned the parts of speech from TV. *Schoolhouse Rock!* debuted on ABC-TV in 1973 and has been periodically revived ever since, “being, singing, feeling, and living” most recently on YouTube. Then again, you might have learned your parts of speech from ditties like this:

A *noun's* the name of any thing

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Like house or garden, boat, or swing.
Instead of nouns you may prefer
The *pronouns* you, or I, or her.

Adjectives tell the kind of noun
As great or small or black or brown.
Verbs tell something to be done:
To read or count, sing, laugh, or run.

The song goes on to define adverbs, conjunctions,
prepositions, and interjections.

Unfortunately, some words still don't fit neatly into
this syntactical blueprint. A language shifts over
time, much as the foundation of a house can settle
and require re-carpentering.

We'll get to the resettled and sometimes haphazard elements
in later lessons.

In-class exercises

1. For an introductory exercise in the first class, ask students to pick three words to describe themselves to the rest of us. As you go around the room, note the words that people have picked in common. (These often include *male*, *female*, *writer*, and *student*.) Do some brainstorming to find less generic, more precise words. Talk about precision, but also about denotation and connotation—about how certain words are packed with rich associations. (I use the example of *mango* and *peach*, from the introduction to “Words,” to illustrate. Something like *Grandmother* and *Nana* and *Abuelita* would work well for younger kids.)

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2. For younger students, when discussing using a dictionary and a thesaurus, create teams and have each team look up certain words for denotations (using a dictionary) and synonyms (using a thesaurus). Then brainstorm different connotations of those words.

3. With older students, explore how certain words that are often used casually may have quite particular meanings (some examples might be *aggravate*, *decimate*, *nemesis*, and *terrorist*) that give the words special nuance. Explore word pairs that are used interchangeably by writers who don't know better. This leads to a discussion of usage—how it changes over time, when there are reasons to insist on proper usage, when we might let usage be loose. (Examples might be *aggravate v. irritate*; *careen v. career*; *medium v. media*; and *compare to v. compare with*.)

4. Make sure that students understand the ideas of *slang* and *jargon*. Brainstorm for slang. Have fun with this. Hit the Urban Dictionary! Students who are older may have fun as well with professional jargon. Here is a far-too-typical sentence from the business world to pick apart in class:

This focus on innovation does not mean there is a huge R&D spend. (Taken from a business school case study)

A better version might be this:

Focusing this way on innovation doesn't mean the company has to spend huge sums on R&D.

5. **For more advanced students:** This letter, from the first edition of *Sin and Syntax*, offers some subversive fun to more advanced students in identifying nouns. In it, Cyan Inc., the company that produced the adventure game to end all adventure games, *Myst*, showed a better sense of words—and humor—than most PR types,

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avoiding the knee-jerk tendency to drown crucial words in a tide of filler. The letter landed on the desk of an editor at *Wired* magazine back in the early days of the Web. The press release focused all attention on a few key nouns (i.e., the names of the products being hawked) and poked fun at meaningless PR. (If all press releases were as funny, editors might actually read them.)

Dear Mr. Frauenfelder,

Blah, blah blah blah blah Cyan blah Blah blah *Myst* blah Blah. BLAH! Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah blah: blah blah. Blah blah Cyan blah blah blah blah blahblah blah blah blah *Myst* blah blah.

Blahblah *The Manhole Masterpiece Edition* blah blah *Cosmic Osmo and the Worlds Beyond the Mackerel*.

The Manhole Masterpiece Edition blah blah blah blah blah blahblah blah blah blah blah blah blahblah blah. Blahblah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blahblah; blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah *The Manhole Masterpiece Edition*, blah blah blah blah blah blahblah blah.

Cosmic Osmo and the Worlds Beyond the Mackerel blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blahblah blah blah blah, blah blah. Blah blah! Blah blah blah & blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah blah blah. Blah, *Cosmic Osmo and the Worlds Beyond the Mackerel* blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah.

Blah blah Cyan blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blahblah blah—blah blah. Blah blah blah blah

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blah blah blah blah blah blah blahblah.

Regards,
Rand Miller & Robin Miller
Founders

P.S. Blah blah blah blah Blah blah: blah
blah blah!

Homework

Let's add some ads into the mix. Find three ads that depend on *words* for their success, and bring them in to class. Find ads that use as few words as possible and yet exploit each one. (Examples: the California Milk Processor Board's "got milk?" and Dollar Shave Club's "Shave time. Shave money.")

Thesaurus love. Are the words you chose in the first class to introduce yourself generic and somewhat vague (e.g., *writer*), or are they specific and precise (e.g., *novelist, poet, journalist, compulsive scribbler*)? Are they nouns? Adjectives? Verbs? Go find a good, Roget's-style thesaurus and look up each word. Can you find even more precise words that give someone a much clearer picture?

Loosen up. Have a little fun with slang and jargon. Take something you've written recently (it would be great if it were a piece of formal writing or an academic paper!) and revise it using as much slang as you can. Or write an email to your teacher or boss using formal language, then write the same email to a friend or colleague in informal language. Or think of two people who work together and rely on professional argot or jargon, then write a dialogue in their lingo. As an example of a writer having fun with jargon, here is a no-doubt-apocryphal conversation between the economist and techno-

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utopian advocate George Gilder and an engineer, captured (or improvised) by the journalist Po Bronson in a 1996 profile in *Wired*:

Every time Gilder meets an engineer, they go through this sort of cascade of language syntax, negotiating like two modems, trying to find the most efficient level of conversation they can hold. It ends up sounding like the dueling-banjo scene from *Deliverance*:

George: “Hi, nice to meet you. Hey, that’s a sweet access router over there. Wow, both Ethernet and asynchronous ports?”

Steve: “Yeah, check this baby out—the Ethernet port has AUI, BNC, and RJ-45 connectors.”

George: “So for packet filtering you went with TCP, UDP, and ICMP.”

Steve: “Of course. To support dial-up SLIP and PPP.”

George: “Set user User_Name ifilter Filter _Name.”

Steve: “Set filter s1.out 8 permit 192.9.200.2/32 0.0.0.0/0 tcp src eq 20.”

George:
“0010110110001011100100111011000010101010
0011111001.”

Steve: “.
..... ..”

George: “Really? Wait, you lost me there.”

Week Two: Noodling Around With Nouns

Reading

Sin and Syntax: "Nouns"

"Desperately Seeking Synonyms," *New York Times* Opinionator:
opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/02/desperately-seeking-synonyms

Sections of *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* (as noted)

Lesson and discussion

Nouns are the cornerstones of writing and, along with verbs, key components of every sentence. Nouns transform people into characters, places into scenes, tangible things into metaphors, and ideas into themes. So, what is a noun? Let's start our exploration by reading the definitions of nouns in *Sin and Syntax* (page 11) and *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* (page 29).

Depending on the age and grammatical comfort level of your students, this discussion is all about definitions. One way to help younger students define nouns is to bring in buckets labeled "Common Nouns" and "Proper Nouns." Read a story at their age level, and write the nouns on index cards. Have the students drop the cards in the right buckets. For older students, define nouns by closely reading the passage by Paul Theroux, from *The Pillars of Hercules*, on pages 12–13 of *Sin and Syntax*. Discuss common nouns and proper ones, generic nouns and specific nouns, abstract nouns and concrete ones. How many proper nouns are there in the Theroux passage? Why are they effective? Do you notice compound nouns, some of them open (*bus ride*) and some of them closed (*daylight*)? Would you agree that Theroux exploits nouns to create this scene?

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In-class exercises

1. Almost every English sentence contains at least one noun. They are indispensable when it comes to portraying a character or painting a scene. The Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman opens his book *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* by creating an indelible image of the cell in which he was imprisoned for criticizing the official cruelty of his country's military. He does most of it through nouns (see Handout). Have students group the nouns in two ways—first, into the four noun classes:

People: *guard, guards*

Places: *cell, corridor, house*

Concrete things: *door, arms, body, knees, ceiling, walls, names, messages, floor, mattress, blanket, shoulders, crack, air, watch, cigarette, wife's lighter, gold Rolex watches, Dupont cigarette lighters, Argentine security forces*

Intangible things: *luck, encouragement, vestige, testimony, time, semi-penumbra, semi-air, temptation, obsession, sensation, freedom, entire universe, Time, time, existence, duration, eternity*

Then have students group them as common nouns (*arms, knees, cell*) and proper nouns (*Rolex, Dupont, Argentine*) and nouns that carry ideas and abstractions (*freedom, eternity, Time, time*). Nouns can buttress good scene descriptions. Both Theroux and Timerman lean hard on nouns, but their passages are quite different.

2. Use the blackboard or some other surface (I sometimes just use my outstretched arms) to talk about the three parallel spectra, or axes, of nouns. The first spectrum is between common, generic,

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basic nouns and proper or precise nouns (which include brand names!). The second is between abstract, general, and vague nouns and concrete, specific, narrow nouns. The third is between nouns that are literal and nouns that are figurative (or the denotative value of a word and its connotative value).

Take the example of *house*, on page 15, and mark where various nouns fall on each spectrum. Take the example of *boat*, from “Desperately Seeking Synonyms,” and do the same, going from common to proper, abstract to concrete:

Abstractions: *vessel, vehicle, mode of transportation, means of navigation*

Commonplace: *boat, ship, seacraft*

Proper: *Boston Whaler, Duck Boat, Hobie Cat, Hokule'a, Titanic, Sunfish, USS Kentucky*

Precise: *canoe, skiff, yacht, yawl, aircraft carrier, amphibious landing vehicle, barge, battleship, dinghy, dugout, junk, outrigger, rowboat, trimaran, scow*

Figurative: *log on steroids, Cadillac of a canoe*

3. Identify the nouns in the passages in the Handout. Identify common nouns and proper nouns, specific nouns and generic ones.

4. Get gritty with the grammar, reviewing the chapter's “Cardinal Sins” and various problems that crop up with nouns, especially these:

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Abstractions: Take a look at the paragraph about GreenTree Nutrition (page 21). Have a good laugh.

Noun piles and purple prose: See the examples on page 180. Encourage students to collect ridiculous descriptions from restaurant menus, like these desserts from a trendy San Francisco eatery: Tellicherry Black Pepper Banana Caramel Pot de Crème with chocolate earthquake cookies; Warm Valrhona Chocolate-Cardamom Soufflé Cake with snicker doodle cookies.

Lack of imagination: *boat, house*

Euphemisms (examples on pages 27–29): Here’s one: After Justin Timberlake ripped off Janet Jackson’s bodice during the halftime show of the 2004 Super Bowl, exposing her right breast, Timberlake’s press agent issued this statement: “I am sorry if anyone was offended by the wardrobe malfunction.”

Redundancies: *first start, acute crisis, free gift, true facts, convicted felon*

Redundant pairs, or “doublets”: *last will and testament, excitement and enthusiasm, effectiveness and efficiency*

Another source of examples of redundancy—with a linguistic/historical explanation of why they are so frequent in English—is pages 72–73 and 76–78 of *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch*.

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5. Use the “Geeky Grammar” exercises in the Handout to show students develop an eye for the various ways weak nouns can appear.

6. Show how powerful brand names can be—the good ones carry a raft of connotations or provide an image that lodges itself in our minds. It can be fun to look at the names of car models (from Honda's Accord to Datsun's 280Z); some conjure images (Subaru's Forrester), but some are gauzy or ridiculous (Hyundai's Elantra).

7. **For more advanced students:** John McPhee and Joan Didion both use brand names to great effect. I encourage you to find your own examples here—it's critical that you share with your students what you feel passionate about.

Homework

Berry good nouns. Review Mark Twain's “potted geraniums” reference, in the “Nouns” chapter, and Jo Ann Beard's “pink geraniums grow[ing] like earrings on either side of the porch.” Nouns give shape to ideas, heft to sentences. It's worth taking the time to get them right. It may seem old-fashioned, or just tedious, to work with a dictionary and a thesaurus at your side, but this is part of the practice of writing. Working with word books strengthens our imaginative muscles and in turn strengthens our mental thesaurus, our ability to call up precise words. Take a common noun like *fruit*. How many more specific synonyms can you come up with? Is one of them *berry*? Can you do even better than that? List as many different kinds of berries as you can, using your mental thesaurus. When you've run out, go to a literal thesaurus. How many more did you get?

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Surface energy. The first step in learning how to write evocative scenes is to increase your powers of observation. First, really look. Then start taking notes. Write down everything. Draw shapes. Note colors. Find new, more precise words. The poet Maw Shein Win catalogs items in her house—from mismatched mattresses to wrapped candies to a Moroccan mask—in her poem “Home.” Her exercise is an easy one to replicate. For something more focused, notice the detail Thomas Pynchon squeezes into a one-paragraph description of Lt. Tyrone Slothrop’s desk, early in *Gravity’s Rainbow*:

It hasn’t been cleaned down to the original wood surface since 1942. Things have fallen roughly into layers, over a base of bureaucratic smegma that sifts steadily to the bottom, made up of millions of tiny red and brown curls of rubber eraser, pencil shavings, dried tea or coffee stains, traces of sugar and Household Milk, much cigarette ash, very fine black debris picked and flung from typewriter ribbons, decomposing library paste, broken aspirins ground to powder. Then comes a scatter of paperclips, Zippo flints, rubber bands, staples, cigarette butts and crumpled packs, stray matches, pins, nubs of pens, stubs of pencils of all colors including the hard-to-get heliotrope and raw umber, wooden coffee spoons, Thayer’s Slippery Elm Throat Lozenges sent by Slothrop’s mother, Nalline, all the way from Massachusetts, bits of tape, string, chalk . . . above that a layer of forgotten memoranda, empty buff ration books, phone numbers, unanswered letters, tattered sheets of carbon paper, the scribbled ukulele chords to a dozen songs including “Jonny Doughboy Found a Rose in Ireland.”

Pynchon’s description goes on for another 164 words. Your own desk might not be such a “godawful mess” (his words), but look at it

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closely and describe what you see. Make your description more than a mere catalog.

Southern nouns. Read the first four paragraphs of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, by Carson McCullers (see Handout). Underline every noun in the passage, and take special note of the idea/feeling/abstraction nouns McCullers uses (*dreams, gaiety, ruin*). Have students write a few lines on how the author drops those nouns into the passage to set up her themes.

See, seeing, scene. Reread the scenes early in the “Nouns” chapter—Paul Theroux’s train compartment in Turkey, James Salter’s hall at West Point, Arundhati Roy’s landscape in Ayemenem. Go sit somewhere distinctive—a favorite garden, a cathedral, or even a grungy inner-city Laundromat—and notice what is special or evocative about the place. Use concrete, vivid nouns to paint a picture of the scene. Carefully choose a few idea/feeling/abstraction nouns to convey what makes the place unusual. Is it a microcosm of something larger? Is it a symbol? A metaphor?

Transcendental time. Read the descriptions of the Concord River written by Henry David Thoreau and then John McPhee on pages 30–32 of *Sin and Syntax*. Find a historical description of a particular place in your city, town, or county. Retrace the author’s steps. Write your own description of the place as it is today, using the original as a starting point but letting John McPhee inspire you to see the essence of the place today.

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

Week Two:

Noodling Around With Nouns/Handout

In-class exercises

1. **From *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, by Jacobo Timerman**

Identify every noun in the following passage:

The cell is narrow. When I stand at its center, facing the steel door, I can't extend my arms. But it is long, and when I lie down, I can stretch out my entire body. A stroke of luck, for in the cell I previously occupied—for how long?—I was forced to huddle up when seated and keep my knees bent while lying down.

The cell is quite high. When I jump, I'm unable to touch the ceiling. The white walls have been recently painted. Undoubtedly they once had names on them, messages, words of encouragement, dates. They are now bereft of any vestige or testimony.

The floor of the cell is permanently wet. Somewhere there's a leak. The mattress is also wet. I have a blanket, and to prevent that from getting wet I keep it on my shoulders constantly. If I lie down with the blanket on top of me, the part of my body touching the mattress gets soaked. I discover it's best to roll up the mattress so that one part of it doesn't touch the ground. In time, the top part dries. This means, though, that I can't lie down, but must sleep seated. My life goes on during this period—for how long?—either standing or seated.

The cell has a steel door with an opening that allows part of a face, a minimal part, to be visible.

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The guard has orders to keep the opening shut. Light enters from the outside through a small crack, which acts also as an air vent. This is the only ventilation and light. A faint glow, night and day, eliminating time. Producing a semi-penumbra within an atmosphere of contaminated air, semi-air. . . .

One of the guards has my watch. During an interrogation another guard offered me a cigarette and lit it with my wife's lighter. I later learned that they were under army orders not to steal anything from my house throughout the kidnapping but succumbed to temptation. Gold Rolex watches and Dupont cigarette lighters were almost an obsession with the Argentine security forces during that year of 1977.

Tonight, a guard, not following the rules, leaves the peephole ajar. I wait a while to see what will happen but it remains open. Standing on tiptoe, I peer out. There's a narrow corridor, and across from my cell I can see at least two other doors. Indeed, I have a full view of two doors. What a sensation of freedom! An entire universe added to my Time, that elongated time which hovers over me oppressively in the cell. Time, that dangerous enemy of man, when its existence, duration, and eternity are virtually palpable.

3. Naming things:

Identify all the nouns in the following passages. Which ones are common, which ones proper? Which ones specific, which generic?

From *Whoredom in Kimmage: Irish Women Coming of Age*, by Rosemary Mahoney

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The man wore a wool cap and a heavy overcoat with the collar up, as though against a winter wind. The great wings of his collar hid the lower half of his face—all I could see of him was a black brow, a long, graying sideburn and an enormous hairy ear. . . . [He] addressed me without introduction or preface and without taking his eyes off the red dot of the fishing boat. I thought he was speaking Irish and stepped closer, the better to hear him, but it was English he was speaking, his second language. Aran Islanders—indeed most native Irish speakers—speak English in a mournful, faintly suspicious way, as though it pains them to be speaking such an unwieldy tongue, but this man’s tone was exceptionally gloomy; it made him sound like the spy he resembled.

**From “Death All Day in Kansas,” by Richard Rhodes
(*Esquire*)**

Dan’s parents have waited up for us with Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon. Mrs. Cram appears to let us in—a slim, pleasant, dark-haired woman in a quilted robe, feminine without fluffiness, with delicate and graceful hands. She does not, as a farm woman might, leave the conversation to the men; as she asks her questions her eyes examine her son, assaying his health, his appetite, his state of mind. Married only ten months, Dan has not yet finally left home, and between his mother and his grandmother, in the next twenty-four hours, he will receive more attention than makes him comfortable, as befits a former Portis high-school basketball player.

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From *The Last Cowboy*, by Jane Kramer

There was a fine-lined, weathered look about Henry at forty. Too much bourbon and beer had put a gut on him, but his gray eyes were clear and quick most days, and often humorous, and his sandy hair had got thick and wiry as it grayed—a little ruffled and overgrown, because he hated haircuts, though never long enough to cause comment in a cowboy bar. He had a fine, solemn swagger. Saturday nights at the country-and-Western dance in Pampa, he thumped around the floor, serious and sweating, and the women liked to watch him—there was something boyish and charming about his grave self-consciousness. When he was young, he used to laugh and shake hands with everybody after a good polka. Now, more often than not, he blinked and looked around, suddenly embarrassed, and his laugh was loud and nervous, and made the women who had been watching him uncomfortable.

Still, Betsy was looking tired lately. All the cowboys' wives said so. She looked as if her life had hurt her and worn her out. Years ago, when Henry began to court her, she was the prettiest girl in her class at the district high school—a slender girl with wide blue eyes and a dimpled smile and wavy yellow hair that flipped in the wind when she went riding and was the envy of her friends. Now there was tension—a kind of tightness—about her. Her face had hardened under the bright, careful pouf that her hairdresser said was just the thing for softening the features of tall, thin women. She was getting sallow the way people who spend their youth outdoors turn sallow when they are shut up in closed cars and offices.

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

5. Geeky grammar

Clean up these phrases by finding better, more specific nouns:

a written warranty or any documents associated therewith

the location of manufacture

we have no present or future plans to do so

Welcome to the New York area!

Eliminate the redundancies in the following sentences, each one taken from a real book manuscript:

The Philadelphia chromosome derails normal bone marrow functioning and initiates an uncontrolled reproduction and proliferation of all types of white blood cells and platelets (which help blood clot).

The way to begin is to eliminate any mindset or attitude that might be a source of conservatism or resistance to change.

Gates said that the Money team, with its limited resources, had increased the public's fascination and attraction with personal finance software.

Identify the junk nouns in these sentences, and think of a way to improve them:

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This is all part of our global improvement product enhancement program. (A statement by a spokesman for Hasbro after the toy company closed a Scrabble plant in Fairfax, Vermont)

I am writing to you about our need for a communication facilitation skills development intervention. (From a school principal's letter to parents)

Careful operational organization of this policy is needed in order to avoid the pitfall of goal displacement. (From a government agency memo)

Agreement on the overall objective of decision usefulness was a prerequisite to the establishment of a conceptual framework. (From a company memo)

Homework

Southern nouns. Underline every noun in this passage, from *The Ballad of the Sad Café* by Carson McCullers, and take special note of the idea/feeling/abstraction nouns McCullers uses (*dreams, gaiety, ruin*). How does the author drop these nouns into the passage to set up her themes?

The town itself is dreary; not much is there except the cotton mill, the two-room houses where the workers live, a few peach trees, a church with two colored windows, and a miserable main street only a hundred yards long. On Saturdays the tenants from the near-by farms come in for a day of talk and trade. Otherwise the town is lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world. The nearest train stop is Society City,

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and the Greyhound and White Bus Lines use the Forks Falls Road which is three miles away. The winters here are short and raw, the summers white with glare and fiery hot.

If you walk along the main street on an August afternoon there is nothing whatsoever to do. The largest building, in the very center of the town, is boarded up completely and leans so far to the right that it seems bound to collapse at any minute. The house is very old. There is about it a curious, cracked look that is very puzzling until you suddenly realize that at one time, and long ago, the right side of the front porch had been painted, and part of the wall—but the painting was left unfinished and one portion of the house is darker and dingier than the other. The building looks completely deserted. Nevertheless, on the second floor there is one window which is not boarded; sometimes in the late afternoon when the heat is at its worst a hand will slowly open the shutter and a face will look down on the town. It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams—sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief. The face lingers at the window for an hour or so, then the shutters are closed once more, and as likely as not there will not be another soul to be seen along the main street. These August afternoons—when your shift is finished there is absolutely nothing to do; you might as well walk down to the Forks Fall Road and listen to the chain gang.

However, here in this very town there was once a café. And this old boarded-up house was unlike any other place for many miles around. There were tables with cloths and paper napkins, colored streamers from the electric fans, great gatherings on Saturday nights. The owner of the place

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was Miss Amelia Evans. But the person most responsible for the success and gaiety of the place was a hunchback called Cousin Lymon. One other person had a part in the story of this café—he was the former husband of Miss Amelia, a terrible character who returned to the town after a long term in the penitentiary, caused ruin, and then went on his way again. The café has long since been closed, but it is still remembered.

Twitter nouns

Which of the following seven Twitter profiles (which are all well written) rely mostly on nouns and adjectives (and some prepositional phrases acting as adjectives) to identify the writers behind them?

@PaigeBowers

Professional writer, proud mama, grad student, foodie, struggling knitter, square-foot gardener, Louisiana girl.

@cubedweller

Brand igniter, angel investor, public speaker, former Virgin.

@missdestructo

Destroyer of Social Media Boredom. Blue Haired Blogger.

@the_leaky_pen

poet, writer, college student, vagabond

@4ndyman

Copy editor by day. Writer by night. Musician on the weekends. Literary critic every other Wednesday. Raconteur when the mood strikes. AKA Logophilus.

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@pnotleks23

Ordinary, upbeat Mom, limo biz owner and tennis player/fanatic from Atlanta.

Week Two: Noodling Around With Nouns/Answer Key

In-class exercises

1. From *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, by Jacobo Timerman

The **cell** is narrow. When I stand at its **center**, facing the steel **door**, I can't extend my **arms**. But it is long, and when I lie down, I can stretch out my entire **body**.

A **stroke** of **luck**, for in the **cell** I previously occupied—for how long?—I was forced to huddle up when seated and keep my **knees** bent while lying down.

The **cell** is quite high. When I jump, I'm unable to touch the **ceiling**. The white **walls** have been recently painted. Undoubtedly they once had **names** on them, **messages**, **words** of **encouragement**, **dates**. They are now bereft of any **vestige** or **testimony**.

The **floor** of the **cell** is permanently wet. Somewhere there's a **leak**. The **mattress** is also wet. I have a **blanket**, and to prevent that from getting wet I keep it on my **shoulders** constantly. If I lie down with the **blanket** on top of me, the **part** of my **body** touching the **mattress** gets soaked. I discover it's best to roll up the **mattress** so that one **part** of it doesn't touch the **ground**. In time, the top **part** dries. This means, though, that I can't lie down, but must sleep seated. My **life** goes on during this **period**—for how long?—either standing or seated.

The **cell** has a steel **door** with an **opening** that allows **part** of a **face**, a minimal **part**, to be visible. The **guard** has **orders** to keep the **opening** shut. **Light** enters from the outside through a small **crack**, which acts also as

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an **air vent**. This is the only **ventilation** and **light**. A faint **glow**, **night** and **day**, eliminating **time**. Producing a **semi-penumbra** within an **atmosphere** of contaminated **air**, **semi-air**. . . .

One of the **guards** has my **watch**. During an **interrogation** another **guard** offered me a **cigarette** and lit it with my wife's **lighter**. I later learned that they were under **army orders** not to steal anything from my **house** throughout the **kidnapping** but succumbed to **temptation**. Gold **Rolex watches** and **Dupont cigarette lighters** were almost an **obsession** with the **Argentine security forces** during that **year** of 1977.

Tonight, a **guard**, not following the **rules**, leaves the **peephole** ajar. I wait a **while** to see what will happen but it remains open. Standing on **tiptoe**, I peer out. There's a narrow **corridor**, and across from my **cell** I can see at least two other **doors**. Indeed, I have a full **view** of two **doors**. What a **sensation** of **freedom**! An entire **universe** added to my **Time**, that elongated **time** which hovers over me oppressively in the **cell**. **Time**, that dangerous **enemy** of **man**, when its **existence**, **duration**, and **eternity** are virtually palpable.

3. Naming things

(Note the compound nouns; here, the modifiers might be considered adjectives or noun modifiers. I have not boldfaced the pronouns acting as nouns.)

From *Whoredom in Kimmage: Irish Women Coming of Age*, by Rosemary Mahoney

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The **man** wore a wool **cap** and a heavy **overcoat** with the **collar** up, as though against a winter **wind**. The great **wings** of his **collar** hid the lower **half** of his **face**—all I could see of him was a black **brow**, a long, graying **sideburn** and an enormous hairy **ear**. . . . [He] addressed me without **introduction** or **preface** and without taking his **eyes** off the red **dot** of the fishing **boat**. I thought he was speaking **Irish** and stepped closer, the better to hear him, but it was **English** he was speaking, his second **language**. **Aran Islanders**—indeed most **native Irish speakers**—speak **English** in a mournful, faintly suspicious **way**, as though it pains them to be speaking such an unwieldy **tongue**, but this man's **tone** was exceptionally gloomy; it made him sound like the **spy** he resembled.

From "Death All Day," by Richard Rhodes (*Esquire*)

Dan's **parents** have waited up for us with **Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon**. **Mrs. Cram** appears to let us in—a slim, pleasant, dark-haired **woman** in a quilted **robe**, feminine without **fluffiness**, with delicate and graceful **hands**. She does not, as a **farm woman** might, leave the **conversation** to the **men**; as she asks her **questions** her **eyes** examine her **son**, assaying his **health**, his **appetite**, his **state of mind**. Married only ten **months**, **Dan** has not yet finally left **home**, and between his **mother** and his **grandmother**, in the next twenty-four **hours**, he will receive more **attention** than makes him comfortable, as befits a former **Portis high-school basketball player**.

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From “Cowboy,” by Jane Kramer (the *New Yorker*)

There was a fine-lined, weathered **look** about **Henry** at **forty**. Too much **bourbon** and **beer** had put a **gut** on him, but his gray **eyes** were clear and quick most **days**, and often humorous, and his sandy **hair** had got thick and wiry as it grayed—a little ruffled and overgrown, because he hated **haircuts**, though never long enough to cause **comment** in a **cowboy bar**. He had a fine, solemn **swagger**. Saturday **nights** at the country-and-Western **dance** in **Pampa**, he thumped around the **floor**, serious and sweating, and the **women** liked to watch him—there was something boyish and charming about his grave **self-consciousness**. When he was young, he used to laugh and shake **hands** with everybody after a good **polka**. Now, more often than not, he blinked and looked around, suddenly embarrassed, and his **laugh** was loud and nervous, and made the **women** who had been watching him uncomfortable.

Still, **Betsy** was looking tired lately. All the cowboys’ **wives** said so. She looked as if her **life** had hurt her and worn her out. Years ago, when **Henry** began to court her, she was the prettiest **girl** in her **class** at the **district high school**—a slender **girl** with wide blue **eyes** and a dimpled **smile** and wavy yellow **hair** that flipped in the **wind** when she went riding and was the **envy** of her **friends**. Now there was **tension**—a kind of **tightness**—about her. Her **face** had hardened under the bright, careful **pouf** that her **hairstylist** said was just the thing for softening the **features** of tall, thin **women**. She was getting sallow the way **people** who spend their **youth** outdoors turn sallow when they are shut up in closed **cars** and **offices**.

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5. Geeky grammar

Finding more specific nouns:

a written warranty or any documents associated therewith
→ a guarantee

the location of manufacture → the plant or factory

we have no present or future plans to do so → we have no plans

Welcome to the New York area! → Welcome to New York!

Eliminating redundancies:

The Philadelphia chromosome derails normal bone marrow functioning and initiates an uncontrolled **reproduction** and ~~proliferation~~ of all types of white blood cells and platelets (which help blood clot).

The way to begin is to eliminate any **mindset** ~~or attitude~~ that might be a source of ~~feed conservatism~~ or **resistance to change**.

Gates said that the Money team, with its limited resources, had increased the public's ~~fascination and attraction~~ **infatuation** with personal finance software.

Identifying junk nouns and improving sentences:

This is all part of our global improvement product enhancement program. (From a statement by a spokesman

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for Hasbro after the toy company closed a Scrabble plant in Fairfax, Vermont)

➔ We are laying people off to save resources.

I am writing to you about our need for a communication facilitation skills development intervention. (From a school principal's letter to parents)

➔ Let's help our children write better.

Careful operational organization of this policy is needed in order to avoid the pitfall of goal displacement. (From a government agency memo)

➔ To meet our goals, let's follow this policy carefully.

Agreement on the overall objective of decision usefulness was a prerequisite to the establishment of a conceptual framework. (From a company memo)

➔ First, we must agree on the importance of this decision.

Homework

Berry good nouns. The word *berry* comes from the Old English *berie*, which originally meant *grape*. According to Dictionary.com, the berry family is not a botanical category but rather a linguistic invention particular to Germanic languages like English. (Languages like Spanish and French do not link all these yummy little fruits with a similar name but rather have distinct words for blackberries, raspberries, blueberries, and strawberries. In French, these would be *mûres*, *framboises*, *myrtilles*, and *fraises*.)

On my website (sinandsyntax.com/uncategorized/list-of-berry-good-berries), I've compiled a running list of berry names culled from classes and workshops. Please add more, if you have them, in the

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Comments section, or have your students add more. We have not included berries (like currants) that do not contain the root *berry*. Here's the working list:

Açaí berry
Alkekengi*
Appleberry
Aronia berry
Baneberry**
Barberry
Bayberry
Bearberry
Beautyberry
Bilberry
Blackberry
Bloodberry**
Blueberry
Boysenberry
Brambleberry
Buffalo berry
Bullberry
Bunchberry
Camu camu berry
Chasteberry
Checkerberry
Chehalem berry
Chokeberry
Cloudberry
Conkerberry
Cowberry
Cranberry
Crowberry

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Csejka berry
Daphne berry**
Deerberry
Dewberry
Dog berry
Elderberry
Emu berry
Farkleberry
Foxberry
Goji berry
Gooseberry
Groundberry
Hackberry
Holly berry**
Honeyberry
Houndberry*
Huckleberry
Inkberry**
Ivy berry**
Juneberry
Juniper berry
Knoutberry
Lingonberry
Loganberry
Jostaberry
Marionberry
Mede berry
Mistletoe berry**
Mulberry
Nana-berry*
Nannyberry
Olallieberry

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Partridgeberry
Phenomenal berry
Pigeonberry**
Poisonberry**
Pokeberry**
Privet berry**
Quailberry
Raspberry
Redberry
Riberry
Rockberry
Rowan berry
Salal berry
Salmonberry
Santiam berry
Sarvisberry
Saskatoonberry
Scarlet berry**
Seaberry
Seabuckthorn berry
Serviceberry
Shadberry
Shallon berry
Sheepberry
Snakeberry**
Snowberry**
Sparkleberry
Spiceberry
Squawberry
Strawberry
Sugarberry
Tayberry

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Teaberry
Thimbleberry
Two-eyed berry
Ugniberry
Whortleberry
Wineberry*
Wolfberry
Yewberry**
Youngberry

*Alkekengi is a Chinese lantern plant; nana-berry is another name for the *Searsia dentata* shrub or small tree. Note that *wineberry* suggests the Old English *winberige*, which includes a variation of the word for *grape*, although, according to Wikipedia, it is actually a different fruit, an Asian species of raspberry (also called Japanese wineberry, wine raspberry, and dewberry).

**Warning! These berries are toxic to humans.

Southern nouns. (From *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.)

The **town** itself is dreary; not much is there except the **cotton mill**, the two-room **houses** where the **workers** live, a few **peach trees**, a **church** with two colored **windows**, and a miserable **main street** only a hundred **yards** long. On **Saturdays** the **tenants** from the near-by **farms** come in for a **day of talk** and **trade**. Otherwise the **town** is lonesome, sad, and like a **place** that is far off and estranged from all other **places** in the **world**. The nearest **train stop** is **Society City**, and the **Greyhound** and **White Bus Lines** use the **Forks Falls Road** which is three **miles** away. The **winters**

CONSTANCE HALE'S

here are short and raw, the **summers** white with **glare** and fiery hot.

If you walk along the **main street** on an August **afternoon** there is nothing whatsoever to do. The largest **building**, in the very **center** of the **town**, is boarded up completely and leans so far to the **right** that it seems bound to collapse at any minute. The **house** is very old. There is about it a curious, cracked **look** that is very puzzling until you suddenly realize that at one **time**, and long ago, the right **side** of the **front porch** had been painted, and **part** of the **wall**—but the **painting** was left unfinished and one **portion** of the **house** is darker and dingier than the other. The **building** looks completely deserted. Nevertheless, on the second **floor** there is one **window** which is not boarded; sometimes in the late **afternoon** when the **heat** is at its worst a **hand** will slowly open the **shutter** and a **face** will look down on the **town**. It is a **face** like the terrible dim **faces** known in **dreams**—sexless and white, with two gray crossed **eyes** which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret **gaze** of **grief**. The **face** lingers at the **window** for an hour or so, then the **shutters** are closed once more, and as likely as not there will not be another **soul** to be seen along the **main street**. These August **afternoons**—when your **shift** is finished there is absolutely **nothing** to do; you might as well walk down to the **Forks Fall Road** and listen to the **chain gang**.

However, here in this very town there was once a **café**. And this old boarded-up **house** was unlike any other **place** for many **miles** around. There were **tables** with **cloths** and **paper napkins**, colored **streamers** from the **electric fans**, great **gatherings** on Saturday **nights**. The **owner** of

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the place was **Miss Amelia Evans**. But the **person** most responsible for the **success** and **gaiety** of the place was a **hunchback** called **Cousin Lymon**. One other **person** had a **part** in the **story** of this **café**—he was the former **husband** of **Miss Amelia**, a terrible **character** who returned to the **town** after a long **term** in the **penitentiary**, caused **ruin**, and then went on his **way** again. The **café** has long since been closed, but it is still remembered.

Twitter nouns. Which of the following seven Twitter profiles (which are all well written) rely only on nouns and adjectives to identify the writers behind them?

@PaigeBowers

Professional writer, proud mama, grad student, foodie, struggling knitter, square-foot gardener, Louisiana girl.

@cubedweller

Brand igniter, angel investor, public speaker, former Virgin.

@missdestructo

Destroyer of Social Media Boredom. Blue Haired Blogger.
[INCLUDES PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE]

@the_leaky_pen

poet, writer, college student, vagabond

@4ndyman

Copy editor by day. Writer by night. Musician on the weekends. Literary critic every other Wednesday. Raconteur when the mood strikes. AKA Logophilus. [INCLUDES PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES AND ADVERBS]

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@pnotleks23

Ordinary, upbeat Mom, limo biz owner and tennis player/fanatic from Atlanta. [INCLUDES CONJUNCTION AND PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE]

Week Three: Pronouns and Point of View

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Pronouns”

Check sinandsyntax.com for posts and comments addressing point of view, including these:

sinandsyntax.com/blog/putting-out-the-apb-all-points-of-view-bulletin

sinandsyntax.com/blog/point-of-view-with-attitude

Lesson and discussion

Pronouns are mere proxies for nouns, and in themselves words like *I* and *you*, *she* and *we*, *it* and *they* do not command attention like concrete, colorful nouns (unless, of course, they are used incorrectly, as they so often are).

A primer on pronouns. Most of us use pronouns without thinking much about them, so a large part of the lesson is designed to raise students’ awareness. Review pages 35–36 of *Sin and Syntax*, talking about the different kinds of pronouns. Follow this by asking students to write sentences using one example from each of the different kinds of pronouns (personal, indefinite, demonstrative, etc.). Review these in class, asking students to write their sentences on the board and then identify the pronouns.

Go over the four most common grammatical errors made with pronouns:

1. Obscure pronominal reference (for example, starting a sentence with *it* or *this* when there is no obvious antecedent)
2. Confusing subjective and objective case

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3. Using a pronoun that disagrees in number with its antecedent
4. Confusing the contraction *it's* with the possessive *its*

We come back to the thorny issue of subjective and objective case when we get to simple sentences, especially how to sort out when to use *who* and when to use *whom*. It's helpful to spend some time here on the fact that the subjective case needs to be used when a pronoun is the subject of a sentence or a complement, and the objective case needs to be used when it's the direct object, indirect object, or object of a preposition. We have a bit of a chicken-or-egg problem, though: Which abstract concept do you start with—the case of pronouns or the structure of a sentence? I've included some funny song lyrics in the Handout to help introduce the idea of pronouns as objects of prepositions.

When it comes to literary style, as opposed to mere grammar, choosing pronouns makes a difference not just in mechanics but also in meaning. For it is in choosing pronouns that we choose a *point of view*. Every writer has to decide who is telling the story to the reader, which angle of vision will be used. The point of view can be first person (using *I* or *we*), second person (*you*), or third person (*he, she, it, they*). Point of view has many stylistic consequences, affecting tone and determining whether the piece seems objective and hard-boiled or subjective and emotionally revealing.

Reading a few passages helps animate the discussion. Joan Didion's essays are most often written in the first person; "Why I Write" and "The White Album" make great examples for this discussion. Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (fiction) and Laura Fraser's *An Italian Affair* (nonfiction) are written in the second person and are useful in showing the playfulness and the perils of a *you* point of

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view. Another example of the second person, in which the reader really believes that he or she is the protagonist, is Dennis Lehane's "Until Gwen," published in the *Atlantic*. For the third person, any number of powerful pieces of journalism will suffice. (Pick your favorite!)

The writing exercise in the Homework section—going to a favorite restaurant, eating a meal, and writing three capsule reviews, each in a different point of view—provides fodder for discussion. In the class that follows the assignment, have each student read one of the three reviews and discuss how and why the point of view works well. It's great to have someone read a review written in the starchiest form of third person, using the pronoun *one*.

For more advanced students: Novelists must consider all sorts of possibilities when it comes to point of view. Hilary Mantel, in *Bring Up the Bodies*, gives us examples for a sophisticated discussion of point of view in fiction:

Third-person omniscient:

His children are falling from the sky (page 3).

"Sir, how are you not burned?" Rafe Sadler demands. He, Thomas Cromwell, shrugs; he hangs an arm around Rafe's shoulders as they drift indoors (page 4).

Thomas Cromwell is now about fifty years old. He has a labourer's body, stocky, useful, running to fat (page 6).

Close third person and interior monologue:

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If he had any feeling for her, he cannot find traces of it now (page 29).

He feels he should walk backwards, withdraw, fade back into the night, and leave her here in the moment she occupies: looking out into England (page 30).

He is not the same man he was last year, and he doesn't acknowledge that man's feelings; he is starting afresh, always new thoughts, new feelings (page 30).

Daily he ponders the mystery of his countrymen. He has seen killers, yes; but he has seen a hungry soldier give away a loaf to a woman, a woman who is nothing to him, and turn away with a shrug (page 34).

Ever since he, Cromwell, came up in Henry's service, he has been mollifying these men, flattering them, cajoling them, seeking always an easy way of working, a compromise; but sometimes, when for an hour they block him from access to his king, they can't keep the grins from their faces (page 39).

In-class exercises

1. Find a paragraph at the right reading level for your students, and have them identify all the pronouns. Pay special attention to indefinite pronouns, which can be hard to recognize. You may want to see if students can identify the antecedent (presuming there is one), as well as whether the pronoun is singular or plural. Finally, see whether students can differentiate those pronouns in the subjective case (versus the objective).

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2. Read aloud the second passage from Jacobo Timerman (in the Handout). Discuss how Timerman's use of pronouns affects both the style and the substance of the passage. Draw students' attention to the starkness of Timerman's *I*. Note how the author complements the plainness of his nouns. Timerman repeats the simple pronoun *I* again and again, giving it the strongest position in the sentence: at the beginning. This repetition makes the sudden appearance of *he* all the more startling and powerful. Timerman has also exploited the anonymity of *I* and *they* and *he*. Those bare pronouns, lacking antecedents, fit perfectly in a book about nameless prisoners.

3. Practice recognizing pronoun errors by doing the exercise in the Handout.

Homework

Undercover pronouns. The contemporary food writer Ruth Reichl uses a kind of secret first person in her tweets, which ooze not just with smells and tastes, but with sympathy:

Very old lady begging in the subway. Gave her money, muffins, coffee. Tears. Home to bracingly spicy sesame noodles. Such sadness here too.

Crisp fall morning. Last leaves. American classic: thick salty bacon, deep dark maple syrup, yeast-raised waffles.
Tangerine juice. Sweet!

Try your hand at 140-character descriptions written in the first, second, or third person, but without the pronouns.

Feed your inner critic. To play with point of view, go to a favorite restaurant for a meal. Write three capsule reviews—no more than a

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paragraph in length—each from a different point of view. Notice how the point of view changes the tenor of the review, and whether a certain point of view allows you to write in a way that sounds like you—or like a different you. Which do you like best?

The gourmet point of view. Balladists, novelists, journalists, essayists—all must decide on a point of view for every story. Point of view affects tone: The third person seems more objective and hard-boiled, the first person more up close and personal, the second person more informal. Identify the point of view in these classic culinary quotes. Extra points for the ones that contain no pronouns!

A hungry stomach seldom scorns plain food. (Horace)

Eat, drink, and be merry. (The Bible)

A bachelor's life is a fine breakfast, a flat lunch, and a miserable dinner. (Francis Bacon)

First we eat, then we do everything else. (M. F. K. Fisher)

Probably one of the most private things in the world is an egg before it is broken. (M. F. K. Fisher)

A good cook is like a sorceress who dispenses happiness. (Elsa Schiaparelli)

I come from a family where gravy is considered a beverage. (Erma Bombeck)

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Week Three: Pronouns and Point of View/Handout

Lesson and discussion

The subjective case of a pronoun must be used when the pronoun is the subject of a sentence. The objective case must be used when a pronoun is a direct object, indirect object, or object of a preposition. On his website, Hooks and Harmony, Peter Lee offers up some funny song lyrics to help you become more familiar with the idea of proper cases (hooksandharmony.com/20-songs-bad-grammar). Here are some examples:

But that'd change if she ever found out about you and I.
(Bryan Adams, "Run to You.") As Peter Lee points out, if you take out the *you and*, the sentence doesn't make sense. (You wouldn't end it with *if she ever found out about I*). The correct lyric would end with *you and me*.

I'd like for you and I to go romancing. (Queen, "Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy") Warning: if you are going to go romancing with a wordsmith, you would want to use *you and me* instead of Queen's unroyal grammar.

I feel the magic between you and I. (Eric Carmen, "Hungry Eyes.") Maybe Eric has eyes, or I's, on the mind, but this lyric still needs to be *you and me*.

So open up your morning light / And say a little prayer for I.
(Paula Cole, "I Don't Want to Wait.") Maybe Paula was searching for the internal rhyme between *light* and *I*, but she forgot her grammar. "What about 'Have a cup of morning tea

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/ And say a little prayer for me?,” Lee suggests. “Makes about as much sense and is grammatically correct.”

In-class exercises

2. Pronouns may seem puny next to their heftier noun and adjective kin, and some writers might initially view them as too homely to put much faith in. But sometimes their very simplicity is their strength. Jacobo Timerman plays on the power of these little words in the opening of *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. These pronoun-driven paragraphs follow the noun-heavy ones we looked at in the passage from Week Two. Can you identify the pronouns?

Tonight, a guard, not following the rules, leaves the peephole ajar. I wait a while to see what will happen but it remains open. Standing on tiptoe, I peer out. There's a narrow corridor, and across from my cell I can see at least two other doors. Indeed, I have a full view of two doors. What a sensation of freedom!

...

My entire forehead is pressed against the steel and the cold makes my head ache. But it's been a long time—how long?—without a celebration of space. I press my ear against the door, yet hear no sound. I resume looking.

He is doing the same. I suddenly realize that the peephole in the door facing mine is also open and that there's an eye behind it. I'm startled: They've laid a trap for me. Looking through the peephole is forbidden and they've seen me doing it. I step back and wait. I wait for some Time, more Time, and again more Time. And then return to the peephole.

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He is doing the same.

How does Timmerman's use of pronouns affect the style and substance of the passage?

3. Remembering the difference between subjective and objective case, identify and correct the pronouns in these sentences:

Apple is searching for a new CEO, but whoever that person is, they will be haunted by the mistakes of their predecessors. (From *Wired*)

The applicant does not have to tell us they are pregnant. (From a London employer's policy sheet)

Tonight on MTV, Bill Clinton faces the generation that holds the future in their hands. (From an MTV teaser)

I'd like to thank everybody who ever punched or kissed me in my life. And everybody who I ever punched or kissed. (John Patrick Shanley, in his speech accepting an Oscar for the screenplay of *Moonstruck*)

Did the server introduce themselves by name? (From a Howard Johnson's restaurant survey card)

Chrysler is the only American car company that builds their convertibles from start to finish. (From an ad for the Detroit automaker)

One day everyone will have their own show. (From TV Guide)

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Philosophically, I am very different from normal politicians. We have big ideas. (Newt Gingrich in 2011, shortly after his top campaign staff abandoned him during the Republican presidential campaign, continued to speak of himself in that last sentence. What's that pronoun called?)

Since I'm in charge, obviously we screwed it up. (Then-president Barack Obama in a December 2013 press conference, acknowledging the huge problems with the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare. Not only is he inconsistent, but he also uses the royal we!)

Bonus point.

If not us, who? (Former president Ronald Reagan, in his inaugural address)

(Hint: supply the missing subjects and verbs.)

Week Three: Pronouns and Point of View/Answer Key

In-class exercises

2. Jacobo Timerman plays on the power of these little words in the opening of *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. These pronoun-driven paragraphs follow the noun-heavy ones we looked at in the passage from last week. Can you identify the pronouns?

Tonight, a guard, not following the rules, leaves the peephole ajar. **I** wait a while to see **what** will happen but **it** remains open. Standing on tiptoe, **I** peer out. **There's** a narrow corridor, and across from **my** cell **I** can see at least two **other** doors. Indeed, **I** have a full view of two doors. **What** a sensation of freedom!
. . .

My entire forehead is pressed against the steel and the cold makes my head ache. But **it's** been a long time—how long?—without a celebration of space. **I** press my ear against the door, yet hear no sound. **I** resume looking.

He is doing the same. **I** suddenly realize that the peephole in the door facing **mine** is also open and that **there's** an eye behind **it**. **I'm** startled: **They've** laid a trap for **me**. Looking through the peephole is forbidden and **they've** seen **me** doing **it**. **I** step back and wait. **I** wait for some Time, more Time, and again more Time. And then return to the peephole.

He is doing the same.

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3. Identify and correct the pronouns. (I have identified the incorrect pronouns. There are many ways to revise these sentences. Have fun!)

Apple is searching for a new CEO, but whoever that person is, **they** will be haunted by the mistakes of **their** predecessors. (From *Wired*)

The applicant does not have to tell us **they** are pregnant. (From a London employer's policy sheet)

Tonight on MTV, Bill Clinton faces the generation that holds the future in **their** hands. (From an MTV teaser)

I'd like to thank everybody who ever punched or kissed me in my life. And everybody **who** I ever punched or kissed. (John Patrick Shanley, in his speech accepting an Oscar for the screenplay of *Moonstruck*)

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presidential campaign, continued to speak of *himself* in that last sentence. What's that pronoun called?)

Since **I'm** in charge, obviously **we** screwed it up. (Then-president Barack Obama in a December 2013 press conference, acknowledging the huge problems with the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare. Not only is he inconsistent, but he also uses the royal *we*!)

Bonus point.

If not **us**, who? (Former president Ronald Reagan, in his inaugural address)

(Okay, I'll help on this one. The full and correct sentence is "If it is not we, who is it?" The shorter sentence should be "If not we, who?")

Homework

The gourmet point of view:

A hungry stomach seldom scorns plain food. (Horace: third person)

Eat, drink, and be merry. (The Bible: second person, imperative mood)

A bachelor's life is a fine breakfast, a flat lunch, and a miserable dinner. (Francis Bacon: third person)

First we eat, then we do everything else. (M. F. K. Fisher: second person plural)

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Probably one of the most private things in the world is an egg before it is broken. (M. F. K. Fisher: third person)

A good cook is like a sorceress who dispenses happiness. (Elsa Schiaparelli: third person)

I come from a family where gravy is considered a beverage. (Erma Bombeck: first person singular)

Week Four: Verbs—the Heartbeat of the Sentence

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Verbs”

Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch (for teachers—as much as you can read!)

“Make-or-Break Verbs,” *New York Times* Opinionator:

opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/16/make-or-break-verbs

“The Pleasures and Perils of the Passive,” *New York Times*

Opinionator:

opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/30/the-pleasures-and-perils-of-the-passive

Lesson and discussion

Aspiring writers often ask me for one tip that they can use to improve their writing. My tip: Work your verbs. I love verbs so much, I wrote an entire book about them. I love teaching about verbs, and I urge you to find a way to have a blast with these ideas and exercises.

The main thing to impart is the difference between static and dynamic verbs. This difference is what separates static (read: boring) and dynamic (read: breathtaking) writing. (I use the terms *static* and *dynamic*, not *passive* and *active*, intentionally. Why? Because verbs also have an aspect called “voice,” which can be either active or passive, so this has led to a lot of confusion.)

To be or not to be. Use both Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” and Roger Angell’s “In the Fire” to define static and dynamic verbs. (Both are cited in *Sin and Syntax*, on pages 61 and 65, respectively.) Read the passages out loud. On the blackboard, create two buckets, labeled “Static” and “Dynamic,” and fill them with verbs from each

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passage. Then “jam,” filling the rest of the blackboard with examples of both static and dynamic verbs. On the static side, explain about “existential,” or “to be,” verbs; “wimp” verbs (*seems, appears, becomes, etc.*); and “five senses” verbs (*look, sound, feel, taste, smell*). On the dynamic side, make sure to elicit some really bold verbs.

Even when we write with dynamic verbs, as with nouns, the key thing is not to pick common, humdrum, generic verbs (like *has, goes, and does*—which are technically dynamic). Instead, search for verbs that are specific and unexpected, as well as conveying a visual sense of action. One of my favorite writers in this regard is Laura Hillenbrand, the author of *Seabiscuit*, among other nonfiction thrillers. Notice the language she uses to describe the sorry state of the dark horse's gallop before he was trained:

Asked to run, he would drop low over the track and **fall into** a comical version of what horsemen **call** an egg-beater gait, **making** a spastic sideways flailing motion with his left foreleg as he **swung** it forward, as if he **were swatting** flies. His gallop **was** so disorganized that he **had** a maddening tendency to **whack** himself in the front ankle with his own hind hoof.

In addition to finding verbs that give us a visual image of Seabiscuit's characteristic gallop, Hillenbrand uses that distinctive adjective-noun combo, “egg-beater gait,” as well as the simile “as if he were swatting flies.”

Sticky syntax. Next, or perhaps in a subsequent lesson, dive into some of the harder stuff: (a) the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs (which means a dip into the idea of direct objects),

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which leads into the difference between *lay and lie*; and (b) the idea of tense, explaining all the different tenses. (I have fun miming the progressive tenses.)

And, perhaps in yet another lesson, discuss the difference between active and passive voice. I devote an entire chapter in *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* to the passive voice, as well as one *New York Times* column titled “The Pleasures and Perils of the Passive.” It might be helpful to read these in advance of the lesson, and then you can decide how deeply you want to plunge into the issue of voice. The basic idea to convey is that every action has an agent, and in a sentence written in the active voice, the subject and the agent are one and the same. In a sentence written in the passive voice, the subject receives the action and the agent is unknown, implied, or in the sentence in another form.

Ridding prose of the passive voice is one good way to rid it of static verbs. By following the trail of static verbs, you can find instances of passive voice—in which static verbs like *is* or *are* or *has been* are auxiliaries of the main verb. Then reframe each sentence by finding the agent of the action and making that noun the subject. (Or you can just remove the auxiliary verb and rewrite the sentence.) Here’s an example:

Passive: My mother was worried that I would discover her secret.

Active: My mother worried that I would discover her secret. To “be worried,” Mom does a lot of worrying. Take out the auxiliary and make it active.

Of course, the passive voice does exist for a reason: Sometimes it’s appropriate. If you want to keep your focus on a subject who is not a “doer” but a “done-to,” try the passive voice. Discuss why Germaine

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Greer, in *The Female Eunuch*, chooses the passive voice here: "The married woman's significance can only be conferred by the presence of a man at her side, a man upon whom she absolutely depends. In return for renouncing, collaborating, adapting, identifying, she is caressed, desired, handled, influenced."

For more advanced students: Use yet another lesson to explore (a) the nature of verbals (participles, gerunds, and infinitives) and how verbs can act as other parts of speech, like nouns and adjectives; (b) the idea of mood and the subjunctive; and (c) the existence of phrasal verbs, which add a "particle" or an adverb/preposition to the verb and in so doing change its meaning. We return to the idea of participles in Chapter 11 of *Sin and Syntax*. Verbals, mood, and phrasal verbs are all covered extensively in *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch*.

In-class exercises

1. In the following song titles, taken from a variety of genres, are the verbs static or dynamic?

Blind Gary Davis:	"Lord I Feel Just Like Goin' On" "Lo I Be With You Always"
Elizabeth Cotton:	"Mama, Nobody's Here But the Baby" "Take Me Back to Baltimore" "When the Train Comes Along" "Shoot That Buffalo"
The Even Dozen Jug Band:	"Take Your Finger Off It"
Five Americans:	"I See the Light"
George Strait:	"All My Exes Live in Texas"
Howlin' Wolf:	"Moanin' at Midnight" "Howlin' For My Baby"

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Lee Hazlewood:	“These Boots Are Made for Walkin’” “My Baby Cried All Night Long” “When a Fool Loves a Fool”
Led Zeppelin:	“The Song Remains the Same”
Memphis Jug Band:	“Sometimes I Think I Love You”
Memphis Minnie:	“If You See My Rooster (Please Run Him Home)” “Kissing in the Dark”
Robert Johnson:	“I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” “Come On In My Kitchen”
The Rolling Stones:	“(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction”
The Seeds:	“Can’t Seem to Make You Mine”
Smiley Lewis:	“I Hear You Knockin’”
13th Floor Elevators:	“You’re Gonna Miss Me”

This list is slightly longer than the one you will find in *Sin and Syntax* (page 80). There are many ways to have fun with this exercise. You might ask students to bring in their favorite song titles and use those instead. You might also use some of these titles later: “Moanin’ at Midnight,” “Howlin’ For My Baby,” and “Kissing in the Dark” are technically sentence fragments (unless you add *I Am* to the first two). They are also verbal phrases, discussed in Week Eleven. Some of these can also be helpful in Week Ten, when students are identifying different sentence patterns.

2. The first step in learning to write with verbs is learning to identify them. Have students do some peer-to-peer editing. In pairs or groups, have students study paragraphs written by other students. Can they identify all the verbs? Can they tell which ones are static, which dynamic? How about voice—is each sentence written in the active or the passive voice? Can they suggest ways to pump up the verbs?

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3. Look closely at “Hoppers,” a Garrison Keillor “Talk of the Town” piece published in *the New Yorker* and reprinted in *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* on pages 81 and 82. In two minutes, have students brainstorm as many synonyms as they can for the verb *walk*. Have them compare their lists, looking not just at the quantity of their synonyms, but also at the quality. To take things further, pull out a thesaurus, preferably a Roget’s-style one. (See “So as Not to Bore Us, Get a Thesaurus”: sinandsyntax.com/cool-tools/thesauruses.) Have students use the thesaurus to generate another list of synonyms. Discuss this process and the results.

4. Turn the exercise to find synonyms for *walk* into a contest, rewarding the winner with a prize. Emphasize that creativity counts. (With more mature students, I often choose *love*, instead of *walk*, and encourage them to consider the many ways in which we manifest that verb.) Here’s how to let the contest play out: The three students with the highest number of synonyms stand up. Student Number One reads one synonym, and the other two cross it off their lists if they have it. Student Number Two reads one synonym, and the other two cross it off their lists if they have it. Student Number Three reads one synonym, and the other two cross it off their lists if they have it. We continue until one person—the winner!—is left standing. Along the way, if there is a questionable synonym, we ask the student to demonstrate that form of walking. This process can be quite lighthearted and funny, and the student with the most synonyms doesn’t necessarily win if the other two have been more imaginative.

5. Do the “verb review” exercises in the Handout to reinforce some ideas about using more-dramatic verbs. (You might want to consult

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pages 76–78 of *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* for a refresher on redundancy.)

6. Correct the verb tenses in these sentences about a child, written by a student:

As the wind blew a gust towards her, her dress fluttered up, causing her to laugh and dance in circles around me. Her prances catch the attention of the drifting leaves, now also twirling in her playfulness. Her hair flies up in frenzy, with her hands thrown up in the air; she tried to grasp the sun in her hands.

7. Discuss the use of the passive voice (and nineteenth-century bureaucratic nouns) in a letter from Ambassador George Perkins Marsh to Secretary of State William Seward, a member of President Abraham Lincoln's cabinet, in 1863. Marsh is discussing the relations between the U.S. government and the kingdom of Italy during the time of our Civil War and the Italian Risorgimento. The U.S. ambassador thought the Pope was pulling some shenanigans with the Confederacy:

In northern Italy, even so unimportant a circumstance as the recent publication of the correspondence between Jefferson Davis and the Pope has produced an impression quite favorable to us. [Among friends] . . . the letters are thought to show that between the great enemy of African liberty in America, and the great enemy of all liberty in Europe, a sympathy exists which is not shared by the people of the North or the Government which represents it.

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How might a more modern, and more succinct, ambassador say this?

Homework

Act up. Revise the following sentences to remove the passive voice in favor of the active:

A bombing was ordered by the president.

Art is studied by everyone.

The faun was in love with a nymph named Effie, and many hours were spent each day slinking past her glade. (From *The Transitive Vampire*, by Karen Elizabeth Gordon)

The hypotenuse was bored with facing the same old right angle, and its nights were passed in dreams of escape. (Also from *The Transitive Vampire*)

Nick Diver might have been modeled on F. Scott Fitzgerald himself.

Barney Frank's speech may be interpreted as a defense of homosexual love.

Consider the catcher. Verbs give writing energy and power. Using Roger Angell's "In the Fire" (page 65 of *Sin and Syntax*) as a model, watch one person do exactly the same thing over and over. (Angell watched a catcher.) You might watch another athlete. Or a cashier at a grocery store. Or a shoe salesman. Observe closely, noting the small shifts in the way the person does the action each time. Write a

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description of that person, capturing the smallest details and movements by using dynamic verbs.

Consider the passive. To continue experimenting with the active and passive voice, try this variation on the previous exercise: Find someone who is stuck waiting for something, and watch how he or she waits. Perhaps it's a teenager waiting for a bus, or a customer in line at the post office, or a child eager to open birthday presents. Does the passive voice underscore the person's passivity? Can you animate even passivity by using dynamic verbs in the active voice? What verbs do the trick? Which works best, active or passive voice?

Consider the passersby. If you'd like another variation, here's one modeled after "Hoppers," a Garrison Keillor "Talk of the Town" piece published in *the New Yorker* and reprinted in *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* on pages 81 and 82. Go watch a bunch of people do exactly the same thing *once*. Find a way to describe each person's action differently. You might watch people getting on a bus and paying the fare, or people walking past a panhandler, or people buying beer at a baseball game. Use a thesaurus to stimulate your imagination. Can each verb you pick serve double duty, capturing an aspect of each person's character?

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Week Four: Verbs—the Heartbeat of the Sentence/ Handout

In-class exercises

1. In the following song titles, taken from a variety of genres, are the verbs static or dynamic?

Blind Gary Davis:	“Lord I Feel Just Like Goin’ On” “Lo I Be With You Always”
Elizabeth Cotton:	“Mama, Nobody’s Here But the Baby” “Take Me Back to Baltimore” “When the Train Comes Along” “Shoot That Buffalo”
The Even Dozen Jug Band:	“Take Your Finger Off It”
Five Americans:	“I See the Light”
George Strait:	“All My Exes Live in Texas”
Howlin’ Wolf:	“Moanin’ at Midnight” “Howlin’ For My Baby”
Lee Hazlewood:	“These Boots Are Made for Walkin’” “My Baby Cried All Night Long” “When a Fool Loves a Fool”
Led Zeppelin:	“The Song Remains the Same”
Memphis Jug Band:	“Sometimes I Think I Love You”
Memphis Minnie:	“If You See My Rooster (Please Run Him Home)” “Kissing in the Dark”
Robert Johnson:	“I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom”
The Rolling Stones:	“(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction”
The Seeds:	“Can’t Seem to Make You Mine”
Smiley Lewis:	“I Hear You Knockin’”
13th Floor Elevators:	“You’re Gonna Miss Me”

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5. Verb review

(The next three issues are not covered here in the e-book, but they are discussed extensively in *Sin and Syntax* and *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch*. I include these exercises if you are using the books in class and have covered “*lay* v. *lie*,” “false starts,” and the “cease and desist” problem.)

Is the use of *lay* or *lie* in the following sentences

correct? (Note: Students of mine wrote these sentences, unless I’ve indicated otherwise.)

All I can do is **lay** here.

A toy gorilla that sings “Great Balls of Fire” **lies** dead among the mayhem.

Mr. Lee’s famed perfectionism was occasionally on display. Sandy Dawson . . . was drafted as a cow wrangler, and Mr. Lee wanted her cows to pose just so. “Cows are cows,” Ms. Dawson explained. “In the morning they were very happy. Then after lunch it was hot, and cows like to **lay** down after lunch. We had to physically push them to stand there. They wanted them by this post or that post. And Morgan, he’s a big steer; after a while he was rolling his eyes, like: ‘I’m not doing this anymore. I don’t want to be a movie star, I’m done.’” (From 2009 *New York Times* article “Turn On, Tune In, Turn Back the Clock,” on Ang Lee’s *Taking Woodstock*)

For months, in a musty, rented room he shared with actor Peter Lorne, [Billy] Wilder would **lay** on his bed and listen to baseball games on the radio. (*News*, April 8, 2002)

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A yoga teacher: "See if you can **lay** your chest on the floor."

Another yoga teacher: "Now **lay** on your backs for savasana."

Rewrite these sentences to eliminate the false starts:

There is nothing sweeter than reading a good book by a fire on a cold, wet winter night.

There are no eggs in this store.

There is no end in sight.

It's a shame no one prepared a eulogy.

Cease and desist! Replace two ho-hum verbs with one power verb:

You can describe and understand the air-conditioning system as a whole once you identify its elements and their dynamic interactions.

She has a journalist's curiosity; she's always digging and delving into subjects and giving people the third degree.

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Week Four: Verbs—the Heartbeat of the Sentence/Answer Key

In-class exercises

1. In the following song titles, taken from a variety of genres, are the verbs static or dynamic?

Blind Gary Davis:	“Lord I Feel Just Like Goin’ On” (static) “Lo I Be With You Always” (static, with a nonstandard verb)
Elizabeth Cotton:	“Mama, Nobody’s Here But the Baby” (static) “Take Me Back to Baltimore” (dynamic) “When the Train Comes Along” (dynamic) “Shoot That Buffalo” (dynamic)
The Even Dozen Jug Band:	“Take Your Finger Off It” (dynamic)
Five Americans:	“I See the Light” (dynamic)
George Strait:	“All My Exes Live in Texas” (dynamic)
Howlin’ Wolf:	“Moanin’ at Midnight” (dynamic if it’s “I Am Moaning”) “Howlin’ For My Baby” (dynamic)
Lee Hazlewood:	“These Boots Are Made for Walkin’” (dynamic) “My Baby Cried All Night Long” (dynamic) “When a Fool Loves a Fool” (dynamic)

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Led Zeppelin:	“The Song Remains the Same” (static)
Memphis Jug Band:	“Sometimes I Think I Love You” (dynamic)
Memphis Minnie:	“If You See My Rooster (Please Run Him Home)” (dynamic, twice) “Kissing in the Dark” (dynamic)
Robert Johnson:	“I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” (dynamic, twice)
The Rolling Stones:	“(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” (dynamic)
The Seeds:	“Can’t Seem to Make You Mine” (static, with infinitive phrase)
Smiley Lewis:	“I Hear You Knockin’” (dynamic)
13th Floor Elevators:	“You’re Gonna Miss Me” (dynamic, “You Are Going to Miss Me”)

5. Verb review

Is the use of *lay* or *lie* in the following sentences

correct? (Note: Students of mine wrote these sentences, unless I’ve indicated otherwise.)

All I can do is **lay** here. [INCORRECT]

A toy gorilla that sings “Great Balls of Fire” **lies** dead among the mayhem. [CORRECT]

Mr. Lee’s famed perfectionism was occasionally on display. Sandy Dawson . . . was drafted as a cow wrangler, and Mr. Lee wanted her cows to pose just so. “Cows are cows,” Ms. Dawson explained. “In the morning they were very happy. Then after lunch it was hot, and cows like to **lay** down after

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lunch. We had to physically push them to stand there. They wanted them by this post or that post. And Morgan, he's a big steer; after a while he was rolling his eyes, like: 'I'm not doing this anymore. I don't want to be a movie star, I'm done.'" (From *New York Times* article "Turn On, Tune In, Turn Back the Clock," on Ang Lee's film *Taking Woodstock*)
[INCORRECT]

For months, in a musty, rented room he shared with actor Peter Lorne, [Billy] Wilder would **lay** on his bed and listen to baseball games on the radio. (*Newsweek*, April 8, 2002)
[INCORRECT]

A yoga teacher: "See if you can **lay** your chest on the floor."
[CORRECT]

Another yoga teacher: "Now **lay** on your backs for savasana."
[INCORRECT]

Rewrite these sentences to eliminate the false starts:

There is nothing sweeter than reading a good book by a fire on a cold, wet winter night.

Nothing **beats** reading a good book by a fire on a cold, wet winter night.

There are no eggs in this store.

This store **lacks** eggs [or] **Customers have bought every carton of** eggs in this store.

There is no end in sight.

No end **is** in sight.

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It's a shame no one prepared a eulogy.

Sadly, no one prepared a eulogy.

Cease and desist! Replace two ho-hum verbs with one power verb:

You can ~~describe and understand~~ **envision** the air-conditioning system as a whole once you identify its elements and their dynamic interactions.

She has a journalist's ~~curiosity~~ habits; she's always digging ~~and delving~~ into subjects and giving people the third degree.

Homework

Consider the passive

This paragraph by one of my Harvard Extension students, Colleen Glenn, shows what I consider a superior job at the "consider the passive" assignment. She includes passersby as well.

A band of teenagers **post up** against a wall in the Square. With arms crossed, **swaying** side to side, they **leer** at everyone **strolling** by. The runt of the group is **glaring** the hardest at the carefully **selected** suit-and-tie combinations that **breeze** by. He **squints** his eyes into narrow, comical slits, **thinking** he looks tough. He is **drowning** in a triple-extra-large T-shirt and jeans that **look** too new to **belong** to a hood rat. Little beady, watering eyes **blink** rapidly beneath a fitted cap **emblazoned** with that predictable *B*. His scrawny neck **makes** him involuntarily **mimic** a bobblehead, unable to **support** the weight of his own skull. Feet **shuffling** side to side, this little gangster **stiffens** his

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frame, **squares** his shoulders, and **thrusts** his chin in the air. Others **chatter** around him, but he **remains** stoic—just **standing** there, so small and solitary. He **stares** into the space of the opposite sidewalk. He could be **looking** at a sworn enemy, the way he **contorts** his face and body. Another figure is **zigzagging** her way through the traffic from across the street, **locking** her sight upon the little man. Her braids **swing** behind her like pendulums as she **picks up** speed, **dodging** cars and bicycles. Suddenly, the boy doesn't **look** so stern anymore—the tiniest change in his eyes **suggests** fear. In a flash, the woman is **hovering** over the boy, **shouting** and **slapping**. He **cowers**, and **shields** his face with his open palms. The gang's laughter is deafening now, as the little tough guy **curls** into a ball on the sidewalk, **shrinking** from his older sister.

**Week Five:
Adjectives and Adverbs—the Frill Is Gone (or
Should Be)**

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Adjectives” and “Adverbs”

“Skyscapes,” *New York Times* Opinionator:

opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/06/skyscapes

Lesson and discussion

Now that we've covered the words that form the foundation of great sentences, we'll move on to the words that weak writers rely on and strong writers eschew. The most important point of this lesson is that if a writer uses strong nouns and verbs, he or she will rarely need to rely on adjectives and adverbs.

Adjectives do of course have a function: They *intensify* nouns, adding description that makes generic nouns more precise—like color, size, type, shape. Adjectives also *limit* nouns, taking what could be a broad group and making it much narrower. Articles (*a, an, the*) and pronouns (*all, some, a few, these*) make nouns definite or indefinite. Possessives (*Mary's, mine, yours*) tell us which nouns we're talking about, as do demonstratives and interrogatives (*this, that, which?*). Numbers give us the size of the group (*one, one hundred, thousands*). I like to review Diane Ackerman's adjectives in a passage about a monkey named Jenny to point out how they work in the hands of a truly creative writer. Other examples, from her essay on golden lion tamarins, appear on page 93 of *Sin and Syntax*; this passage is replicated in the Handout:

Golden tufts of fur stick out between her fingers and toes, which have **small round** pads at the base of **each** claw. Her

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long, slender fingers were made for reaching into **narrow** places, where insects may lurk. I have seen **lithe, graceful** hands like these in paintings of **Thai** dancers. Stroking the **dark** pads on her feet, I'm surprised to discover them **soft** and **yielding**. . . . On Jenny's **small** nose, **two thin** nostrils angle away from each other. A **slight, upside-down** curve is the **natural** shape of her mouth, as if she were caught in a **perpetual** pout. **Gold** whiskers sprout from her chin, and a widow's peak of **canary** yellow leads to a **full golden** mane encircling her head. Her **tiny, guitar-pick-shaped** tongue, flicking in and out, has a **deep** groove down the center. **Golden** lion tamarins give off a **pungent** odor. Burying my nose in Jenny's chest, I inhale deeply the aroma of **hot** gingerbread mixed with **drenched** wheat.

When discussing adverbs, I make sure to emphasize that adverbs addressing time and place (or answering the questions When? and Where?) are succinct and helpful. But adverbs addressing manner (answering the question How?) are often used to prop up weak verbs. Better to fix the verb! Finally, adverbs addressing degree (answering How much?) appear all the time in speech to add emphasis but, paradoxically, subtract emphasis in writing.

In-class exercises

1. Write down three adjectives to describe yourself. Think about them, and maybe consult a thesaurus. Then, separately, write three adjectives to describe yourself to someone you are meeting at the airport *who has never seen you before*. How are the two sets of adjectives different?

In a classroom setting, the exercise of deciding on adjectives to describe ourselves can be interactive and hilarious. Have students

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write the two sets of three adjectives on sides of a paper labeled A and B. For side B, have them write in giant letters. Then collect all the sheets of paper and play a guessing game with side B, trying to match the person with the adjectives. Make sure students wear their poker faces; urge them not to confirm or deny whether the class assigns the right adjectives to them. Once all the adjectives are matched with their makers, spend some time focusing on which adjectives failed to do the job because they are vague (*short*), apply to half the world (*female*), or miss the chance to say two things instead of one (*tall* might have been *statuesque* or *lanky*; *male* might have been *father* or *stud*).

2. Have students write a few sentences, each with intentionally redundant adjectives. Then have them trade sentences and correct each other's work. Ask for especially bad redundancies (i.e., do creative work on the assignment!), and write those on the board to analyze and discuss.

3. Articles, common adjectives, proper adjectives, multiword adjectives, nouns as adjectives, and verbs as adjectives—that's a lot to keep track of! Have your students try to identify all the adjectives in the character description of Johnny in the Handout (extra credit for articles and possessive pronouns).

4. Read this paragraph from a *New York Times Magazine* article on psychopathic children. Have students identify the adverbs.

When I first met Michael, he seemed shy but **remarkably** well behaved. While his brother Allan ran through the house with a plastic bag held **overhead** like a parachute, Michael entered the room **aloofly**, then curled up on the living room sofa, hiding his face in the cushions. "Can you come say

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hello?” Anne asked him. He glanced at me, then sprang **cheerfully** to his feet. “Sure!” he said, running to hug her. Reprimanded for bouncing a ball in the kitchen, he rolled his eyes like any nine-year-old, then **docilely** went outside. A few minutes later, he was back in the house, capering **antically** in front of Jake, who was bobbing up and down on his sit-and-ride scooter. When the scooter tipped over, Michael gasped **theatrically** and ran to his brother’s side. “Jake, are you OK?” he asked, wide-eyed with concern. **Earnestly** ruffling his youngest brother’s hair, he flashed me a winning smile.

Why does the writer use so many adverbs? Are they helpful or redundant? Might any be eliminated by improving the verb?

5. Do the grammar exercises in the Handout.

Homework

Start a sketchbook. Adjectives always work in concert with nouns, and when we pick killer nouns, we need fewer (not *less*) adjectives. But those adjectives still need to be killer. In character sketches, adjectives do double duty, painting both physical and psychological detail. Much as a painter might draw a compelling face on a napkin or in a sketchbook, the writer needs to take the time to stop, to watch, and to find words to describe people. Start a journal just for character sketches. Sometimes you may just want to jot down ideas, words, or phrases. Play with adjectives.

Get those “Valley-girl *verys*” out of your system. Whether in movies like *Clueless* or in texts and tweets, teenagers (and plenty of immature older folks) love empty adverbs. I call these “Valley-girl *verys*.” Write a short paragraph about a favorite possession, using

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as many Valleyspeak as you can. These include not just *very*, *really*, *so*, *totally*, and *definitely*, but also *truly*, *exceedingly*, *extremely*, *largely*, *completely*, *absolutely*, *wholly*, *suddenly*, *gradually*, and the like. How do the adverbs affect the tone of the writing? Does a description loaded with *really*, *definitely*, *way*, and *so* acquire a comedic tone?

Local color. Note Tim Cahill's use of color in his description of the Ferris Fork trail on page 85 of *Sin and Syntax*. Take a hike along a beach, down a path in the woods, or through an urban alleyway plastered with signs. Force yourself to look closely at the colors around you and write a description, using them as a starting point. Don't be afraid to use a good tool to inspire your color vocabulary. A thesaurus works, as does the Pantone book of color, or paint chips from Home Depot.

The sky's the limit. One of the hardest things to describe is the sky—whether at dawn, at dusk, or before a storm. Remember Jonathan Raban's sentence "One could see it coming for an hour before it hit: the distant artillery flashes on a sky of deep episcopal purple" (page 85 of *Sin and Syntax*)? Taking inspiration from that snapshot of Montana, watch a turbulent sky and paint a picture using nouns and adjectives. (I invited readers of the *New York Times* Opinionator to do this. Their attempts are shared in "Skyscapes": opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/06/skyscapes.)

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Week Five: Adjectives and Adverbs—the Frill Is Gone /Handout

Lesson and discussion

Diane Ackerman's passage about a monkey named Jenny, from her essay on golden lion tamarins:

Golden tufts of fur stick out between her fingers and toes, which have **small round** pads at the base of **each** claw. Her **long, slender** fingers were made for reaching into **narrow** places, where insects may lurk. I have seen **lithe, graceful** hands like these in paintings of **Thai** dancers. Stroking the **dark** pads on her feet, I'm surprised to discover them **soft** and **yielding**. . . . On Jenny's **small** nose, **two thin** nostrils angle away from each other. A **slight, upside-down** curve is the **natural** shape of her mouth, as if she were caught in a **perpetual** pout. **Gold** whiskers sprout from her chin, and a widow's peak of **canary** yellow leads to a **full golden** mane encircling her head. Her **tiny, guitar-pick-shaped** tongue, flicking in and out, has a **deep** groove down the center. **Golden** lion tamarins give off a **pungent** odor. Burying my nose in Jenny's chest, I inhale deeply the aroma of **hot** gingerbread mixed with **drenched** wheat.

In-class exercises

3. Articles, common adjectives, proper adjectives, multiword adjectives, nouns as adjectives, and verbs as adjectives—that's a lot to keep track of! Try to identify all the adjectives in the character description of Johnny (extra credit for articles and possessive pronouns).

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Met Johnny while at the gate in Honolulu: twenty, mixed-race (black, American Indian, and some sort of white), beanpole-like. He's naive and street-smart at the same time, a fetching combination of wide-eyed curiosity and hard-luck stories. Raised in Berkeley, he went to Malcolm X Elementary, worked at Johnson's Barbershop on Sacramento, went to Hawaii to cut hair with his uncle, had his brand-new equipment stolen. He's headed home to get his old equipment and see his three-day-old brother. He wants to go back to Honolulu, where he and his uncle cut hair "off of Likelike." (He pronounced the highway, named after a princess, the Hawaiian way.) I sensed something truly sweet about him, answered his funny questions about history ("Is it true they had warriors but the white man had guns?"), gave him a brief history of Queen Lili'uokalani, told him to visit 'Iolani Palace when he goes back. Took a gamble and offered him a ride home. Bruce was dubious but then as taken in as I had been. We left him at his mother's house, where a pink Karmann Ghia and a VW bus painted with flowers were standing guard. He put Bruce's number into one of his two iPhones, the work phone, and told Bruce he'd give him a haircut anytime—cheaper than Supercuts, and better.

5. Grammar exercises with adjectives and adverbs

Pick one strong noun or adjective, rather than two weak ones:

We all carry around in our heads many and various images of who we want to be. (From a book by a Harvard professor)

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Working as a scuba-diving instructor—scraping barnacles off boats—would be a mundane, repetitive existence. (From that same book)

The way to begin is to eliminate any mindset or attitude that might be a source of conservatism or resistance to change. (From that same book)

In the following sentences, select the proper adjective or adverb:

The grammar teacher praised my (good/well) marks.

She said if I continue to do so (good/well), I may soon take over her class.

I still don't think I'm (good-/well-) versed in the parts of speech.

She's an OK grammar teacher, but a (bad/badly) cook.

I never seem to be able to get a (good/well) steak.

I prefer my meat (good/well) done, not bloody.

When the steak is perfect, I croon, but (bad/badly).

In the following sentences, select the proper adjective:

Sorbet has (less/fewer) fat than ice cream.

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If you have (less/fewer) than twelve items, use the express checkout line.

There's a Zen saying that begins, "Eat (less/fewer) and chew well; have (less/fewer) clothes and launder often. . . ."

Tell me your life story in twenty-five words or (less/fewer).

Replace weak verbs—propped up by adverbs—with stronger verbs:

My waitress's face lights up brightly at their arrival.

My waitress hooks a loose strand of baby-fine dark blond hair behind her ear, jots down my order briefly, and snatches the menu from the table.

The kitchen door swings open, and the waitress briskly ambles toward me, her stride long and deliberate. She carefully deposits my plate before me, then somewhat mechanically inquires if I need anything else. I notice her mind is already halfway on her next task. Nonetheless, she's polite, and I'm happy to report I do not need anything. She disappears, swiftly maneuvering through the room with a sixth sense, negotiating tables, chair legs, customers, other waiters, and pocketbooks protruding into the aisles.

As he looks closely at each item, he discovers one he likes.

Week Five:
Adjectives and Adverbs—the Frill Is Gone
/Answer Key

In-class exercises

3. Identify all the adjectives in the character description of Johnny on the Handout (extra credit for articles and possessive pronouns, which are underlined here).

Met Johnny while at the gate in Honolulu: **twenty**, **mixed-race** (**black**, **American Indian**, and **some sort of white**), **beanpole-like**. He's **naive** and **street-smart** at the **same** time, a **fetching** combination of **wide-eyed** curiosity and **hard-luck** stories. **Raised** in Berkeley, he went to Malcolm X Elementary, worked at Johnson's Barbershop on Sacramento, went to Hawaii to cut hair with his uncle, had his **brand-new** equipment stolen. He's headed home to get his **old** equipment and see **his three-day-old** brother. He wants to go back to Honolulu, where he and his uncle cut hair "off of Likelike." (He pronounced the **famed** highway, named after a princess, the **Hawaiian** way.) I sensed something truly **sweet** about him, answered his **funny** questions about history ("Is it true they had warriors, but the **white** man had guns?"), gave him a **brief** history of Queen Lili'uokalani, told him to visit 'Iolani Palace when he goes back. Took a gamble and offered him a ride home. Bruce was **dubious** but then as taken in as I had been. We left him at his **mother's** house, where a **pink** Karmann Ghia and a VW bus painted with flowers were standing guard. He put **Bruce's** number into one of his **two** iPhones, the **work** phone, and told Bruce he'd give him a haircut anytime—**cheaper** than Supercuts, and **better**.

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5. Exercises with adjectives and adverbs. (I've underlined the errors. Just as there are lots of ways to skin a cat, there are many possible fixes for the sentences below. See how well your students do with revisions.)

Pick one strong noun or adjective, rather than two weak ones:

We all carry around in our heads **many and various** images of who we want to be. (From a book by a Harvard professor) [You might consider the phrases *carry in our heads* and *images* to be redundant.]

Working as a scuba-diving instructor—scraping barnacles off boats—would be a **mundane, repetitive** existence. (From that same book)

The way to begin is to eliminate any **mindset or attitude** that might be a source of **conservatism or resistance to change**. (From that same book)

In the following sentences, select the proper adjective or adverb:

The grammar teacher praised my (**good**/well) marks.

She said if I continue to do so (good/**well**), I may soon take over her class.

I still don't think I'm (good-/**well**-) versed in the parts of speech.

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She's an OK grammar teacher but a (**bad**/badly) cook.

I never seem to be able to get a (**good**/well) steak.

I prefer my meat (good/**well**) done, not bloody.

When the steak is perfect, I croon, but (bad/**badly**).

In the following sentences, select the proper adjective:

Sorbet has (**less**/fewer) fat than ice cream.

If you have (less/**fewer**) than twelve items, use the express checkout line.

There's a Zen saying that begins, "Eat (**less**/fewer) and chew well; have (less/**fewer**) clothes and launder often. . . ."

Tell me your life story in twenty-five words or (less/**fewer**).

Replace weak verbs—propped up by adverbs—with stronger verbs:

My waitress's face lights up ~~brightly~~ at their arrival.

My waitress hooks a ~~loose~~ strand of baby-fine dark-blond hair behind her ear, jots down my order ~~briefly~~, and snatches the menu from the table.

The kitchen door swings open, and the waitress ~~briskly~~ ambles toward me, her stride long and deliberate. She

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~~carefully deposits~~ **settles** my plate before me, then ~~somewhat~~ mechanically inquires if I need anything else, ~~and I~~ notice her mind is already ~~halfway~~ onto her next task. Nonetheless, she's polite, and I'm happy to report I do not need anything. She disappears, ~~swiftly~~ maneuvering through the room with a sixth sense, negotiating tables, chair legs, customers, other waiters, and pocketbooks protruding into the aisles.

[Note: Does *briskly* contradict *amble*? If you think it does, what about *deliberate*? Does that contradict *amble*? Maybe the verb should just be *walk*. Does *carefully* complement or contradict *deposit*?]

As he ~~looks closely at~~ **scrutinizes** each item, he discovers one he likes.

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Week Six: Prepositions—Innocent Little Suckers (Not)

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Prepositions”

Lesson and discussion

No Great American Novel depends upon prepositions for its identity. In fact, the main reason for writers to understand prepositions is to know when *not* to use them.

Spend the beginning of this lesson defining prepositions. Unlike nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, prepositions fall into a “closed” category of words. That means that there is a finite number of them. While I’m not a fan of memorization, it does help to take some time to learn these words—or at least the most common ones.

Move on to the nature of prepositional phrases and the fact that in sentences they usually act adjectivally or adverbially. That is, they modify nouns or tell “which,” or they modify verbs or tell “when,” “how,” or “how much.”

It might be helpful to find a passage or two in which prepositions are used to situate the reader in *time* (*at three o’clock, before the murder, as I lay dying*) or *place* (*from three thousand feet in the air, down in the willow garden, after thirteen years of war*). Once students become adept at identifying these phrases, perhaps they can then write a description in which they control or direct the reader’s focus with the judicious use of prepositional phrases, especially those that introduce a passage and set time parameters.

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Finally, review the three major pitfalls that prepositions present to writers:

1. Grammar and usage problems caused by prepositions:
(a) the incorrect use of *I*, instead of *me*, in *just between you and me*; (b) the incorrect use of *between* for more than two items (*we were trying to choose among three entrées*); (c) the use of the preposition *like* where the conjunction *as* is required (*Winston tastes good, as a cigarette should*).
2. Pileups of prepositional phrases that cause sentences to lose their focus and turn good ideas into hopelessly abstract ones. Urge students to “clear the clutter.”
3. Long introductory prepositional phrases that should be followed by a comma, or internal ones that should be surrounded by commas.

In-class exercises

1. Spend some time making sure students know how to identify prepositions. Give them the following paragraph, from “Farewell, My Lovely!” by E. B. White (in the Handout), and ask them to underline every prepositional phrase—the preposition, its object (a noun), and any adjectives modifying that noun—and to circle every preposition, which may also include particles and cases of *to* in an infinitive.

I see by the new Sears Roebuck catalogue that it is still possible to buy an axle for a 1909 Model T Ford, but I am not deceived. The great days have faded, and the end is in sight. Only one page in the current catalogue is devoted to parts and accessories for the Model T; yet everyone remembers springtimes when the Ford gadget section was larger than men's clothing, almost as large as household furnishings. The last Model T was built in 1927, and the car

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is fading from what scholars call the American scene—which is an understatement, because to a few million people who grew up with it, the old Ford practically *was* the American scene. It was the miracle that God had wrought. And it was patently the sort of thing that could only happen once. Mechanically uncanny, it was like nothing that had ever come to the world before. Flourishing industries rose and fell with it. As a vehicle, it was hard-working, commonplace, heroic; and it often seemed to transmit those qualities to the persons who rode in it. My own generation identifies it with Youth, with its gaudy, irretrievable excitements; before it fades into the mist, I would like to pay it the tribute of the sigh that is not a sob, and set down random entries in a shape somewhat less cumbersome than a Sears Roebuck catalogue.

2. In the *New York Times*, John Noble Wilford wrote a passage that illustrates how prepositions function to vary sentences and heighten interest. Before reading John Noble Wilford's actual version, have students look at this passage, which merely collects facts:

The discoveries planets the solar system, stimulating renewed speculation other possible worlds throbbing life, are now drawing closer cosmic terms the world their discoverers.

The latest detection, made this month American astronomers, is a planet twice the mass Jupiter that is orbiting the star Gliese 876, one the Sun's nearest neighbors. . . .

The discovery Gliese 876 adds another element surprise and surmise the continuing quest other planetary systems.

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The large object is orbiting a red dwarf star one-third the mass the Sun.

Then have them look at the same information as it was written for the *New York Times* by John Noble Wilford. (The prepositions here are in bold, the objects of the prepositions underlined; you may want to have students identify both on their own in the handout.) He turns what was a meaningless meteor shower without prepositions into a constellation of interesting images:

The discoveries **of** planets beyond the solar system, stimulating renewed speculation **of** other possible worlds throbbing **with** life, are now drawing closer **in** cosmic terms **to** the world of their discoverers.

The latest detection, made this month **by** American astronomers, is **of** a planet about twice the mass of Jupiter that is orbiting the star Gliese 876, one **of** the Sun's nearest neighbors. . . .

The discovery **at** Gliese 876 adds another element **of** surprise and surmise **to** the continuing quest for other planetary systems. The large object is orbiting a red dwarf star **less than** one-third the mass of the Sun.

3. Before we set about getting rid of unnecessary phrases, let's make sure we can find them. See the opening lines of great novels that use a prepositional phrase or four (below and in the Handout). Can your students spot the prepositions? Can they tell what the phrases are modifying?

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.
(Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813)

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Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. (Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, 1925)

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. (George Orwell, *1984*, 1949)

Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash. (J. G. Ballard, *Crash*, 1973)

4. This is a good point to review what's been covered in previous weeks. See the exercises in the Handout.

Homework

Kick out prepositions. E. B. White is a masterful writer, and he had wonderful editors, so his prepositional phrases are not pileups of abstractions. Notice how paring prepositional phrases makes writing clearer and more concrete. Take a paragraph from a rough draft you've written and try to kick out prepositional phrases.

Beyond the beyond. Try writing a poem or a poetic ad mimicking Goodby Silverstein's ad for Norwegian Cruise Line (pages 120–21 of *Sin and Syntax*). Pick a common preposition (*through? beside? before?*), and tell a story with it.

Saloon-speak. In the following sentences, many of the prepositional phrases should be pared back. Try your hand at making these sentences leaner.

Madame Maybelle was speaking to the piano player in regards to the rules of the house.

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With reference to your pay, she said, I have many thoughts.

The approximate amount of your retainer will be \$20.

She said she'd be willing to increase that in the interest of keeping him.

So, for the purpose of making him happy, she upped his wage.

He said that in order to please him she'd have to feed him dinner, too.

She agreed she would in the event that patrons started praising his music.

He started to play a lot of popular tunes.

A great number of patrons were happy, and said so.

But their pleasure varied according as to whether they were drunk.

And they were often in an inebriated condition.

Nevertheless, Madame Maybelle showed integrity in her word.

Week Six:
Prepositions—Innocent Little Suckers (Not)
/Handout

In-class exercises

1. Underline every prepositional phrase—the preposition, its object (a noun), and any adjectives modifying that noun in this passage from “Farewell, My Lovely!” by E. B. White. In addition, circle every preposition, which may also include particles and cases of *to* in an infinitive.

I see by the new Sears Roebuck catalogue that it is still possible to buy an axle for a 1909 Model T Ford, but I am not deceived. The great days have faded, and the end is in sight. Only one page in the current catalogue is devoted to parts and accessories for the Model T; yet everyone remembers springtimes when the Ford gadget section was larger than men’s clothing, almost as large as household furnishings. The last Model T was built in 1927, and the car is fading from what scholars call the American scene—which is an understatement, because to a few million people who grew up with it, the old Ford practically *was* the American scene. It was the miracle that God had wrought. And it was patently the sort of thing that could only happen once. Mechanically uncanny, it was like nothing that had ever come to the world before. Flourishing industries rose and fell with it. As a vehicle, it was hard-working, commonplace, heroic; and it often seemed to transmit those qualities to the person who rode in it. My own generation identifies it with Youth, with its gaudy, irretrievable excitements; before it fades into the mist, I would like to pay it the tribute of the sigh that is not a sob, and set down random entries in a

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shape somewhat less cumbersome than a Sears Roebuck catalogue.

2. Read these "just the facts" paragraphs in which all the prepositions have been removed:

The discoveries planets the solar system, stimulating renewed speculation other possible worlds throbbing life, are now drawing closer cosmic terms the world their discoverers.

The latest detection, made this month American astronomers, is a planet twice the mass Jupiter that is orbiting the star Gliese 876, one the Sun's nearest neighbors. . . .

The discovery Gliese 876 adds another element surprise and surmise the continuing quest other planetary systems.

The large object is orbiting a red dwarf star one-third the mass the Sun.

Now read the same information as it was written for the *New York Times* by John Noble Wilford. Can you identify the prepositions and their objects?

The discoveries of planets beyond the solar system, stimulating renewed speculation of other possible worlds throbbing with life, are now drawing closer in cosmic terms to the world of their discoverers.

The latest detection, made this month by American astronomers, is of a planet about twice the mass of Jupiter that is orbiting the star Gliese 876, one of the Sun's nearest neighbors. . . .

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The discovery at Gliese 876 adds another element of surprise and surmise to the continuing quest for other planetary systems. The large object is orbiting a red dwarf star less than one-third the mass of the Sun.

3. See the following opening lines of great novels, which use a prepositional phrase or four. Can you spot the prepositions? Can you tell what the phrases are modifying?

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.
(Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813) [FOUR PHRASES]

Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. (Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, 1925) [TWO PHRASES]

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. (George Orwell, *1984*, 1949) [ONE PHRASE]

Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash. (J. G. Ballard, *Crash*, 1973) [ONE PHRASE]

4. Review material from previous weeks.

Nouns. To test your command of common and proper nouns, verify or correct the capitalization in these sentences, which come from student writing:

As I ride my bike round and round Davenport, Cicadas and Crickets compete in a midnight melody.

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Deer hide in harmony with the cold, tall Pine trees and Oaks.

An Oriental Rug attempts to cover the blemished wooden floors. A toy Gorilla that sings "Great Balls of Fire" lies dead among the mayhem.

Pronouns. Double-check the pronouns in these sentences (also from student writing). Are they correct? If not, why not?

Melissa told me to buy seeds from a catalog, since she can barely collect enough for herself this year.

The bus drivers have an affinity for Calhoun's, probably because he gives them free meals for bringing their passengers through.

The afternoon light cast its magic on the rosebush to my parents' right, causing their burgundy petals to glow.

Sam was nice enough to give my sister and I a present.

Verbs. Are the verbs in these sentences OK?

All I can do is lay here.

A toy gorilla that sings "Great Balls of Fire" lies dead among the mayhem.

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Mr. Lee's famed perfectionism was occasionally on display. Sandy Dawson . . . was drafted as a cow wrangler, and Mr. Lee wanted her cows to pose just so. "Cows are cows," Ms. Dawson explained. "In the morning they were very happy. Then after lunch it was hot, and cows like to lay down after lunch. We had to physically push them to stand there. They wanted them by this post or that post. And Morgan, he's a big steer; after a while he was rolling his eyes, like: 'I'm not doing this anymore. I don't want to be a movie star, I'm done.'" (From *New York Times* article "Turn On, Tune In, Turn Back the Clock," on Ang Lee's film *Taking Woodstock*)

Adjectives. Eliminate redundancies in the adjectives below:

The French professor's large neck stiffens, and her large fingers peer over the dark lecturn.

The pistachio-green walls create a calm, soothing atmosphere.

The crowd is composed mostly of middle-aged folks, with a smattering of silver heads, some graduate students, and a couple of young college kids.

Week Six:
Prepositions—Innocent Little Suckers (Not)
/Answer Key

In-class exercises

1. Underline every prepositional phrase—the preposition, its object (a noun), and any adjectives modifying that noun in this passage from “Farewell, My Lovely!” by E. B. White. In addition, circle every preposition, which may also include particles and cases of *to* in an infinitive.

I see (by) the new Sears Roebuck catalogue that it is still possible (to) buy an axle (for) a 1909 Model T Ford, but I am not deceived. The great days have faded, and the end is (in) sight. Only one page (in) the current catalogue is devoted (to) parts and accessories (for) the Model T; yet everyone remembers springtimes when the Ford gadget section was larger than* men's clothing, almost as large as* household furnishings. The last Model T was built (in) 1927, and the car is fading (from) what scholars call the American scene—which is an understatement, because (to) a few million people who grew (up) (with) it, the old Ford practically *was* the American scene. It was the miracle that God had wrought. And it was patently the sort (of) thing that could only happen once. Mechanically uncanny, it was like nothing that had ever come (to) the world before. Flourishing industries rose and fell (with) it. (As) a vehicle, it was hard-working, commonplace, heroic; and it often seemed (to) transmit those qualities (to) the person who rode in it. My own generation identifies it (with) Youth, (with) its gaudy, irretrievable excitements; before it fades (into) the mist, I would like (to) pay it the tribute (of) the

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sigh that is not a sob, and set down random entries (in) a shape somewhat less cumbersome than* a Sears Roebuck catalogue.

*Grammarians don't always agree on *than* and *as*, but in each of these instances, I am treating them as conjunctions in clauses in which some words have been elided:

- the Ford gadget section was larger than *the* men's clothing *department was*;
- almost as large as *the* household furnishings *department was*;
- a shape somewhat less cumbersome than *a Sears Roebuck catalogue is*.

3. In these opening lines of great novels that use a prepositional phrase or four, spot the prepositions. What phrases are they modifying?

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man **in possession of a good fortune**, must be **in want of a wife**. (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813) [FOUR PHRASES]

Once an angry man dragged his father **along the ground through his own orchard**. (Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, 1925) [TWO PHRASES]

It was a bright cold day **in April**, and the clocks were striking thirteen. (George Orwell, *1984*, 1949) [ONE PHRASE]

Vaughan died yesterday **in his last car-crash**. (J. G. Ballard, *Crash*, 1973) [ONE PHRASE]

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4. Review of material from previous weeks:

Nouns. To test your command of common and proper nouns, verify or correct the capitalization in these sentences, which come from student writing:

As I ride my bike round and round Davenport, **cicadas** and **crickets** compete in a midnight melody.

Deer hide in harmony with the cold, tall **pine trees** and **oaks**.

An Oriental rug attempts to cover the blemished wooden floors. A toy **gorilla** that sings "Great Balls of Fire" lies dead among the mayhem.

Pronouns. Double-check the pronouns in these sentences (also from student writing). Are they correct? If not, why not?

Melissa told me to buy seeds from a catalog, since she can barely collect enough for herself this year. [CORRECT USE OF REFLEXIVE PRONOUN]

The bus drivers have an affinity for Calhoun's, probably because he gives them free meals for bringing their passengers through. [OBSCURE PRONOMINAL REFERENCE: IS CALHOUN'S THE NAME OF A RESTAURANT OR THE NAME OF A PERSON?]

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The afternoon light cast its magic on the rosebush to my parents' right, causing their burgundy petals to glow.

[THERE IS A PROBLEM HERE WITH PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT, WHICH LEADS TO AMBIGUITY. DOES *THEIR* REFER TO *ROSEBUSH* OR *PARENTS*?]

Sam was nice enough to give my sister and I a present. [*SAM* IS THE SUBJECT; *MY SISTER* AND *ME* ARE THE DIRECT OBJECTS.]

Verbs. Are the verbs in these sentences OK?

All I can do is lay here. [WHOOOPS. NO OBJECT. NEEDS TO BE *LIE*.]

A toy gorilla that sings "Great Balls of Fire" lies dead among the mayhem. [CORRECT]

Mr. Lee's famed perfectionism was occasionally on display. Sandy Dawson . . . was drafted as a cow wrangler, and Mr. Lee wanted her cows to pose just so. "Cows are cows," Ms. Dawson explained. "In the morning they were very happy. Then after lunch it was hot, and cows like to lay down after lunch. We had to physically push them to stand there. They wanted them by this post or that post. And Morgan, he's a big steer; after a while he was rolling his eyes, like: 'I'm not doing this anymore. I don't want to be a movie star, I'm done.'" (From the 2009 *New York Times* article "Turn On, Tune In, Turn Back the Clock," about Ang Lee's film *Taking Woodstock*)

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[EVIDENTLY, THE REPORTER WANTED TO LEAVE DAWSON'S ERROR; THOSE COWS LIKE TO *LIE DOWN* AFTER LUNCH.]

Adjectives. Eliminate redundancy in these sentences:

The French professor's ~~large~~ neck stiffens, and her large fingers peer over the dark lecturn.

The pistachio-green walls create a calm, ~~soothing~~ atmosphere.

The **fortysomething*** crowd ~~is composed mostly of middle-aged folks, with~~ **contains** a smattering of silver heads, ~~some~~ graduate students, and ~~a couple of~~ young college kids.

*It could be *fiftysomething*, but then the silver heads might not be as distinct.

Homework

Saloon-speak. Prepositional phrases can be pared back in various ways. Here's how *I* would do it:

Madame Maybelle was speaking to the piano player **about the house rules.**

About your pay, she said, I have many thoughts.

Your retainer will be **about** \$20.

She said she'd be willing to increase that **to** keep him.

So, **to make** him happy, she upped his wage.

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He said that she'd have to feed him dinner, too.

She agreed she would **if** patrons started praising his music.

He started to play **more** popular tunes.

Many patrons were happy, and said so.

But their pleasure varied according **to their sobriety**.

They were often **drunk**.

Nevertheless, Madame Maybelle showed integrity.

**Week Seven:
Conjunctions and Interjections—Because, Well,
Because**

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Conjunctions” and “Interjections”

Lesson and discussion

As with prepositions, it's hard to make the argument that great writing is a matter of using conjunctions and interjections wisely. Yet both of these seemingly unimportant parts of speech can have a dramatic effect on the intelligence of a piece of writing, and especially on its style and tone.

Review the three main categories of conjunctions, reminding students of that handy mnemonic of grade-school teachers, FANBOYS, for the coordinate conjunctions *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*. Try to impress upon them how coordinate conjunctions join things of equivalent value and so in a way flatten out sentences, while subordinate conjunctions give sentences tension and texture. High school and college students may find it helpful to think of subordinate conjunctions as “thesis statement words.” The essence of an interesting thesis or argument is paradox, and paradox is exactly what terms like *although, even though, despite that, because, and while* inject into a sentence.

You can invent all kinds of entertaining exercises to identify and play with interjections. The most important point to stress is that they carry a sense of informality, and are thus usually avoided in published work, but can convey a lot in quotations or in dialogue between two characters. I also mention how I purposely used

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interjections in *Sin and Syntax* to make sure the book didn't seem too dry or pompous.

In-class exercises

1. For a recent news event reported widely in the press, find the article by either Reuters or the Associated Press covering the event. Then find the article that appeared in the *New York Times*. Scan each story, circling all the conjunctions you can find. Do the different sources rely on different sorts of conjunctions, and therefore on different kinds of sentences? How do the conjunctions affect the style of the story? (Though you might pick the news event and the date so that you can make sure the AP and *New York Times* stories are appropriate, this also works well as a homework assignment with a follow-up discussion in class.)

2. I like to use sentences about “your last supper” as an interactive exercise. Give students ten minutes or so to contemplate and write about a recent meal—nothing fancy, just stream of consciousness. Read some aloud so that the entire class can identify the conjunctions. Then have students rewrite. If students write short, crisp sentences without using *since* or *when* or *although*, try suggesting that they string together sentences by using subordinate conjunctions. If they already rely on subordinate conjunctions, ask them to try replacing the subordinate conjunctions with *ands* and *buts* and *fors* and *sos*. How is style changed by the use of conjunctions? Read some of the before-and-afters.

3. In the *Schoolhouse Rock!* song “Interjections!,” the character Reginald, home with the flu, gets “one small injection” from the doctor and responds with a surfeit of interjections. Find them:

Hey! That smarts! Ouch! That hurts! Yow! That's not fair,
givin' a guy a shot down there!

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Homework

The news on conjunctions and interjections. Take the articles you found on a news event in different publications. Do any of them include interjections? To follow up, take something you've previously written and rewrite it, changing the conjunctions or experimenting with tone through interjections. How does the passage change?

Conjunction junction. Identify the conjunctions in the following passage from Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*:

You got very hungry when you did not eat enough in Paris because all the bakery shops had such good things in the windows and people ate outside at tables on the sidewalk so that you saw and smelled the food. When you had given up journalism and were writing nothing that anyone in America would buy, explaining at home that you were lunching out with someone, the best place to go was the Luxembourg gardens where you saw and smelled nothing to eat all the way from the Place de l'Observatoire to the rue de Vaugirard. There you could always go into the Luxembourg museum and all the paintings were sharpened and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cézanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry. I used to wonder if he were hungry too when he painted; but I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat. It was one of those unsound but illuminating thoughts you have when you have been sleepless or hungry.

Make a monologue. Write a soliloquy like Catherine Tate's (pages 144–45 of *Sin and Syntax*), in which one person recounts a conversation whose content is conveyed mostly with interjections.

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Let the monologue tell a story—let the choice and sequence of interjections tell the reader who the characters are, what their relationship is, and what the tone or mood of the conversation is.

Remake a dialogue. Take a scene with dialogue, either one of yours or one from a book, and rewrite it, condensing utterance and attitude by using the quotative *like* and other interjections.

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Week Seven: Conjunctions and Interjections—Because, Well, Because/Answer Key

In-class exercises

3. In the *Schoolhouse Rock!* song “Interjections!” the character Reginald, home with the flu, gets “one small injection” from the doctor and responds with a surfeit of interjections. Find them:

Hey! That smarts! **Ouch!** That hurts! **Yow!** That’s not fair, givin’ a guy a shot down there!

Homework

Conjunction junction. Identify the conjunctions in the following passage from Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*:

You got very hungry **when** you did not eat enough in Paris **because** all the bakery shops had such good things in the windows **and** people ate outside at tables on the sidewalk **so** that you saw **and** smelled the food. **When** you had given up journalism **and** were writing nothing that anyone in America would buy, explaining at home that you were lunching out with someone, the best place to go was the Luxembourg gardens **where** you saw **and** smelled nothing to eat all the way from the Place de l’Observatoire to the rue de Vaugirard. There you could always go into the Luxembourg museum **and** all the paintings were sharpened **and** clearer **and** more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cezanne much better **and** to see truly how he made landscapes **when** I was hungry. I used to wonder **if** he were hungry too **when** he painted; **but** I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat. It was one of those unsound **but** illuminating thoughts you have **when** you have been sleepless **or** hungry.

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Week Eight: Parsing Sentences—No Pain, No Gain

Reading

Sin and Syntax: Review the entire “Words” section

Lesson and discussion

This week offers a crucial opportunity to review all the parts of speech and to see where students’ understanding of the parts of speech is weak or wobbly.

Parsing sentences—that is, going word by word through the sentence and naming which part of speech each word is—used to be a standard feature in English classes.

Parsing sentences is a rather old-fashioned kind of exercise from grammar classes. It is sometimes referred to wistfully, sometimes contemptuously. (Opinions on it seem as passionate, and different, as opinions on diagramming.) Merriam-Webster Unabridged defines the verb, which can be either transitive or intransitive, this way:

Transitive:

1 a: to resolve (as a sentence) into component parts of speech and describe them grammatically.

b: to describe (as a word) grammatically by stating the part of speech and explaining the inflection and syntactical relationships

2: to examine in a minute way: analyze

Intransitive:

1: to give a grammatical description of a word or a group of words

2: to admit to being parsed

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When we parse a sentence, we read slowly, labeling each word with a part-of-speech tag, such as N (noun) or V (verb). It is a skill, but not an entirely practical one. (No one outside school—and certainly not in the writing or editing professions—will ever ask us to parse a sentence. Some, though, will use the verb contemptuously, in describing someone who splits hairs over words.)

As creativity became foregrounded in “language arts” classes, grammar was backgrounded and parsing fell out of favor. But there is no better way to test students’ grasp of the various parts of speech. It is something they can continue to do on their own or as homework if they need a little more practice.

Since we will, after this lesson, move on to the parts of a sentence, it’s good to stop here and make sure that the parts of speech have all sunk in.

In-class exercises

1. Use the elegant paragraph below by E. B. White, from an essay called “A Report in Spring,” to see whether students can parse each sentence, figuring out the part-of-speech identity (or identities) of each word. It might be helpful to lay out a code for the parts of speech. (Here’s what I use: N = noun; P = pronoun; V = verb; Aj = adjective; Av = adverb; Pp = preposition; C = conjunction; I = interjection.)

On Tuesday, in broad daylight, the coon arrived, heavy with young, to take possession of the hole in the tree, but she found another coon in possession, and there was a grim fight high in the branches. The new tenant won, or so it appeared to me, and our old coon came down the tree in

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defeat and hustled off into the woods, to examine her wounds and make other plans for her confinement. I was sorry for her, as I am for any who are evicted from their haunts by the younger and stronger—always a sad occasion for man or beast.

I chose the E. B. White passage for parsing because of the clarity of the sentences—and because he uses every part of speech but interjections. The first five sentences of the Cormac McCarthy passage on page 161 of *Sin and Syntax* are another good choice.

A few notes:

- I allow students to identify pronouns *either* as pronouns or as nouns or adjectives, and I have marked pronouns accordingly. It's great to make the point that you can identify a part of speech in the abstract or by looking at the role the word plays in the sentence. Words slide around and take on different roles, and parsing helps to underscore this.
- In infinitives, the *to* is a preposition.
- In the phrase *hustled off into the woods*, I would accept *off* as a particle (i.e., a preposition that follows a verb and slightly alters its meaning) or as an adverb (i.e., a modifier that tells *where* the old coon hustled).
- The back-to-back conjunctions *or so* can befuddle.
- *Young*, *younger*, and *stronger* seem like adjectives, especially in the abstract, but when you look at the role they play, it's clear that they are nouns in these sentences. They all appear as objects of prepositions, and in the last line, *younger* and *stronger* are even preceded by the article *the*, indicating a noun.

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- Although I have marked all articles as adjectives (which they are), I do accept *article* as an answer, since it shows a more nuanced awareness.

I generally find that students at this point still have difficulty identifying prepositions and conjunctions, so I often devote much time in this lesson to reviewing them.

2. Devote one discussion to following up on the homework assignment (below). It's pretty self-explanatory, but this is a good time to have students tune in to what kinds of words they rely on most. More adjectives than nouns? Lots of adverbs? Also, talk about the sentences as a whole, and ask whether students find themselves using prepositions and conjunctions quite naturally, even if they have trouble finding them when they're parsing. After such a conversation, a fun variation is to have them rewrite their paragraphs, changing their habits in some way—deleting every adjective, perhaps, or using only coordinating conjunctions, or chopping all the conjunctions out and using super-short sentences. How do these changes alter the tone of the paragraph?

Homework

Season your vocabulary. Sit somewhere outdoors and write a brief paragraph describing how the season expresses itself in what you see, as E. B. White did. After you've written a paragraph, parse your own sentences.

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Week Eight:

Parsing Sentences—No Pain, No Gain /Handout

In-class exercises

1. Parse the following paragraph by E. B. White, from an essay called “A Report in Spring.” In other words, identify each word according to which part of speech it is. Use these abbreviations:

N = noun

P = pronoun

V = verb

Aj = adjective

Av = adverb

Pp = preposition

C = conjunction

I = interjection

(In some cases, words might be identified in multiple ways, any one of which is acceptable. For example, *another* on line two could be identified either as a pronoun or as an adjective.)

On Tuesday, in broad daylight, the coon arrived, heavy with young, to take possession of the hole in the tree, but she found another coon in possession, and there was a grim fight high in the branches. The new tenant won, or so it appeared to me, and our old coon came down the tree in defeat and hustled off into the woods, to examine her wounds and make other plans for her confinement. I was sorry for her, as I am for any who are evicted from their haunts by the younger and stronger—always a sad occasion for man or beast.

**Week Eight:
Parsing Sentences—No Pain, No Gain
/Answer Key**

In-class exercises

1. Here is my attempt to parse E. B. White's passage. In some cases, words might be identified in multiple ways, any one of which is acceptable. For example, *another* on line two could be identified either as a pronoun or as an adjective. I have used these abbreviations:

N = noun

P = pronoun

V = verb

Aj = adjective

Av = adverb

Pp = preposition

C = conjunction

I = interjection

On (Pp) Tuesday (N), in (Pp) broad (Aj) daylight (N), the (Aj) coon (N) arrived (V), heavy (Aj) with (Pp) young (N), to (Pp) take (V) possession (N) of (Pp) the (Aj) hole (N) in (Pp) the (Aj) tree (N), but (C) she (P/N) found (V) another (P/Aj) coon (N) in (Pp) possession (N), and (C) there (P/N) was (V) a (Aj) grim (Aj) fight (N) high (Av) in (Pp) the (Aj) branches (N). The (Aj) new (Aj) tenant (N) won (V), or (C) so (C) it (P/N) appeared (V) to (Pp) me (P/N), and (C) our (Aj) old (Aj) coon (N) came (V) down (Av) the (Aj) tree (N) in (Pp) defeat (N) and (C) hustled (V) off (Av/Pp) into (Pp) the (Aj) woods (N), to (Pp) examine (V) her (P/Aj) wounds (N) and (C) make (V) other (P/Aj) plans (N) for (Pp) her (P/Aj) confinement (N). I (P/NV) was (V) sorry (Aj) for (Pp) her (P), as (C) I (P/N) am (V) for (Pp) any (P/N) who (P/N) are (V) evicted (V) from

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(Pp) their (P/Aj) haunts (N) by (Pp) the (Aj) younger (N) and (C) stronger (N)—always (Av) a (Aj) sad (Aj) occasion (N) for (Pp) man (N) or (C) beast (N).

**Week Nine:
Sentences, Oh, Sentences—Telling a Story in a
Few Words**

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Sentences” and “The Subject, The Predicate”
“The Sentence as a Miniature Narrative,” *New York Times*
Opinionator: opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/19/the-sentence-as-a-miniature-narrative

Lesson and discussion

When you ask young students what a sentence is, they might answer, “It starts with a capital letter and ends with a period.” Ask someone older what the basic components of a sentence are, and the answer might be—if a bit by rote—“Subject and predicate.” But dig deeper, ask for definitions, and most people pause, unsure what to say next. It’s worth devoting an entire lesson to these basics.

Let’s start by exploring the true nature of the subject. At its root, what is it? A noun! A person, place, thing, or idea that is in a situation. A person, place, thing, or idea that is the actor in the little drama about to unfold. That noun is often called the *simple subject*; the *complete subject* includes any adjectives, adverbs, or phrases that modify that noun. The simple subject might not be just a single noun and all its modifiers—it might be a gerund phrase (“*Walking in the woods* is my favorite weekend activity”) or an entire noun clause (“*Whoever took my pashmina* better give it back”).

It’s important to stress that the subject is the *subject* of the drama that unfolds in the sentence—the person, place, thing, or idea in a particular predicament—but it is not necessarily the person, place, thing, or idea *completing the action*. As we’ll see in a few weeks, in

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sentences expressed through the passive voice, the subject of the sentence is not always the agent.

Let's look at some opening lines of great novels to see how the sentence drama plays out. Notice the subject, in bold, in each of the following sentences. It might be a simple noun or pronoun, a noun modified by an adjective or two, or something even more complicated:

For a long time, **I** went to bed early. (Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, 1913; translated by Lydia Davis)

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. (James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922)

Once **an angry man** dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. (Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, 1925)

I am an invisible man. (Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952)

In a sense, **I** am Jacob Horner. (John Barth, *The End of the Road*, 1958)

It was love at first sight. (Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, 1961)

All this happened, more or less. (Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 1969)

A screaming comes across the sky. (Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 1973)

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Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash. (J. G. Ballard, *Crash*, 1973)

In the beginning, sometimes **I** left messages in the street.
(David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, 1988)

Next, let's explore the nature of the predicate. The predicate is, basically, everything in the sentence that is *not* the subject; it is the predicament the subject is in. The *simple predicate* is a verb, but the *complete predicate* might include adverbs and prepositional phrases, as well as objects or complements (basically, more nouns, noun phrases, or noun clauses) and whatever words might modify them. If the subject is the "what" of a sentence (i.e., what the sentence is about), the predicate is the "so what."

OK, why does any of this matter? Two big reasons. First, understanding and controlling subjects helps keep focus in writing. Changing subjects every other sentence makes paragraphs fuzzy, makes a central idea blur. The writer unable to control subjects is like a novice cyclist unable to properly shift gears; the jerky progression of sentences is like the jerky slipping of gears of a bicycle struggling up a hill. To illustrate this, read the quote on page 163 of *Sin and Syntax*, in which George H. W. Bush lurches from one subject to another without seeming to have any clarity about his point. Then read the first two paragraphs of *Moonshine* (page 160), by Alec Wilkinson. A writer in command of sentences stays focused even on a multifaceted character.

Second: Only by understanding the relationship of subjects and verbs can you avoid one of the most common syntactical errors in sentences: subject-verb disagreement. This error happens when a

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singular subject is paired with the plural form of a verb, or a plural subject is paired with the singular form of the verb. (You may want to work into your lesson the difficulty indefinite pronouns pose; see pages 166–68 of *Sin and Syntax*.)

In-class exercises

1. Read aloud the news ledes on pages 159–60 of *Sin and Syntax*, identifying the subjects and predicates in each.
2. Read aloud the Cormac McCarthy excerpt on page 161 of *Sin and Syntax*, asking students to find the simple subject (noun) and simple predicate (verb) of each sentence. Point out compound predicates. Notice the way McCarthy handles subjects—going back and forth between the nice, compact *they rode* and the other subject-verb pairings. Discuss the flow of the sentences and the way the subjects and predicates function stylistically—in other words, the way in which McCarthy’s sentences mimic the action. They are short and staccato while the riders are walking through the corrals, a little looser as they trot out to the open pastureland, long and limber and unending as they gallop out under the stars to Mexico.
3. Ask students to compose their epitaphs, the real-life summations of who they are or what they’ve done in their lives that might appear on their tombstones. Invite whimsy and wit, but ask them to write true. Have students read them one by one, and notice how the subject and the predicate make up a little narrative: a subject and a predicament.
4. Whether or not they technically contain a subject and a predicate, the best email subject headers convey everything a sentence conveys. Take a look at the following subject headers. Are they

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sentences or sentence fragments? If the latter, do they contain a subject only, a predicate only, or neither?

- >Subject: Oh, Mexico . . .
- >Subject: woe
- >Subject: RSVP to Soiree 98 by 1/18!
- >Subject: the official word
- >Subject: point blank pie
- >Subject: Prepare to Be Overwhelmed
- >Subject: last chance
- >Subject: my mother
- >Subject: writer threatening suicide
- >Subject: peep

That last one is especially enigmatic. Is *peep* the plaintive cry of someone badly in need of attention? Is it the promise of a risqué glimpse? Or is it an imperative (*Look here, or you will forever face regret . . .*)? It works because it could be all three.

5. Have students complete the S-V agreement exercises in the Handout.

Homework

Before the epitaph, a bio! Write a short bio of yourself, in fifty words or fewer. This is the kind of thing you see in magazines about the contributors—who you are today. Ideally, you should be the subject and the predicate of most of the sentences, if not every one.

Six-word memoirs. In 2006, Rachel Fershleiser and Larry Smith, editors of the Web-based *SMITH* magazine, reminded readers that Ernest Hemingway had told an entire story in six words: “For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn.” They dared readers to top him by writing

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personal stories, and they published the best of the enthusiastic responses. Here are two six-word memoirs that do the subject-predicate tango:

Googled what he called me. Ouch. (Emily L.)

My parents should've kept their receipt. (SarahBeth)

Using those as models, write your own mini-memoir—either seriously or in jest.

Little bitty biographies. Using Alec Wilkinson's profile of Garland Bunting as an example (pages 160–61 of *Sin and Syntax*), have students write a brief character sketch of an eccentric person, making sure to keep track of subjects in order to keep the focus on the person.

**Week Nine:
Sentences, Oh, Sentences—Telling a Story in a
Few Words/Handout**

In-class exercises

5. S-V pairings:

Which verb in the following sentences agrees with the sentence's subject? (From *The Deluxe Transitive Vampire*, by Karen Elizabeth Gordon)

An entourage of hangers-on was/were sprawling in the lounge.

Those pajamas is/are bound to give the sandman pause.

The way you're wearing those pajamas is/are bound to give the sandman pause.

Her smile, with its intimations of unspeakable pleasure, has/have been of little use of late.

Is/are the sandman and the vampire buddies?

Campari and soda is/are the little maestro's usual libation.

My coiffeur and confidant say/says he can't take any more of my tangled hair and tales.

Customs don't/doesn't mind if our satchels are loaded with grief.

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How well do you understand sentence dynamics? Here are some questions to test your mastery of subjects and predicates:

Which of these Madison Avenue slogans has no subject?

A diamond is forever.

We try harder.

Melts in your mouth, not in your hand.

You deserve a break today.

I go cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs!

Which of these Madison Avenue slogans has no predicate?

I'd walk a mile for a Camel.

Breakfast of Champions.

Who's behind those Foster Grants?

Just do it.

Do you . . . Yahoo!?

Which of these famous sentences by linguists tells a little story, by logically linking a subject and a predicate?

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously. (Noam Chomsky, in *Syntactic Structures*)

A language is a dialect with an army and a navy. (Max Weinreich, in a lecture in Yiddish)

Last night I slept bad dreams a hangover snoring no pajamas sheets were wrinkled. (Steven Pinker, in *The Language Instinct*)

**Week Nine:
Sentences, Oh, Sentences—Telling a Story in a
Few Words/Answer Key**

2. Here are the simple subjects (in boldface) and the simple predicates (underlined) in Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*:

They rode out along the fenceline and across the open pastureland. **The leather** creaked in the morning cold. **They** pushed the horses into a lope. **The lights** fell away behind them. **They** rode out on the high prairie where **they** slowed the horses to a walk and **the stars** swarmed around them out of the blackness. **They** heard somewhere in that tenantless night a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was and **they** rode out on the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that **they** rode not under but among them and **they** rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing.

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Week Ten: 'Tis the Gift—the Five Simple Sentence Patterns

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Simple Sentences”

Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch (to review different kinds of verbs): pages 104–14, 193–205

Lesson and discussion

What exactly, beyond a subject and a verb, is a sentence? Believe it or not, every English sentence can be broken down into one of just five simple sentences. And sometimes the simpler they are, the better they are. This is the cool news I try to impart in this lesson.

Not that all sentences are simple. As we’ll see in the next few lessons, they can be made quite complex when we start using phrases and clauses, or when we start joining them together with various kinds of conjunctions. But this week we’re going to stick to stripped-down sentences and enjoy them for all they’re worth.

Start the lesson by giving a short writing prompt: “Describe the first five minutes of your day (your waking moments) in three or four sentences” (if the class is in the morning), or “Describe in three or four sentences what happened at lunch hour” (if the class is in the afternoon). Then add, “Take five minutes to write a short paragraph in a stream of consciousness—don’t stop to correct or rewrite anything.” Finally, ask students to put those away for a few minutes. (Return to them in the fourth exercise below.)

Go to the black- or whiteboard and write down the five basic sentence patterns:

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1. S + V (where the verb is intransitive)
2. S + V (where the verb is transitive) + DO
3. S + V (where the verb is ditransitive) + IO + DO
4. S + V (where the verb is static) + C
5. S + V (where the verb is factitive) + DO + OC

Review intransitive and transitive verbs—as well as the notion of a direct object—and come up with some example sentences for patterns 1 and 2. Remind students that the very first thing you learn about a verb when you look it up in a dictionary is whether it is *v.i.* or *v.t.*, but that the dictionary then stops being helpful, because linguists and lexicographers don't care as much about the other kinds of verbs, even though they are very important to grammarians and great writers. Then review the limited list of ditransitive verbs and the idea of an indirect object. Return to static verbs and point out that they don't take direct objects but rather link a subject with a complement, which can be a noun or an adjective. Finally, discuss that small class of verbs known as factitive verbs, and the idea of an object complement.

Students may have a hard time understanding the concept of objects, depending how much grammar—or how many foreign languages—they've studied in the past. So it's worth spending some time on this notion. Once they've gotten this, perhaps in a follow-up class, explain how understanding and recognizing subjects and objects helps us to know when to use *who* and *whom*. (*Who* is for subjects, *whom* for objects.) For practice identifying sentence patterns and correcting *who* and *whom*, see the exercises in the Handout.

You may want to return to some grammatical fine points that depend on simple sentence patterns to understand *lay* v. *lie*, *who* v.

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whom, and the use of *I/he/she/we/they*, instead of *me/him/her/us/them*, in a complement.

Finally, use some of the writing passages in the “Simple Sentences” chapter of *Sin and Syntax* (pages 177–79) to show how effective simple sentences can be. They are spare, they pack a punch, and they can be richly funny. I often say that the very first thing writers should do is to learn to strip down their sentences to their bare essentials. Then, and only deliberately, should they build them back up with a few adjectives, as well as phrases and musical clauses.

In-class exercises

1. To give students a clear idea of how the subject-verb–direct-object thing works, play a version of the Surrealist writing game Exquisite Corpse. (See my blog post at sinandsyntax.com/blog/the-exquisite-corpse). Have three different groups brainstorm ideas for subjects, transitive verbs, and direct objects, then combine them to construct sentences. Here’s what one class of mine came up with:

The coffee beans sautéed the rooster.

Vampires borrow snow.

The conductor kicked the can.

You might then alter the exercise by having the groups brainstorm ideas for subjects, static verbs, and complements. Again, the results in my class:

The Easter Bunny is upset.

Santa Claus was a worrywart.

2. Identify the sentence patterns in each of Charlotte Brontë’s sentences (pages 178–79 of *Sin and Syntax*). (Pretend the semicolons are periods.) This one is especially tricky: “The leaves grow sere.” In

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this sentence, *sere* is a complement, or predicate adjective. That means that *grow* in this sentence is static, not dynamic.

3. Write the following passages on the board and have students explain why each instance of *lay* or *lie* is correct:

Woke up this morning, looked out the window, and wrote this: "As I lay sleeping, the snow god laid a white carpet at our feet. Lace lies in the oak tree. I may lay burlap over the rhododendron." (These are all correct.)

If you are fortunate enough to have an old watch or two laying around . . .
(The copywriter for the watchmaker Tourneau must have liked lying down, too, or was just half asleep when penning this ad. The poor professional was busted by William Safire, who scolded: "The present participle should be the intransitive *lying*, not the transitive *laying*, which requires an object like a Fabergé egg.")

4. Review the short paragraphs describing students' waking moments or their lunch hours. Analyze their sentences. Did they use simple sentences, or did thoughts tend to tumble out in a jumbled sequence of clauses? See if students can find examples of each sentence pattern:

- S + V (intransitive)
- S + V (transitive) + DO
- S + V (ditransitive) + IO + DO
- S + V (static) + C
- S + V (factitive) + DO + OC

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It's unlikely that anyone will have an example of the latter, but see if the class can create one.

5. For more advanced students: In one urban street game, competing groups assert superiority by playing with the slang phrase _____ *Rules, OK?* They insert their own name as a subject of the verb *rules*. The game may have originated in the 1930s among violent razor gangs in Glasgow. When they weren't slashing each other, the rival Scottish gangs were known to tag each other's turf with [*Gang Name*] *Rules, OK?* The tag spread to the world of soccer, giving us *Arsenal Rules, OK?* From there it migrated to children's books (*Titus Rules OK*) and to music (*KC Rules* is an album by King Creosote). It even appeared in the world of newspaper headlines: In the *Economist*, *Primogeniture Rules, OK?* was perched next to a photo of two siblings feuding over who should lead their late father's multinational business. Parodies have also cropped up, like *Heisenberg Probably Rules, OK?* and *James Bond Rules, OK?* and *Dyslexics Lure, KO*. Play a game in which students come up with some tags of their own. Go ahead, be cutting—but hold the razors.

Homework

Waking up to sentences. Rewrite the stream-of-consciousness paragraphs you wrote in class, describing either your first five minutes or your lunch hour. Use only simple sentences. (Adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases are allowed!) How does the feeling of the passage change?

Verbs rule, OK? Identify the verb in each of the following sentences and figure out whether it is intransitive (S + V), transitive (S + V + DO), ditransitive (S + V + IO + DO), static (S + SV + C), or factitive (S + V + DO + OC). Hint: Only one is factitive.

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She gave all her colleagues invitations.

The days grow shorter in December.

A seagull, obviously looking for a handout, hovered over the ferry's stern.

The banana peel stuck to the bottom of the principal's shoe.

The chef made the short ribs divine.

Bravely, she walked on.

He felt ridiculous in his Elmo costume.

Daniel's antics taught the sisters a valuable lesson.

OK or KO?

Identify the simple sentence pattern in each of these clauses by Muhammad Ali, supplying words (like *I*) that have been elided if it's helpful:

Only last week, I murdered a rock

injured a stone

hospitalized a brick

I'm so mean

I make medicine sick

Who or whom? In each of the following sentences, collected from various print sources (including *The Deluxe Transitive Vampire*), choose the right pronoun:

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The company's original logo featured Winston's cat Miffffffff, who/whom Winston could coax up onto his two back legs and lead around the room.

He let out a low whistle, bit his lip, and tossed the note to his cousin, who/whom he noticed floating by on a barge.

You're the one in who/whom I can confide.

**Week Ten:
'Tis the Gift—the Five Simple Sentence
Patterns/Handout**

In-class exercises

2. Remember the five basic sentence patterns? Here they are:

1. S + V (where the verb is intransitive)
2. S + V (where the verb is transitive) + DO
3. S + V (where the verb is ditransitive) + IO + DO
4. S + V (where the verb is static) + C
5. S + V (where the verb is factitive) + DO + OC

Identify the sentence patterns in each of Charlotte Brontë's sentences. It helps to pretend the commas and semicolons are periods. Also, ignore the prepositional and appositive phrases. These two sentences are especially tricky—*The leaves grow sere* and *The skies hang full and dark*—because we think of *grow* and *hang* as dynamic verbs. But in the first sentence, *sere* is a complement, or predicate adjective. That means that *grow* in this sentence is static, not dynamic. The same pattern holds in *The skies hang full and dark*.

The sun passes the equinox
the days shorten
the leaves grow sere
but—he is coming

Frosts appear at night
November has sent his fogs in advance
the wind takes its autumn moan
but—he is coming

The skies hang full and dark

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a rack sails from the west

the clouds case themselves ~~into strange forms—arches and
broad radiations~~

there rise resplendent mornings—~~glorious, royal, purple as
monarch in his state~~

the heavens are one flame

so wild are they

they rival battle at its thickest

so bloody [are they]

they shame victory in her pride

I know some signs of the sky

I have noted them ever since childhood

God watch that sail!

Oh, guard it!

**Week Ten:
'Tis the Gift—the Five Simple Sentence
Patterns/Answer Key**

In-class exercises

2. To identify the sentence patterns in each of Charlotte Brontë's sentences, it helps to pretend the commas and semicolons are periods. Also, ignore the prepositional and appositive phrases. These two sentences are especially tricky—*The leaves grow sere* and *The skies hang full and dark*—because we don't think of *grow* and *hang* as static. In the first sentence, *sere* is a complement, or predicate adjective. That means that *grow* in this sentence is static, not dynamic. The same pattern holds in the second sentence.

The sun passes the equinox [pattern 2]
the days shorten [1]
the leaves grow sere [4]
but—he is coming [1]

Frosts appear at night [1]
November has sent his fogs in advance [2]
the wind takes its autumn moan [2]
but—he is coming [1]

The skies hang full and dark [4]
a rack sails from the west [1]
the clouds case themselves ~~into strange forms—arches and
broad radiations~~ [2]
there rise resplendent mornings—~~glorious, royal, purple as
monarch in his state;~~ [2]
the heavens are one flame [4]
so wild are they [4]

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they rival battle at its thickest [2]

so bloody [are they] [4]

they shame victory in her pride [2]

I know some signs of the sky [2]

I have noted them ever since childhood [2]

God watch that sail! [2]

Oh, guard it! [2]

Homework

Verbs rule, OK?

Identify the verb in each of the following sentences and figure out whether it is intransitive (S + V), transitive (S + V + DO), ditransitive (S + V + IO + DO), static (S + SV + C), or factitive (S + V + DO + OC).
Hint: Only one is factitive.

She gave all her colleagues invitations. [DITRANSITIVE]

The days grow short in December. [STATIC]

A seagull, obviously looking for a handout, hovered over the ferry's stern. [INTRANSITIVE]

The banana peel stuck to the bottom of the principal's shoe.
[INTRANSITIVE]

The chef made the short ribs divine. [FACTITIVE]

Bravely, she walked on. [INTRANSITIVE]

He felt ridiculous in his Elmo costume. [STATIC]

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Daniel's antics taught the sisters a valuable lesson.
[DITRANSITIVE]

OK or KO?

ID the simple sentence pattern in each of these clauses by
Muhammad Ali:

~~Only last week,~~ I murdered a rock [2]

[I] injured a stone [2]

[I] hospitalized a brick [2]

I'm so mean [4]

I make medicine sick [5]

Who or whom? Here are the right pronouns:

The company's original logo featured Winston's cat Miffffffff,
who/whom Winston could coax up onto his two back legs
and lead around the room.

He let out a low whistle, bit his lip, and tossed the note to
his cousin, who/whom he noticed floating by on a barge.

You're the one in who/whom I can confide.

Week Eleven: Using Phrases to Turn Phrases

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Phrases and Clauses,” pages 189–93

“Turning a Phrase,” *New York Times* Opinionator:

opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/14/turning-a-phrase

Lesson and discussion

The best reason to learn simple sentences and practice using them is to become familiar with the essential, bare-bones parts of a sentence. Ideally, students will begin to strip out of their sentences things like adjectives, adverbs, and unnecessary prepositional phrases. As Charlotte Brontë and Muhammad Ali show, simple sentences can have incredible power.

I try to make sure that students really understand simple sentences—that they are able to identify the five patterns and that they are able to create sentences following any one of the patterns—before moving on to phrases. When I do move on, I point out that if we write only in simple sentences, our writing acquires an overly simplistic, Dick-and-Jane quality. So, very carefully, we can begin to write using phrases, which will vary the sentences and add a little music.

The first thing to do is to review all the kinds of phrases, for which I refer you to the book. Here is a quick list of the most common ones:

- An **appositive phrase** clarifies a nearby noun by renaming it in different words.
- A **prepositional phrase** allows a preposition to pair with a noun and acts as an adjective or adverb in the larger sentence.

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- A **participial phrase** begins with a participle, the form of a verb that ends in either *-ing* (the present participle) or *-ed* (the past participle) and is used in sentences as an adjective modifying a noun.
- A **gerund phrase** acts as a noun.
- An **infinitive phrase** begins with *to* and the base form of the verb and might act as a noun, an adjective, or an adverb.
- An **absolute phrase** is close to a complete sentence, except that the verb is not acting as a verb; the entire phrase acts as an adjective.

Spend some time reading different passages and having students identify different kinds of phrases. This can take a while, but it's important. (See my suggestion for an in-class exercise, below.)

Some of the most hilarious errors in English occur when phrases are dangled in the wrong place in a sentence and end up modifying the wrong thing. Dangling participles are perhaps the most familiar, as in this classified ad for a trailer:

Single-wide, 1-bedroom, 1-bath, queen-size bed, pets,
children OK if neutered or spayed.

Do you have a favorite dangling participle, gerund, or prepositional phrase?

A follow-up class is a good moment to emphasize the importance of parallelism. If we understand phrases, we can begin to construct lists using parallel phrasing, which helps clarity immensely. Here are some examples of parallelism:

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Cheryl Strayed, in *Wild*, describes the primitive kitchen in her family's rustic house, outfitted with a Coleman camp stove and a real icebox: "Each component demanded just slightly less than it gave, needing to be tended and maintained, filled and unfilled, hauled and dumped, pumped and primed, and stoked and monitored." [PHRASES CONSISTING OF TWO PARTICIPLES]

Timothy Leary, in a formulation that became a mantra for the 1960s, said, "Tune in, turn on, drop out." [THREE PARALLEL VERB PHRASES]

Abraham Lincoln, in the Gettysburg Address, lauded a "government of the people, by the people, for the people." [THREE PARALLEL PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES]

In 1961, John F. Kennedy spoke of a new generation "born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage." [FOUR SYNTACTICALLY PARALLEL PHRASES CONSISTING OF ADJECTIVES FOLLOWED BY PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES]

Have some fun with a *lack of parallelism*, to show how crazy, and how hard to follow, such sentences are. Here are some examples:

The Museum of Fine Arts has a new exhibit of Egyptian art, you can see canvases by John Singer Sargent, and there is a Boston Jewish Film Festival.

Are you fit, free this summer, a degree student, and fancy yourself as a bit of a David Hasselhoff or Pamela Anderson?

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(From an ad for lifeguards in the *Times* of London, cited in the *New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town.")

Most of us have managed to collect quite a range of different kinds of clothes. We have posh clothes for special occasions, casual clothes for everyday, clothes to wear if it's hot, clothes to wear if it's cold, clothes for messing around in, swimming costumes, and lots more. We don't mix them up. (Linguist David Crystal does mix things up a bit in *A Little Book of Language*.)

If we belong to the scouts or guides, or a cadet group, or majorettes, or cheerleaders, or a football team or join the army or the police, then we have to wear a uniform. (Crystal again, describing the same closet, in the same book)

In-class exercises

1. Take a few paragraphs of a wonderful piece of writing and underline the phrases (appositive, prepositional, participial, gerund, infinitive, absolute). Copy it and hand it out to students, asking them to identify each phrase. In the Handout, I've given you one example to start with, a paragraph from *The Weight of Him*, by the writer Ethel Rohan (St. Martin's, 2017).
2. Ask students to write two sentences, each containing an appositive phrase, as well as two with prepositional phrases, two with participial phrases, two with gerund phrases, two with infinitive phrases, and two with absolute phrases (ten sentences total).
3. Choose some paragraphs of student writing and have everyone look at them in search of phrases. Are there students who do not use phrases? Are there students who use them fluently?

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Homework

Five minutes with phrases. You have rewritten the paragraph you wrote describing your waking moments or your lunch break. Go back to the original and identify the phrases you use. Discuss the music of the prose: the way the simple sentences without phrases establish a staccato beat, and the way in which phrases make the writing more lyrical.

Hip-hop phrases. Look at the lyrics of a song or two by your favorite recording artist. Do they contain phrases? What kind of phrases?

Kick the addiction to phrases that aren't parallel. The following sentence comes from a book manuscript about overcoming addiction. It's not inaccurate, and it's pretty clear, but could it be prettier? Try regrouping and recasting those elements so that they are more parallel and move more organically from one to the other:

Patients reported how they had overcome addiction to alcohol, finally filed back taxes, stopped yelling at their children, stuck to an exercise regimen, were free from old patterns of stress, and generally felt better about themselves and more in charge of their lives.

Week Eleven: Using Phrases to Turn Phrases/Handout

In-class exercises

1. Read this paragraph from *The Weight of Him*, by the writer Ethel Rohan. The phrases in it are underlined. Can you name each kind? (Hint: You should find only prepositional, participial, and infinitive phrases. Some of them are nested within other phrases, so I've used a double underline there.)

Billy's attention fell on the snow globe in the window's center display. The ornament contained a blond girl in a red dress, a black dog by her spindle legs, and a cottage with a navy door and straw roof. Two yellow birds completed the scene, perched on the skeleton of an ice-blue tree. Billy wanted to shake the globe and bring it to life. Behind him, a tour bus whooshed past, its red and white reflection streaking the shop glass. He tried to remember back to a time when he was small and thin, and able to feel the undertow from passing traffic. His hand pressed the side of his head, as though trying to keep the egg of himself together.

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Week Eleven:

Using Phrases to Turn Phrases/Answer Key

In-class exercises

1. Identify the types of phrases in this paragraph from *The Weight of Him*, by Ethel Rohan:

Billy's attention fell on the snow globe [PREPOSITIONAL] in the window's center display [PREPOSITIONAL]. The ornament contained a blond girl in a red dress [PREPOSITIONAL], a black dog by her spindle legs [PREPOSITIONAL], and a cottage with a navy door and straw roof [PREPOSITIONAL]. Two yellow birds completed the scene, perched on the skeleton [PARTICIPIAL + PREPOSITIONAL] of an ice-blue tree [PREPOSITIONAL]. Billy wanted to shake the globe [INFINITIVE] and [to] bring it to life [INFINITIVE]. Behind him [PREPOSITIONAL], a tour bus whooshed past, its red and white reflection streaking the shop glass [PARTICIPIAL]. He tried to remember back [INFINITIVE] to a time [PREPOSITIONAL] when he was small and thin, and able to feel the undertow [INFINITIVE] from passing traffic [PREPOSITIONAL]. His hand pressed the side of his head [PREPOSITIONAL], as though trying [PARTICIPIAL] to keep the egg [INFINITIVE] of himself [PREPOSITIONAL] together.

Homework

Kick the addiction to phrases that aren't parallel. Here's one possible rewrite of the sentence that begins, "Patients reported how they had overcome addiction to alcohol . . .":

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Clients reported how they kicked booze, filed overdue taxes, stopped berating their kids, let go of stress, took charge of their lives, and generally felt better about themselves.

Week Twelve: Applause, Applause—the Incredible Clause

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Phrases and Clauses,” pages 193–206

“Chapter 5: The Subordinating Style,” in *How to Write a Sentence*,
by Stanley Fish

Lesson and discussion

Clauses are complicated and hard to explain, so I’ve broken the lesson into two parts. First, handle independent clauses and subordinate clauses; then tackle relative clauses. You can blend lessons on sentence punctuation into both lessons.

Let’s start with a basic definition: Essentially, a clause is a unit that could be a sentence—it has a subject and a predicate. If it’s an independent clause, it really can stand on its own, but for various reasons it’s linked to another clause. If it’s a dependent clause, it can’t stand on its own—usually because either a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun is attached to the clause, changing its chemistry. (The two main kinds of dependent clauses, then, are subordinate clauses and relative clauses.)

Independent clauses. One way to think about independent clauses is to remember all those simple sentences we’ve been writing and rewriting for the last couple of chapters. Independent clauses express a complete thought and contain one subject-and-predicate pairing. They can be punctuated with periods—but then they are sentences, not clauses:

Independent clause. Independent clause. [TWO
COMPLETELY DISTINCT IDEAS]

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If we want to link or join the complete thoughts, we can do so in three principal ways:

1. Independent clause; independent clause. [TWO DISTINCT IDEAS BROUGHT TOGETHER SUBTLY]
2. Independent clause, *and/ but/ or/ yet/ so/ for/ nor* independent clause. [TWO IDEAS SHOWN AS RELATED OR CONTRADICTORY]
3. Independent clause: independent clause. [ONE IDEA FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER THAT EXPRESSES OR EXEMPLIFIES THE FIRST IDEA]

Here's a fun Mark Twain quote that illustrates the various options with independent clauses (i.e., freestanding sentence, independent clauses linked by semicolons):

Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.

In *cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education*, *cauliflower* is the subject, *is* the verb, and *nothing* the complement, itself modified by two prepositional phrases.

And here's a Mark Twain quote that illustrates other options:

Get a bicycle. You will not regret it, if you live.

(The second sentence includes an independent clause followed by a dependent one.)

Subordinate clauses. Sometimes we want to link ideas in a more sophisticated way. Rather than giving roughly equal weight to each, we might want to skew the emphasis one way or another. We might want to drive home a fundamental contradiction. We might want to express a cause-effect relationship. We might want to subordinate

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one idea to the other. For this, we use subordinate conjunctions. When we attach one of them (like *when*, in this very clause) to an independent clause (like this one, *we attach one of them*), we create a dependent clause.

(Take time with your class to revisit subordinate conjunctions, reviewing the list in the book (page 124) if students need a refresher.)

Brainstorm with your students, writing down a bunch of independent clauses. Then link them in various ways, as shown above—with semicolons, colons, and coordinating conjunctions. Next, take those independent clauses and attach subordinating conjunctions to them. See how they can no longer stand alone but rather need another independent clause to lean on and “complete the idea”?

You might want to try this Mark Twain quote a few ways, to underscore why writers choose subordinate clauses for effect:

When your friends begin to flatter you on how young you look, it's a sure sign you're getting old.

For high school students, I like to point out that constructing a thesis statement by using a subordinate conjunction is a smart way to go: It builds in paradox, making declarative sentences both more interesting and more controversial. You can even play something like Let's Make a Thesis Deal—Door #1 is just an independent; Door #2 gives you a subordinate conjunction; Door #3 gives you a conjunctive adverb. Which thesis wins?

For more advanced students: Discuss the ways in which coordinating conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions affect not

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just single sentences but entire passages. You might look at some biblical verses, as well as Ernest Hemingway and Cormac McCarthy, for the use of *and*. Another good source is Stanley Fish, in *How to Write a Sentence*.

In-class exercises

1. Practice identifying subordinate clauses with the Mark Twain quotes included in the Handout.
2. Read the David Sedaris paragraph in the Handout—or another passage you find that is loaded up with subordinate clauses. Have students identify the independent and dependent clauses in the sentences that contain them.
3. Select articles on the same news event (a press conference, for example, or a speech by the president), one from the AP or Reuters, and one from the *New York Times*. In the case of the AP/Reuters version, look for an article that relies on coordinate conjunctions to join independent clauses. In the case of the *New York Times* version, look for one that relies on subordinate conjunctions. For an example, see the two passages on Tiger Woods in *Sin and Syntax*, pages 197 and 198. This is similar to a previous assignment, except in this case you, the teacher, pick the example. Also, this could lead to a discussion of literary style: How does the use of complex sentences affect voice, tone, and style?

Homework

What if? Fill in the back end of the following sentences. In the first example, the dependent clause is done. In the succeeding ones, you can write the dependent clause, then an independent clause to complete the thought.

If I won the lottery . . .

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When you said . . .

After she . . .

Because my mother . . .

Although they . . .

Since Barack Obama . . .

While Donald Trump . . .

Wherever we . . .

Sentence genetics. Using stream of consciousness, write a few sentences about how your personality reflects those of your parents or grandparents. After you've finished, rewrite the paragraph using subordinate conjunctions (*although, because, despite, if, since, while, etc.*) to join various sentences. The subordinate conjunctions should build some complexity into the paragraph by emphasizing paradoxes or, perhaps, cause-effect relationships.

Conjunction redux. Identify the conjunctions in the following passages. One of them you've seen before. But now, for a gold star, or for more advanced students, identify whether the writer is using parataxis (coordination) or hypotaxis (subordination):

From *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, by John Milton:

If men within themselves would be governed by reason and not generally give up their understanding to a double tyranny of custom from without and blind affections within, they would discern better what it is to favor and uphold the tyrant of a nation.

From *A Moveable Feast*, by Ernest Hemingway:

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You got very hungry when you did not eat enough in Paris because all the bakery shops had such good things in the windows and people ate outside at tables on the sidewalk so that you saw and smelled the food. When you had given up journalism and were writing nothing that anyone in America would buy, explaining at home that you were lunching out with someone, the best place to go was the Luxembourg gardens where you saw and smelled nothing to eat all the way from the Place de l'Observatoire to the rue de Vaugirard. There you could always go into the Luxembourg museum and all the paintings were sharpened and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cezanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry. I used to wonder if he were hungry too when he painted; but I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat. It was one of those unsound but illuminating thoughts you have when you have been sleepless or hungry.

From "Goodbye to All That," in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, by Joan Didion:

I remember walking across 62nd Street one twilight that first spring, or the second spring, they were all alike for a while. I was late to meet someone but I stopped at Lexington Avenue and bought a peach and stood on the corner eating it and knew that I had come out of the West and reached the mirage. I could taste the peach and feel the soft air blowing from a subway grating on my legs and I could smell lilac and garbage and expensive perfume and I knew that it would cost something sooner or later. . . .

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Week Twelve: Applause, Applause—the Incredible Clause/Handout

In-class exercises

1. Practice identifying subordinating clauses with these Mark Twain quotes. Underline the dependent clauses and circle the subordinating conjunction:

If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything.
(Notebook entry, January or February 1894, *Mark Twain's Notebook*)

When in doubt, tell the truth. (Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar, Chapter II, *Following the Equator*)

Honesty is the best policy—when there is money in it.
(Speech to Eastman College, 1901)

Jim was most ruined for a servant, because he got stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches. (*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*)

You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus. (*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*)

The only reason why God created man is because he was disappointed with the monkey.
(*Autobiographical Dictation*)

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(Actually, if that last one were written, "God created man because he was disappointed with the monkey," it would be a clearer example of a subordinate clause.)

2. Identify the independent and dependent clauses in the sentences that contain them in this passage in "Old Faithful: Testing the Limits of Love," by David Sedaris (the *New Yorker*, November 29, 2004):

When Hugh and I bicker over who is in the most pain, I think back to my first boyfriend, whom I met while I was in my late twenties. Something about our combination was rotten, and as a result we competed over everything, no matter how petty. When someone laughed at one of his jokes, I would need to make that person laugh harder. If I found something at a yard sale, he would have to find something better—and so on. . . . We were together for six years, and when we finally broke up I felt like a failure, a divorced person. I now had what the self-help books called relationship baggage, which I would carry around for the rest of my life. The trick was to meet someone with similar baggage, and form a matching set, but how would one go about finding such a person?

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Week Twelve: Applause, Applause—the Incredible Clause/Answer Key

In-class exercises

1. Practice identifying subordinating clauses with these Mark Twain quotes. Underline the dependent clauses and circle (I've boldfaced) the subordinating conjunction:

If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything.
(Notebook entry, January or February 1894, *Mark Twain's Notebook*)

When in doubt, tell the truth. (Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar, Chapter II, in *Following the Equator*)

Honesty is the best policy—**when** there is money in it.
(Speech to Eastman College, 1901)

Jim was most ruined for a servant, **because** he got stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches. (*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*)

You can't depend on your eyes **when** your imagination is out of focus. (*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*)

The only reason why God created man is **because** he was disappointed with the monkey. (*Autobiographical Dictation*)

(Actually, if that last one were written, "God created man because he was disappointed with the monkey," it would be a clearer example of a subordinate clause.)

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2. Identify the independent and dependent clauses in this passage by David Sedaris. (Independent clauses are underlined; dependent ones are boldfaced.)

When Hugh and I bicker over who is in the most pain, I think back to my first boyfriend, whom I met while I was in my late twenties [THIS IS A RELATIVE CLAUSE. NEXT CHAPTER]. Something about our combination was rotten, and as a result we competed over everything, no matter how petty. **When someone laughed at one of his jokes**, I would need to make that person laugh harder. **If I found something at a yard sale**, he would have to find something better—and so on. . . . We were together for six years, and **when we finally broke up** I felt like a failure, a divorced person. I now had what the self-help books called relationship baggage, which I would carry around for the rest of my life [ANOTHER RELATIVE CLAUSE]. The trick was to meet someone with similar baggage and form a matching set, **but how would one go about finding such a person?** [USUALLY WE THINK OF *BUT* AS A COORDINATING CONJUNCTION, BUT IT'S PRETTY SUBORDINATING HERE!]

Homework

Conjunction redux.

Identify the conjunctions in the following passages, and identify whether the writer is using parataxis (coordination) or hypotaxis (subordination):

From *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, by John Milton:

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If men within themselves would be governed by reason **and** not generally give up their understanding to a double tyranny of custom from without **and** blind affections within, they would discern better what it is to favor **and** uphold the tyrant of a nation. [HYPOTAXIS]

From *A Moveable Feast*, by Ernest Hemingway:

You got very hungry **when** you did not eat enough in Paris **because** all the bakery shops had such good things in the windows **and** people ate outside at tables on the sidewalk **so** that you saw and smelled the food. **When** you had given up journalism **and** were writing nothing that anyone in America would buy, explaining at home that you were lunching out with someone, the best place to go was the Luxembourg gardens **where** you saw **and** smelled nothing to eat all the way from the Place de l'Observatoire to the rue de Vaugirard. There you could always go into the Luxembourg museum **and** all the paintings were sharpened **and** clearer **and** more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cezanne much better **and** to see truly how he made landscapes **when** I was hungry. I used to wonder **if** he were hungry too **when** he painted; **but** I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat. It was one of those unsound **but** illuminating thoughts you have **when** you have been sleepless or hungry. [EVEN THOUGH MANY OF THESE ARE SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS, I WOULD ARGUE THAT HEMINGWAY'S OVERALL EFFECT IS THAT OF PARATAXIS.]

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From "Goodbye to All That," in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, by Joan Didion:

I remember walking across 62nd Street one twilight that first spring, **or** the second spring, they were all alike for a while. I was late to meet someone **but** I stopped at Lexington Avenue **and** bought a peach **and** stood on the corner eating it **and** knew that I had come out of the West **and** reached the mirage. I could taste the peach **and** feel the soft air blowing from a subway grating on my legs **and** I could smell lilac **and** garbage **and** expensive perfume **and** I knew that it would cost something sooner or later. . . . [PARATAXIS]

Week Thirteen: It's All Relative—More Clauses

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Phrases and Clauses” (again), especially pages 193-195

Among the many grammar sites that deal with relative clauses, I find these to be especially helpful:

writingcenter.unc.edu/relative-clauses

chompchomp.com/terms/relativeclause

Grammar Girl is easy to follow on *that* v. *which*, which she takes a crack at a few times:

quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/which-versus-that-0

quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/where-versus-in-which

quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/which-versus-that

The Wikipedia entry is a bit geeky for my taste, but if you want to take a deep dive, go for it:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Relative_clause

Lesson and discussion

A relative clause is a dependent clause that allows us to give additional information about something without starting another sentence. Relative clauses must contain a subject and predicate (otherwise, they wouldn't be clauses). They are introduced by either:

- a **relative pronoun** (*who, whom, whose, which, that, whoever, whomever, whosever, whichever*) or
- a **relative adverb** (*when, where, why*)

The extra information contained in the relative clause can be critical to sentence clarity, in which case it's called an essential or defining or restrictive clause. But the information can also be superfluous, in which case it's called nonessential or nondefining or nonrestrictive.

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(The idea of the latter is that you could remove the entire clause from the sentence without affecting the meaning or clarity.) Whether a clause is essential or nonessential has a big impact on the way you punctuate the sentence and determines which relative pronoun you use for the clause.

Relative clauses are—bar none—the hardest thing to teach to a grammar class or a novice writer. In addition to the material in the book chapter, I have prepared a cheat sheet, which is in the Handout. It's nice to be able to give students something they can keep and use as a reference. If you have found another tool that you think is useful, please send it to me!

In addition to what is here, I spend a lot of time talking about “main clauses” and what I call “nested clauses.” The main clause is the independent clause that is the main part of the sentence. The nested clause is the relative clause or—heaven help us!—*clauses* that live within this main clause. In *Sin and Syntax*, I use the metaphor of a river delta with many converging waterways to convey the idea of a sentence with multiple clauses. In class, I often use the image of a *matryoshka*, or Russian nesting doll. Various relative clauses can fit inside each other, much as a little baby can fit inside a series of ever-larger babushka figures.

It's important for students to grasp, first, that a relative clause, taken in its entirety, can function as a part of a sentence—a subject, say, or a direct object, or an adverb. They need to begin to see these relative clauses as units operating as discrete parts of the main clauses. Again, the idea of nested clauses helps. Once they get good at spotting these units, I present the really tricky thing: figuring out whether to use *who* or *whom*, *whoever* or *whomever*. The key here is to parse the clause and determine how the pronoun in question is

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operating *within its own clause*—i.e., as a subject or an object.

Learning relative clauses is all about practice, practice, practice. Relative clauses are so tough that it's best to practice with sentences, rather than a larger composition.

In-class exercises

1. Review the cheat sheet in the Handout.
2. Identify the relative clauses in the list of sentences in the Handout.
3. Review my “tricky” relative clauses in the Handout.

Homework

Mentor me, please. Reflect upon the mentors or personalities that have been a great influence in your life. Start by writing a few short sentences on each person, then try to meld some of the ideas together by using relative clauses. (Example: Robert Torrey, *who was like a surrogate father to me*, inspired me to work hard. He urged me to go to Princeton, *which was his alma mater*.)

More on sentence DNA. You might think it impossible to find a case where a relative clause made a passage brilliant, but consider this one, from Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*:

The author feels obligated to acknowledge that, yes, the success of a memoir—of any book, really—has a lot to do with how appealing its narrator is. To address this, he offers the following:

- That he is like you

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- That, like you, he falls asleep shortly after he becomes drunk
- That he sometimes has sex without condoms
- That he sometimes falls asleep when he is drunk having sex without condoms
- That he never gave his parents a proper burial
- That he never finished college
- That he expects to die young
- That, because his father smoked and drank and died as a result, he is afraid of food
- That he smiles when he sees black men holding babies

Using Eggers as a model, write a string of relative clauses (it's OK to have fewer than nine) expressing the appeal of a certain person—you or anyone in your family. It's also OK to be playful or over the top.

Then start again, using subordinating conjunctions (*although, because, despite, if, since, while, etc.*) to lay out how your personality does or doesn't reflect that of your parents or your grandparents. The subordinating conjunctions should build some complexity into the paragraph by emphasizing paradoxes, or perhaps cause-and-effect relationships. (*Although my father was a military officer who respected the chain of command, he raised three kids who eschewed every sort of authority.*)

Down the rabbit hole. As a way of testing your grasp of phrases and clauses, identify each of the following phrases (underlined) and clauses [in square brackets] from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll—i.e., say what kind of phrase (appositive, gerund, etc.) or clause (subordinate, relative, independent) it is:

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Alice did not think that it was so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!”

[When she thought it over afterwards,] it occurred to her [that she ought to have wondered at this,] [but at the time it all seemed quite natural.]

[But when the Rabbit took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket and looked at it and then hurried on,] [Alice started to her feet.]

It flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket or a watch to take out of it.

Burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

Week Thirteen: It's All Relative—More Clauses/Handout

Lesson and Discussion

Cheat sheet

A relative clause is a dependent clause that allows us to give additional information about something without starting another sentence. Relative clauses must contain a subject and predicate (otherwise, they wouldn't be clauses). They are introduced by either:

- a **relative pronoun** (*who, whom, whose, which, that, whoever, whomever, whosever, whichever*) or
- a **relative adverb** (*when, where, why*)

The sentence *The man who called me last night was my uncle* contains the relative clause *who called me last night*. The clause contains a subject and predicate (*who* and *called me last night*). The relative clause begins with the relative pronoun *who* and modifies the noun *man*, which is the subject of the independent clause *the man was my uncle*.

When relative clauses modify nouns, they are also called *adjective* or *adjectival* clauses and they answer the questions *What kind? How many?* or *Which one?* When relative clauses modify verbs, adjectives, or adverbs, they are called *adverbial* clauses and they answer the questions *When? Where? How?* and *How much?*

Within a sentence, a relative clause might also act as a noun, serving as a subject, a direct object, an indirect object, a complement, or the object of a preposition.

When using relative clauses, consider whether the relative clause is essential or nonessential. This will determine which relative pronoun

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you use. Also consider whether the relative clause refers to a person or an object. If it is essential, you will probably use *who* or *that* (and you *will not* need to set off the clause with commas). If it is nonessential, you will probably use *who* or *which* (and you probably *will* need to set off the clause with commas).

For examples and charts, please see English Grammar Online, at ego4u.com/en/cram-up/grammar/relative-clauses

Here is an excerpt from that site to help you see how we make relative clauses:

How to form relative clauses

Imagine, a girl is talking to Tom. You want to know who she is and ask a friend whether he knows her. You could say:

A girl is talking to Tom. Do you know the girl?

That sounds rather complicated, doesn't it? It would be easier with a relative clause: you put both pieces of information into one sentence. Start with the most important thing—you want to know who the girl is:

Do you know the girl . . .

As your friend cannot know which girl you are talking about, you need to put in the additional information—the girl is talking to Tom. Use *the girl* only in the first part of the sentence, in the second part replace it with the relative pronoun (for people, use the relative pronoun *who*). So the final sentence is:

Do you know the girl **who** is talking to Tom?

Relative clauses and punctuation. Punctuating relative clauses can be tricky. Whether a clause is essential or nonessential will tell you when you need or don't need commas.

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Essential relative clauses. Essential relative clauses give detailed information that in some way defines a word or a person or a general term. A relative clause is essential when you *need* the information it provides. Essential relative clauses are *not* enclosed by commas.

Repeating the example above, from English Grammar Online, imagine Tom is in a room with five girls. One girl is talking to Tom, and you ask somebody whether he knows that girl:

Do you know the girl who is talking to Tom?

The phrase *who is talking to Tom* is essential, so no commas are used.

This stuff can be confusing. To test your understanding, look at the following sentence. Is the relative clause essential?

The children who skateboard in the street are noisy in the early evening.

Children is nonspecific. To know which ones we are talking about, we must have the information in the relative clause. Thus, the relative clause is essential and requires no commas.

Nonessential relative clauses. Nonessential relative clauses give additional information about a word or person or term, but this information can be deleted from the sentence without disturbing the meaning. The information is *not needed* to understand the gist. Nonessential relative clauses are put in commas.

Let's go back to Tom from English Grammar Online. Tom is in a room with only one girl. The two are talking to each other, and you ask somebody whether he knows this girl. Here, the relative clause is nonessential, because in this situation it is obvious which girl you mean.

Do you know the girl, who is talking to Tom?

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Note: In nonessential relative clauses, *that* cannot replace *who/which*:

Do you speak Spanish, which is a language increasingly helpful to know?

In relative clauses, we decide whether to use *who* or *whom* based on the role the pronoun plays in the clause:

David, who invited me to *Hamlet*, is a superb actor.

David, whom we saw yesterday in *Hamlet*, is a superb actor.

To test your understanding of even more confusing stuff, let's look at another sentence. Is the clause in it essential or nonessential?

Matthew and Loretta, who skateboard in the street, are noisy in the early evening.

We've replaced *children* with the more specific *Matthew and Loretta*. So the relative clause becomes nonessential and *does* require commas to separate it from the rest of the sentence.

How about this clause:

Dan said good night to Joe, the only one of his roommates who could play video games until his eyes blurred.

That clause tells us which one of Dan's roommates could play video games all night, so it's essential and does not need a comma preceding it.

Recap

- Essential clause referring to person or people: Use *who* or *that* (no commas).
- Essential clause referring to thing or things: Use *that* (no commas).

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- Nonessential clause renaming the subject and referring to person or people: Use *who* with a comma or commas.
- Nonessential clause renaming the subject and referring to thing or things: Use *which* with a comma or commas.

In-class exercises

1. Review the cheat sheet (above).
2. Identify the relative clauses in the following sentences:

I want whichever flavor you want.

No attempt was made to hide the extension cords, which swung above the seats like nooses.

Do you speak Spanish, which is a language increasingly helpful to know?

David, whom we saw yesterday in *Hamlet*, is a superb actor.

I always listen when you tell me that you love me.

“And your speeches are long,” said Matthew Freud, the public-relations man, who is married to Elisabeth Murdoch, Rupert’s daughter. (Adapted from a *New Yorker* “Talk of the Town” piece, October 12, 2009)

I’d like to thank everybody who ever punched or kissed me in my life. And everybody whom I ever punched or kissed. (John Patrick Shanley, slightly corrected, in his speech accepting an Oscar for the screenplay of *Moonstruck*)

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At the tea stall Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet. (From *Interpreter of Maladies*, by Jhumpa Lahiri)

3. Here are “tricky” relative clauses—tricky because they involve “nested clauses.” Select the correct relative pronoun (*who* or *whom*) in each case:

Leopold is the one who/whom lost his bloomers.

Invite whoever/whomever is gullible enough to come.

Who/whom else would I expect to run into on a dark staircase at this hour?

The issue will confront whoever/whomever is named sometime in the next few months as the undersecretary of transportation.

I never know if telemarketers are who/whom they claim to be.

And now for some really tricky ones. Are the relative pronouns here (*who* or *whom*) right or wrong?

“All too often, the character simply kills off the real person. It’s easy to understand why. You can wake up tomorrow as Earl Simmons, a kid from a bad neighborhood **whom** no one ever gave a fuck about for the first 26 years of his life. Or you can be DMX, a character who sells millions of records, and **whom** every kid in America loves, and behave like LMX

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does in his rhymes.” (Lyor Cohen, president of Island Def Jam, quoted in a *New Yorker* article on hip-hop)

I'd like to thank everybody **who** ever punched or kissed me in my life. And everybody **who** I ever punched or kissed. (John Patrick Shanley, in his speech accepting an Oscar for the screenplay of *Moonstruck*)

At the tea stall Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about **who** should take Tina to the toilet. (From *Interpreter of Maladies*, by Jhumpa Lahiri)

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

Week Thirteen: It's All Relative—More Clauses/Answer Key

In-class exercises

2. Identify the relative clauses in the following sentences:

I want whichever flavor you want.

No attempt was made to hide the extension cords, which swung above the seats like nooses.

Do you speak Spanish, which is a language increasingly helpful to know?

David, whom we saw yesterday in *Hamlet*, is a superb actor.

I always listen when you tell me that you love me. [TWO CLAUSES!]

“And your speeches are long,” said Matthew Freud, the public-relations man, who is married to Elisabeth Murdoch, Rupert’s daughter. (Adapted from a *New Yorker* “Talk of the Town” piece, October 12, 2009)

I’d like to thank everybody who ever punched or kissed me in my life. And everybody whom I ever punched or kissed. (John Patrick Shanley, slightly corrected, in his speech accepting an Oscar for the screenplay of *Moonstruck*)

At the tea stall Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet. (From *Interpreter of Maladies*, by Jhumpa Lahiri)

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3. Here are “tricky” relative clauses—tricky because they involve “nested clauses.” Select the correct relative pronoun (*who* or *whom*) in each case:

Leopold is the one who lost his bloomers.

Invite whoever is gullible enough to come.

Whom else would I expect to run into on a dark staircase at this hour?

The issue will confront whoever is named sometime in the next few months as the undersecretary of transportation.

I never know if telemarketers are who they claim to be.

And now for some really tricky ones. Are the relative pronouns here (*who* or *whom*) right or wrong?

All too often, the character simply kills off the real person. It's easy to understand why. You can wake up tomorrow as Earl Simmons, a kid from a bad neighborhood **whom** no one ever gave a fuck about for the first 26 years of his life. Or you can be DMX, a character who sells millions of records, and **whom** every kid in America loves, and behave like LMX does in his rhymes. (Lyor Cohen, president of Island Def Jam, quoted in a *New Yorker* article on hip-hop). [BOTH CORRECT]

I'd like to thank everybody **who** ever punched or kissed me in my life. And everybody **who** I ever punched or kissed.

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(John Patrick Shanley, in his speech accepting an Oscar for the screenplay of *Moonstruck*) [FIRST IS CORRECT; SECOND IS INCORRECT]

At the tea stall Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about **who** should take Tina to the toilet. (From *Interpreter of Maladies*, by Jhumpa Lahiri) [CORRECT]

Down the rabbit hole. Identify each of the following phrases (underlined) and clauses [in square brackets] from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll—i.e., say what kind of phrase (appositive, gerund, etc.) or clause (subordinate, relative, independent) it is:

Alice did not think that it was so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!" [INFINITIVE]

[When she thought it over afterwards,] it occurred to her [that she ought to have wondered at this,] [but at the time it all seemed quite natural.] [SUBORDINATE; RELATIVE; INDEPENDENT]

[But when the Rabbit took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket and looked at it and then hurried on,] [Alice started to her feet.] [SUBORDINATE; INDEPENDENT]

It flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket or a watch to take out of it. [PREPOSITIONAL; INFINITIVE]

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Burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge. [PARTICIPIAL; PREPOSITIONAL; PREPOSITIONAL; PREPOSITIONAL]

Week Fourteen: Controlling Clauses, Sliding In and Out of Sentences

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Length and Tone”

“Sentences Crisp, Sassy, and Stirring,” New York *Times* Opinionator:
opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/28/sentences-crisp-sassy-stirring

Lessons and discussion

I love the analogy used by the early-twentieth-century British critic George Saintsbury, who compared the letting-out and pulling-in of clauses to the letting-out and pulling-in of the slide of a trombone. What I try to convey to students this week is that if they can master the different kinds of sentences, they can begin to craft their prose in such a way as to produce a desired effect in the reader. How cool is that?

The first step in controlling clauses is to understand them and to combine them to produce different kinds of sentences. For comic sentences—or to produce an emotional jolt—short, staccato sentences work well. Short sentences also work well to underscore the simplicity of, say, a particular character.

In-class exercises

1. To rally his citizens after the defeat at Dunkirk, Winston Churchill chose a succession of carefully crafted simple sentences, which he arranged so that energy built to a rousing crescendo. Have students analyze those clauses and sentences (on pages 212–13 of *Sin and Syntax*). Then discuss their emotional power.

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2. To describe Papa Correa, the elderly Portuguese laborer who watched my siblings and me after school in rural Hawaii, I intentionally chose simple language and many simple sentences. (See page 214 of *Sin and Syntax*.) Have students label each sentence: Is it simple? Compound? Complex? Compound-complex? Have them also identify phrases. See the directions and the passage in the Handout.

3. For a more lyrical effect, long, fluid sentences work well. Have students look at two passages by Hemingway that illustrate this technique. (See pages 127 and 248–49 of *Sin and Syntax*.)

Homework

Slogging through slogans. The following are famous political catchphrases from history. Identify them as phrases, fragments, simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, or a blend of more than one of those:

We are all republicans—we are all federalists. (Thomas Jefferson's first inaugural address)

Tippecanoe and Tyler too (Popular slogan for Whig Party candidates William Henry Harrison and John Tyler in the 1840 U.S. presidential election)

Four score and seven years ago (Abraham Lincoln, delivering the Gettysburg Address)

Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy (Franklin D. Roosevelt, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor)

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I shall return. (U.S. General Douglas MacArthur, after leaving the Philippines)

The buck stops here. (Harry Truman)

Ich bin ein Berliner. (John F. Kennedy, in West Berlin)

There you go again. (Ronald Reagan to Jimmy Carter, in a 1980 presidential debate)

Where's the beef? (Former vice president Walter Mondale, attacking Colorado senator Gary Hart in a 1984 Democratic primary debate)

Read my lips: no new taxes. (George H. W. Bush at the 1988 Republican Convention)

That giant sucking sound (Ross Perot in 1992, on American jobs going to Mexico if the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] was ratified)

It's the economy, stupid. (Used during Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign and widely attributed to Clinton adviser James Carville)

I'm the decider. (George W. Bush, when asked about the fate of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in April 2006)

Yes we can (Slogan of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign)

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Make America Great Again (Words embroidered on red baseball caps during Donald Trump's 2016 campaign—a shortened version of Ronald Reagan's 1980 slogan, "Let's make America great again")

From draft to craft. Write a character sketch modeled on the one of Papa Correa. It's fine to start in a kind of stream-of-consciousness style and then craft the sentences afterward. In other words, in the first draft, don't think about the sentences, per se. Just try to write descriptively, expressively, and evocatively. In rewriting, carefully work the sentences, mixing long and short, complex and simple, and adjusting clauses and phrases. Look for the opportunity to use relative or subordinate conjunctions (especially if you want to emphasize paradoxes or, perhaps, cause-and-effect relationships).

Parallel parts. It's not just words and phrases that can be parallel. Which elements are parallel in the following examples? Identify the kind of phrase or clause echoed:

I found a way to be a good mother and still be a great mom.
(From a SunnyD ad)

The loss we felt was not the loss of ham but the loss of pig.
(From "Death of a Pig," by E. B. White)

What special affinities appeared to him to exist between the moon and women? Her nocturnal predominance: her satellitic dependence: her luminary reflection: her constancy under all her phases, rising and setting by her appointed times, waxing and waning: the forced invariability of her aspect: her indeterminate response to inaffirmative interrogation: her potency over effluent and refluent waters:

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her power to enamour, to mortify, to invest with beauty, to render insane, to incite to and aid delinquency: the tranquil inscrutability of her visage: the terribility of her isolated dominant resplendent propinquity: her omens of tempest and of calm: the stimulation of her light, her motion and her presence: the admonition of her craters, her arid seas, her silence: her splendour, when visible: her attraction, when invisible. (From *Ulysses*, by James Joyce)

**Week Fourteen:
Controlling Clauses, Sliding In and Out of
Sentences/Handout**

In-class exercises

2. In this description of Papa Correa, analyze the clauses and sentences. Label each one as either simple, compound, complex, or compound-complex. (Also keep an eye out for phrases.)

By the time we knew Papa, his body was hinged at the waist and starting to wither. He always wore baggy plantation khakis and a white cotton shirt. I never saw him in a pair of shoes. Instead, he wore leather thongs that crossed over his toes, which bunched together like overgrown tree roots. His legs had weakened: he used a walker to move around the house and the yard. The walker kept his upper body strong. He was barrel-chested, with thick, hairy arms and stubby fingers. One of his fingers was a stump, as a result of an accident with a saw. Stump or no, he had a gentle touch.

Despite his difficulty walking, Papa was a terrific gardener. Beds of flowers and ferns surrounded the house, but Papa spent even more time caring for countless potted plants, on several raised wooden platforms in the backyard. There, in old coffee tins, he sprouted trees and raised vegetables. He was forever sending us home with avocados and bananas.

Homework

Slogging through slogans. The following are famous political catchphrases from history. Identify them as phrases, fragments, simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, or a blend of more than one of those:

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We are all republicans—we are all federalists. (Thomas Jefferson's first inaugural address)

Tippecanoe and Tyler too (Popular slogan for Whig Party candidates William Henry Harrison and John Tyler in the 1840 U.S. presidential election)

Four score and seven years ago (Abraham Lincoln, delivering the Gettysburg Address)

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I shall return. (U.S. General Douglas MacArthur, after leaving the Philippines)

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There you go again. (Ronald Reagan to Jimmy Carter, in a 1980 presidential debate)

Where's the beef? (Former vice president Walter Mondale, attacking Colorado senator Gary Hart in a 1984 Democratic primary debate)

Read my lips: no new taxes. (George H. W. Bush at the 1988 Republican Convention)

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That giant sucking sound (Ross Perot in 1992, on American jobs going to Mexico if the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] was ratified)

It's the economy, stupid. (Used during Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign and widely attributed to Clinton adviser James Carville)

I'm the decider. (George W. Bush, when asked about the fate of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in April 2006)

Yes we can (Slogan of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign)

Make America Great Again (Words embroidered on red baseball caps during Donald Trump's 2016 campaign—a shortened version of Ronald Reagan's 1980 slogan, "Let's make America great again")

Parallel parts. It's not just words and phrases that can be parallel. Which elements are parallel in the following examples? Identify the kind of phrase or clause echoed:

I found a way to be a good mother and still be a great mom.
(From a SunnyD ad)

The loss we felt was not the loss of ham but the loss of pig.
(From "Death of a Pig," by E. B. White)

What special affinities appeared to him to exist between the moon and women? Her nocturnal predominance: her

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satellitic dependence: her luminary reflection: her constancy under all her phases, rising and setting by her appointed times, waxing and waning: the forced invariability of her aspect: her indeterminate response to inaffirmative interrogation: her potency over effluent and refluent waters: her power to enamour, to mortify, to invest with beauty, to render insane, to incite to and aid delinquency: the tranquil inscrutability of her visage: the terribility of her isolated dominant resplendent propinquity: her omens of tempest and of calm: the stimulation of her light, her motion and her presence: the admonition of her craters, her arid seas, her silence: her splendour, when visible: her attraction, when invisible. (From *Ulysses*, by James Joyce)

**Week Fourteen:
Controlling Clauses, Sliding In and Out of
Sentences/Answer Key**

In-class exercises

2. In these descriptions of Papa Correa, analyze the clauses and sentences. Label each one as either simple, compound, complex, or compound-complex. (Also keep an eye out for phrases.)

By the time we knew Papa, his body was hinged at the waist and starting to wither. [COMPOUND-COMPLEX SENTENCE; INDEPENDENT CLAUSE CONTAINING A COMPOUND PREDICATE; *BY THE TIME* FUNCTIONS AS A SUBORDINATE CONJUNCTION, LIKE *WHEN*.]

He always wore baggy plantation khakis and a white cotton shirt.

[SIMPLE SENTENCE]

I never saw him in a pair of shoes.

[SIMPLE SENTENCE WITH PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE]

Instead, he wore leather thongs that crossed over his toes, which bunched together like overgrown tree roots.

[SENTENCE ADVERB/TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSION (*INSTEAD*), FOLLOWED BY COMPLEX SENTENCE (I.E., INDEPENDENT CLAUSE + TWO RELATIVE CLAUSES) CONTAINING A PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE]

His legs had weakened: he used a walker to move around the house and the yard.

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[COMPOUND SENTENCE—TWO INDEPENDENT CLAUSES
JOINED BY COLON—AND CONTAINING A PREPOSITIONAL
PHRASE]

The walker kept his upper body strong.

[SIMPLE SENTENCE]

He was barrel-chested, with thick, hairy arms and stubby
fingers.

[SIMPLE SENTENCE CONTAINING A PREPOSITIONAL
PHRASE]

One of his fingers was a stump, as a result of an accident
with a saw.

[SIMPLE SENTENCE CONTAINING THREE PREPOSITIONAL
PHRASES]

Stump or no, he had a gentle touch.

[SIMPLE SENTENCE; *STUMP OR NO* IS IDIOMATIC AND
PERPLEXING, BUT IT IS NOT A CLAUSE.]

Despite his difficulty walking, Papa was a terrific gardener.

[CAN BE LOOKED AT AS A SIMPLE SENTENCE WITH AN
INTRODUCTORY PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE, OR AS A
COMPLEX SENTENCE WHOSE FIRST CLAUSE IS A
VARIATION ON *DESPITE THE FACT THAT HE HAD
DIFFICULTY WALKING*]

Beds of flowers and ferns surrounded the house, but Papa
spent even more time caring for countless potted plants, on
several raised wooden platforms in the backyard.

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[COMPOUND SENTENCE—TWO INDEPENDENT CLAUSES
JOINED BY COMMA AND COORDINATE CONJUNCTION—
FOLLOWED BY GERUND PHRASE AND PREPOSITIONAL
PHRASES]

There, in old coffee tins, he sprouted trees and raised
vegetables.

[SIMPLE SENTENCE CONTAINING A PREPOSITIONAL
PHRASE]

He was forever sending us home with avocados and
bananas.

[SIMPLE SENTENCE WITH PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE]

Homework

Slogging through slogans. The following are famous political
catchphrases from history. Identify them as phrases, fragments,
simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, or a
blend of more than one of those:

We are all republicans—we are all federalists. (Thomas
Jefferson's first inaugural address)

[COMPOUND JOINED BY DASH]

Tippecanoe and Tyler too (Popular slogan for Whig Party
candidates William Henry Harrison and John Tyler in the
1840 U.S. presidential election)

[FRAGMENT]

Four score and seven years ago (Abraham Lincoln, delivering
the Gettysburg Address)

[FRAGMENT]

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Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy (Franklin D. Roosevelt, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor)

[FRAGMENT]

I shall return. (U.S. General Douglas MacArthur, after leaving the Philippines)

[SIMPLE SENTENCE]

The buck stops here. (Harry Truman)

[SIMPLE SENTENCE]

Ich bin ein Berliner. (John F. Kennedy, in West Berlin)

[SIMPLE SENTENCE]

There you go again. (Ronald Reagan to Jimmy Carter, in a 1980 presidential debate)

[SIMPLE SENTENCE]

Where's the beef? (Former vice president Walter Mondale, attacking Colorado senator Gary Hart in 1984 Democratic primary debate)

[SIMPLE SENTENCE]

Read my lips: no new taxes. (George H. W. Bush during the 1988 U.S. presidential election)

[COMPOUND JOINED BY COLON]

That giant sucking sound (Ross Perot in 1992, on American jobs going to Mexico if the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] was ratified)

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[FRAGMENT]

It's the economy, stupid. (Used during Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign and widely attributed to Clinton adviser James Carville)

[SIMPLE SENTENCE]

I'm the decider. (George W. Bush, when asked about the fate of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in April 2006)

[SIMPLE SENTENCE]

Yes, we can. (Slogan of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign)

[SIMPLE SENTENCE, ALTHOUGH PART OF IT (PERHAPS *DO IT*) IS IMPLIED]

Make America Great Again (Words embroidered on red baseball caps during Donald Trump's 2016 campaign—a shortened version of Ronald Reagan's 1980 slogan, "Let's make America great again.")

[SIMPLE SENTENCE. DO YOU SEE HOW THE SUBJECT IS IMPLIED—*YOU* OR *LET'S*—AND THAT THE VERB IS FACTITIVE: *AMERICA* IS THE DIRECT OBJECT; *GREAT* IS AN OBJECT COMPLEMENT?]

Parallel parts. Which elements are parallel in the following examples?

I found a way to be a good mother and still be a great mom.
(From a SunnyD ad)

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The loss we felt was not the loss of ham but the loss of pig.
(From "Death of a Pig," by E. B. White)

What special affinities appeared to him to exist between the moon and women? Her nocturnal predominance: her satellitic dependence: her luminary reflection: her constancy under all her phases, rising and setting by her appointed times, waxing and waning: the forced invariability of her aspect: her indeterminate response to inaffirmative interrogation: her potency over effluent and refluent waters: her power to enamour, to mortify, to invest with beauty, to render insane, to incite to and aid delinquency: the tranquil inscrutability of her visage: the terribility of her isolated dominant resplendent propinquity: her omens of tempest and of calm: the stimulation of her light, her motion and her presence: the admonition of her craters, her arid seas, her silence: her splendour, when visible: her attraction, when invisible. (From *Ulysses*, by James Joyce) [THIS BEING JOYCE, NOTHING IS EVER SIMPLE OR STRAIGHT-FORWARD, FROM PUNCTUATION TO PRECISE SYNTAX IN EACH OF THE PARALLEL ELEMENTS. IT SHOULD BE FUN TO DISCUSS. ALL THE ELEMENTS ARE NOUN PHRASES, SOMETIMES MODIFIED, SOMETIMES NOT, SOMETIMES STARTING WITH *HER*, SOMETIMES STARTING WITH *THE*.]

**Week Fifteen:
Those @#!%* Commas (and Other Squirrely
Parts of Punctuation)**

Reading

“A Punctuation Primer”: sinandsyntax.com/talking-syntax/a-punctuation-primer

“Punctuation Pet Peeves”: sinandsyntax.com/talking-syntax/punctuation-pet-peeves

Eats, Shoots & Leaves, by Lynne Truss, is an enjoyable read—one long rant, really—on punctuation. While it's not very useful pedagogically, it can help enliven this lesson.

Lesson and discussion

I've discussed punctuation, where relevant, within the chapters of *Sin and Syntax*, and I try to touch on it throughout the semester, so that the review of important sentence punctuation isn't a Sisyphean task. Among the things I've emphasized earlier are commas within strings of adjectives before a noun, hyphens in compounds, commas after introductory prepositional phrases, commas with appositive and participial phrases, commas (or dashes or parentheses) with nonessential clauses, and the various ways to punctuate compound and complex sentences.

For the lesson, I use “A Punctuation Primer” and “Punctuation Pet Peeves,” going step by step through the various parts of punctuation.

This is also a good time to review sentence adverbs (*frankly, my dear . . .*), conjunctive adverbs, and what many language mavens call “transitional expressions,” because they all set up situations requiring smart punctuation.

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We discuss the chart of “transitional expressions” in the Handout and use the box on pages 209–10 of *Sin and Syntax* to review ways to punctuate sentences, spending some time discussing why and when to use periods, semicolons, or commas, plus coordinate conjunctions to link independent clauses.

Punctuation takes loads of trial-and-error work, review, and re-review. I collect incorrectly punctuated sentences students have written throughout the semester and pull them out here at the end, using their real mistakes for instruction.

In-class exercises

1. Take a passage by one of your favorite writers—one that you know almost by heart. Type it up without any of the punctuation marks. Put it aside for a day or two. Come back to it and reinsert the punctuation, trying to sense the pauses and the full stops, the flow of ideas and the tangents. Compare it with the original.
2. Do the exercises in the Handout, which contain sentences my students have written; the punctuation needs finessing.
3. Supply punctuation in the paragraphs from a story I wrote, with certain punctuation removed (in the Handout). There is no one right way to punctuate, so, after students try to supply the punctuation in the blanks, review it together. This is a good moment to discuss the differences among commas, dashes, and parentheses for tangents or nonessential phrases and clauses.

Homework

Play around in the punctuation sandbox. Take a passage of your own writing and do what you did with a favorite passage by a

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famous author. That is, type it up without any of the punctuation marks. Then play around: Take some short sentences and weave them together, using commas, with the obligatory coordinate conjunctions, and semicolons. Take some long sentences and change the flow of the ideas, using semicolons and colons. Jam asides into sentences, using dashes and parentheses. Do you find something new that you like?

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

Week Fifteen: Those @#!%* Commas (and Other Squirrely Parts of Punctuation)/Handout

Lesson and discussion

There is a category of words and phrases that many call “transitional expressions.” Some of them might be categorized as adverbs, conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, or prepositional phrases. Others are harder to name. Many require particular punctuation. The following chart, from the UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center (writingcenter.unc.edu) provides a good overview.

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Logical Relationship	Transitional Expression
Similarity	also, in the same way, just as . . . so too, likewise, similarly
Exception/Contrast	but, however, in spite of, on the one hand . . . on the other hand, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, in contrast, on the contrary, still, yet
Sequence/Order	first, second, third, next, then, finally
Time	after, afterward, at last, before, currently, during, earlier, immediately, later, meanwhile, now, recently, simultaneously, subsequently, then
Example	for example, for instance, namely, specifically, to illustrate
Emphasis	even, indeed, in fact, of course, truly
Place/Position	above, adjacent, below, beyond, here, in front, in back, nearby, there
Cause and Effect	accordingly, consequently, hence, so, therefore, thus
Additional Support or Evidence	additionally, again, also, and, as well, besides, equally important, further, furthermore, in addition, moreover, then
Conclusion/Summary	finally, in a word, in brief, in conclusion, in the end, in the final analysis, on the whole, thus, to conclude, to summarize, in sum, in summary

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In-class exercises

2. Add the appropriate punctuation in these sentences, or correct the existing punctuation. (Students of mine wrote them.) While you're at it, identify the phrases and clauses.

Years ago he fell asleep with a cigarette in his mouth and his mattress caught on fire.

The stove is dead center, right in line with the front door, whenever you enter, nine times out of ten you see Calhoun himself frying catfish fifteen paces away.

Some stare at the hosts searching for acknowledgment.

The early-morning dew coats the grass and your eyes are captivated by the sight of the sun sparkling against the flowers.

You must be quiet though to catch a glimpse of nature at play.

I cross in three strides to the window which takes up most of one wall.

We lie down finding that the bed is quite comfortable.

3. Here are some paragraphs from a story I wrote about taking restful vacations, published in *Yoga Journal*. Supply the appropriate punctuation in the blanks:

“The yogic view is that when the mind quiets down, we connect with *prajna*, or wisdom_____the already

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illuminated part of the mind,” says Stephen Cope, director of the Kripalu Institute for Extraordinary Living and author of *The Wisdom of Yoga: A Seeker's Guide to Extraordinary Living*.

“My life here in western Massachusetts is intense and highly routinized,” the fifty-six-year-old psychotherapist explains. “I direct this institute, I do research projects, I teach____I often work seven days a week. I *love* it, but it's very busy and fast-paced. I find that I have to get *out* of here.”

“Out of here” is often Key West, Florida, where the climate is warm and the achievement mentality is AWOL____“the cab driver has a PhD from Brown and is perfectly comfortable just being.” Cope never takes his computer or his cell phone, which he calls an exercise in putting work into perspective: he is reminded that he really does not need to be connected to his office every day.

Cope gives himself permission to do absolutely whatever he wants. “I cycle, I swim, I lie on the beach, I read novels,” he says. “I don't force myself to do any particular *asana* practice____sometimes I want to do Bikram, sometimes I want to stretch on my own, sometimes I want to sit on a rock and meditate.”

. . .“We try to take holidays where there's a lot of being and not a lot of doing,” says Dina Silver, an executive coach____her husband, Steve Persky, is the CEO of an investment firm____ “We are A+ students at lists, schedules, responsibilities, and deliverables, but we're C- students at kicking back and relaxing. We do try____we practice yoga, we

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hike on Sundays, we talk all the time about how to have a more balanced life.” Silver and Persky have found their personal recipe for restoration. “We needed something in the middle between being beach vegetables____which bores the hell out of me____and being urban sophisticates____which we are in our daily lives),” Silver says. “We finally hit upon self-guided bicycle tours in Europe.”

**Week Fifteen:
Those @#!%* Commas (and Other Squirrely
Parts of Punctuation)/Answer Key**

In-class exercises

2. Add the appropriate punctuation in these sentences, or correct the existing punctuation. While you're at it, identify the phrases and clauses.

Years ago[,] he fell asleep with a cigarette in his mouth, and his mattress caught on fire. [FIRST COMMA OPTIONAL; SECOND COMMA NECESSARY BEFORE INDEPENDENT CLAUSE]

The stove is dead center, right in line with the front door; whenever you enter, nine times out of ten you see Calhoun himself frying catfish fifteen paces away. [SEMICOLON OR PERIOD NEEDED TO HOLD TWO INDEPENDENT CLAUSES TOGETHER]

Some stare at the hosts, searching for acknowledgment. [COMMA NEEDED BEFORE PARTICIPIAL PHRASE]

The early-morning dew coats the grass, and your eyes are captivated by the sight of the sun sparkling against the flowers. [COMMA NEEDED BEFORE COORDINATE CONJUNCTION; SEMICOLON OR PERIOD CAN ALSO BE USED, AND THE *AND* CAN BE DELETED.]

You must be quiet, though, to catch a glimpse of nature at play. [COMMAS NEEDED AROUND NONESSENTIAL TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSION]

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

I cross in three strides to the window, which takes up most of one wall. [COMMA NEEDED BEFORE NONESSENTIAL RESTRICTIVE CLAUSE]

We lie down, finding that the bed is quite comfortable. [COMMA NEEDED BEFORE PARTICIPIAL PHRASE]

3. Paragraphs from a story about taking restful vacations, with the appropriate punctuation in the blanks. Notice that I used a lot of dashes. Many of these could be replaced with a different piece of punctuation—a semicolon, a colon, sometimes even a comma. The important thing to note is that these are “asides” and are sometimes phrases, sometimes clauses.

“The yogic view is that when the mind quiets down, we connect with *prajna*, or wisdom___—__the already illumined part of the mind,” says Stephen Cope, director of the Kripalu Institute for Extraordinary Living and author of *The Wisdom of Yoga: A Seeker’s Guide to Extraordinary Living*.

. . .“My life here in Western Massachusetts is intense and highly routinized,” the fifty-six-year-old psychotherapist explains. “I direct this institute, I do research projects, I teach___—___I often work seven days a week. I *love* it, but it’s very busy and fast-paced. I find that I have to get *out* of here.”

“Out of here” is often Key West, Florida, where the climate is warm and the achievement mentality is AWOL___—___“the cab driver has a PhD from Brown and is perfectly comfortable just being.” Cope never takes his computer or his cell phone,

CONSTANCE HALE'S

which he calls an exercise in putting work into perspective: he is reminded that he really does not need to be connected to his office every day.

Cope gives himself permission to do absolutely whatever he wants. "I cycle, I swim, I lie on the beach, I read novels," he says. "I don't force myself to do any particular *asana* practice. ___ Sometimes I want to do Bikram, sometimes I want to stretch on my own, sometimes I want to sit on a rock and meditate."

. . . "We try to take holidays where there's a lot of being and not a lot of doing," says Dina Silver, an executive coach (___ her husband, Steve Persky, is the CEO of an investment firm ___). ___ "We are A+ students at lists, schedules, responsibilities, and deliverables, but we're C- students at kicking back and relaxing. We do try ___: ___ We practice yoga, we hike on Sundays, we talk all the time about how to have a more balanced life." Silver and Persky have found their personal recipe for restoration. "We needed something in the middle between being beach vegetables ___ (___ which bores the hell out of me ___) ___ and being urban sophisticates ___ (___ which we are in our daily lives ___), ___" Silver says. "We finally hit upon self-guided bicycle tours in Europe."

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

Week Sixteen: Let's Get Quizzical—a Whopping Review

Reading

Sin and Syntax: Review all chapters from the “Words” and “Sentences” sections.

Lesson and discussion

It's time to test where everyone is after fifteen lessons of grappling with grammar. I devote half this lesson to a review and the other half to an exam.

Spend some time reviewing the most salient subjects of the previous fifteen lessons. Here's my recap:

Nouns:	capitalization (common v. proper) compounds and hyphenation fuzzy nouns v. sharp nouns
Pronouns:	<i>its</i> v. <i>it's</i> agreement in case, number indefinite pronouns and subject-verb agreement obscure pronominal reference
Verbs:	static v. dynamic verbs transitive and intransitive verbs; <i>lay</i> and <i>lie</i> tense consistency participles (present, past); identify and correct dangles
Adjectives:	redundancy

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less v. fewer; good v. well; bad v. badly
hyphens in compound modifiers; commas in
lists of adjectives

Adverbs: eliminate "manner" adverbs by choosing
better verbs
avoid "degree" adverbs and the "Valley-girl
verys"

Prepositions: be able to identify particles, infinitives

Conjunctions: be able to identify coordinate and
subordinate conjunctions
than and the pronouns that follow

Subjects + be able to identify a simple subject and a
simple predicate in a sentence

Predicates: understand S-V agreement

Simple be able to identify the five simple
sentence patterns

Sentences: understand pronoun case for subjects,
objects, complements

Phrases: be able to identify each kind of phrase
commas with introductory, appositive, and
participial phrases

Clauses: be able to identify independent,
subordinate, relative clauses
who v. whom in nested relative clauses

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

that v. *which* in essential and nonessential clauses

comma use with subordinate clauses and nonessential clauses

Sentences: appropriately punctuate compound, complex sentences
identify and correct run-ons and comma splices

Since there is a paragraph to parse on the exam, I try to make sure students are brushed up on parsing. I've attached another paragraph from E. B. White that I like to use.

In-class exercises

1. As a way of testing students' grasp of the parts of speech, parse a paragraph (in the Handout) from the opening of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll, using these abbreviations:

N = noun

P = pronoun

V = verb

Aj = adjective

Av = adverb

Pp = preposition

C = conjunction

I = interjection

2. Keep coming back to redundancy! Ask students to recast these sentences to turn redundant pairs into killer nouns, adjectives, and verbs:

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Working as a scuba-diving instructor—scraping barnacles off boats—would be a **mundane, repetitive** existence.

A new game, La Conquête du Monde, later transformed into Risk, was seen as **unique** and **promising**, so Parker Brothers CEO Robert Barton acquired the North American rights.

Consider how keeping a daily checklist might keep you **engaged and excited** about your work.

Managers can build **highly productive** organizations that **recognize and harness** the personal **energies and enthusiasms** of individual workers.

Bonus point. Count the redundancies in this sentence from a real-life manuscript—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and even a prepositional phrase!

A series of events in their **lives and work** eventually led them to **question and reconsider** the **many and varied** images they carried **around in their heads** about who they wanted to be.

Homework

Running down run-ons. It's important, always, to be able to spot run-on sentences. Just as important is to be able to tell when they are a product of a lazy writer (or one who just hasn't studied sentences) and when writers have drafted them for particular stylistic reasons. Take a look at the following run-ons and critique them. Do they merit a strong editor's hand or a genuflect?

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

From a college professor's manuscript:

The author argues that, in the last third of the twentieth century, conspiracy theories might be the most accurate depiction of power relations, and their narrative manifestations (such as spy novels and science fiction) are attempts to conceptualize—or even perceive—the economic and social institutions governing the globalized late-twentieth-century world.

From *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac:

Then they danced down the streets like dingedodies, and I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow Roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes, "Awww!" What did they call such people in Goethe's Germany? Wanting dearly to know how to write like Carlo, the first thing you know, Dean was attacking him with a great amorous soul such as only a con-man can have.

From a label for Old Telegram wine, by Bonny Doon

Vineyards:

BROODING DEPTH YES MOUTHFUL LEGS YES DAZZLING
BREADTH STAGGERING LENGTH YES SUBLIME ROBUST
VIRILE UNCTUOUS HARMONIOUS COMPLETE YES
POWERFUL FINISH GOES ON FOREVER YES DON'T STOP.

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(Hint: The chief wordsmith at the now-defunct Bonny Doon, Randall Grahm, was fond of spoofs. Before you write your critique, read the stream-of-consciousness ending of *Ulysses*, by James Joyce.)

Parsing for peas and potatoes. Here's another passage from E. B. White's "A Report in Spring." Identify every word in the passage, using these abbreviations:

N = noun

P = pronoun

V = verb

Aj = adjective

Av = adverb

Pp = preposition

C = conjunction

I = interjection

The stalks of rhubarb show red, the asparagus has broken through. Peas and potatoes are in, but it is not much use putting seeds in the ground the way things are. The bittern spent a day at the pond, creeping slowly around the shores like a little round-shouldered peddler. . . . By day the goldfinches dip in yellow light, by night the frogs sing the song that never goes out of favor. We opened the lower sash of the window in the barn loft, and the swallows are already building, but mud for their nests is not so easy to come by as in most springtimes.

**Week Sixteen:
Let's Get Quizzical—a Whopping
Review/Handout**

In-class exercises

1. As a way of testing your grasp of the parts of speech, parse a paragraph from the opening of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll. Use these abbreviations:

N = noun

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Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do. Once or twice she had peeped into the book that her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it. The hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid, but she was considering whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies. Suddenly, a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her. There was nothing so very remarkable in that.

2. Keep returning to redundancy! Ask students to recast sentences to turn redundant pairs into killer nouns, adjectives, and verbs:

Working as a scuba-diving instructor—scraping barnacles off boats—would be a mundane, repetitive existence.

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A new game, *La Conquête du Monde*, later transformed into *Risk*, was seen as unique and promising, so Parker Brothers CEO Robert Barton acquired the North American rights.

Consider how keeping a daily checklist might keep you engaged and excited about your work.

Managers can build highly productive organizations that recognize and harness the personal energies and enthusiasms of individual workers.

Bonus point. Count the redundancies in this sentence from a real-life manuscript—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and even a prepositional phrase!

A series of events in their lives and work eventually led them to question and reconsider the many and varied images they carried around in their heads about who they wanted to be.

Homework

Parsing for peas and potatoes. Here's another passage from E. B. White's "A Report in Spring." Identify every word in the passage. Use these abbreviations:

N = noun

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Aj = adjective

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Pp = preposition

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I = interjection

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

The stalks of rhubarb show red, the asparagus has broken through. Peas and potatoes are in, but it is not much use putting seeds in the ground the way things are. The bittern spent a day at the pond, creeping slowly around the shores like a little round-shouldered peddler. . . . By day the goldfinches dip in yellow light, by night the frogs sing the song that never goes out of favor. We opened the lower sash of the window in the barn loft, and the swallows are already building, but mud for their nests is not so easy to come by as in most springtimes.

**Week Sixteen:
Let's Get Quizzical—A Whopping
Review/Answer Key**

In-class exercises

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2. Keep returning to redundancy! Ask students to recast sentences to turn redundant pairs into killer nouns, adjectives, and verbs:

Working as a scuba-diving instructor—scraping barnacles off boats—would be a **mundane**, ~~repetitive~~ existence.

A new game, *La Conquête du Monde*, later transformed into *Risk*, was seen as **unique** and **promising**, so Parker Brothers CEO Robert Barton acquired the North American rights.

Consider how keeping a daily checklist might keep you **engaged and excited** jazzed about your work.

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

Managers can build **highly** productive organizations that ~~recognize and harness~~ take advantage of the personal ~~energies and enthusiasms~~ of individual workers.

Bonus point. Count the redundancies in this sentence from a real-life manuscript—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and even a prepositional phrase!

A series of events ~~in their lives and work~~ eventually led them to **question and reconsider** the **many and varied** images ~~they carried around in their heads~~ about who they wanted to be.

Homework

Parsing for peas and potatoes. Here's another passage from E. B. White's "A Report in Spring." Identify every word in the passage. Use these abbreviations:

N = noun

P = pronoun

V = verb

Aj = adjective (including articles)

Av = adverb

Pp = preposition

C = conjunction

I = interjection

The (Aj) stalks (N) of (Pp) rhubarb (N) show (V) red (Aj), the (Aj) asparagus (N) has (V) broken (V) through (Av). Peas (N) and (C) potatoes (N) are (V) in (Av), but (C) it (P/N) is (V) not (Av) much (Aj) use (N) putting (V/N) seeds (N) in (Pp) the (Aj) ground (N) the (Aj) way (N) things (N) are (V). The (Aj) bittern (N) spent (V) a (Aj) day (N) at

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(Pp) the (Aj) pond (N), creeping (V/Aj) slowly (Av) around (Pp) the (Aj) shores (N) like (Pp) a (Aj) little (Aj) round-shouldered (Aj) peddler (N). . . . By (Pp) day (N) the (Aj) goldfinches (N) dip (V) in (Pp) yellow (Aj) light (N), by (Pp) night (N) the (Aj) frogs (N) sing (V) the (Aj) song (N) that (P) never (Av) goes (V) out (Av/Pp) of (Pp) favor (N). We (P/N) opened (V) the (Aj) lower (Aj) sash (N) of (Pp) the (Aj) window (N) in (Pp) the (Aj) barn (N) loft (N), and (C) the (Aj) swallows (N) are (V) already (Av) building (V), but (C) mud (N) for (Pp) their (P/Aj) nests (N) is (V) not (Av) so (Av) easy (Aj) to (Pp) come (V) by (Av/Pp) as (C) in (Pp) most (Aj) springtimes (N).

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

Week Sixteen:

Let's Get Quizzical—a Whopping Review/Final Exam

Part one (each question counts as 1 point; 50 points total)

(The following sentences have been culled from published sources and from student work. Most of them contain errors. Some do not. In passages with more than one sentence, look only at the one underlined.)

Test your command of syntax. Identify the problem (i.e., naming it—“dangling modifier,” “subject-verb disagreement,” etc.) and then fix it. You may want to recast awkward sentences for clarity.

iTunes is currently running on this computer. If you proceed without quitting iTunes, it is highly recommended that you restart your computer after installation. Continue with install? Yes/No (iTunes dialog box)

The soaring cathedral ceilings are painted a soft, eggshell-white color.

One of the roles of the courts is to protect people who don't have a voice. . . . The vulnerable, the minority, the outcast, the person with the unpopular idea, the journalist who is shaking things up. That's inherently the role of the court. And if somebody doesn't appreciate that role, then I don't think they are going to make a very good justice. (Barack Obama, quoted in the *New Yorker*)

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The Museum of Fine Arts has a new exhibit of Egyptian art, you can see canvases by John Singer Sargent, and there is a Boston Jewish Film Festival.

Then I went back to the empty room in the sad little hotel and laid on the bed and tried to weep. (From "The Gift," in *Travelers' Tales: Paris*)

No one is really listening to each other's points, just pushing their own.

The mailroom is tracking for whom these manuals are being distributed to, so be sure to give them the respective names. (From an email memo within PricewaterhouseCoopers)

No one in Harvard Yard tonight is thinking about summer.

"See if you can lie your chest on the floor," said my yoga teacher.

"Now lay on your backs for savasana," he said later.

There is something powerful and provocative about Phil and I playing these parts, given our history as friends. (John Ortiz, reflecting on his role as Othello and Philip Seymour Hoffman's role as Iago in a fall 2009 production of *Othello* at the Public Theater)

The Senate may or may not pass it's version of health-care legislation.

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

The government bailed out the big banks, but they didn't help small businesses in need of loans.

"Maybe that's a good idea," Charles said. "Who do you report us to?" (From *A Wrinkle in Time*, by Madeleine L'Engle)

In the Great Depression, "less Americans married, less divorced, and it's even been suggested that there was less sex. Babies became relatively rare. 'I thought they'd gone out, like horse-cars," a character in a 1934 novel quips." (From "It Happened One Decade," by Caleb Crain, in the *New Yorker*)

The dog hungrily gobbled up his food.

No attempt has been made to hide the extension cords which swing above each seat like nooses.

Walking down Cambridge Street, the wind whipped through my wool mittens and froze my fingers.

Alex was at the top of a long list of people whom I wanted something truly awful to happen to. (From *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People*, by Toby Young)

Fix or "stet" the punctuation in these sentences:

Do you have any vanilla beans? I'd like to make vanilla bean ice cream.

Is Senator Joe Lieberman's stance on health care more Republican than Democratic?

CONSTANCE HALE'S

President George W. Bush said he did not believe in nation building. Then came Iraq.

The administration's special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, intended to try to change Pakistan's perception of its own interests indirectly. One person on his staff, Vali Nasr, called it "remote-control nation building." (Paraphrased George Packer profile of Holbrooke)

"Your speeches are long," said Matthew Freud, the public-relations man, who is married to Elisabeth Murdoch, Rupert's daughter. (Adapted from a *New Yorker* "Talk of the Town" piece, October 12, 2009)

The sly clever cat crept up on the unsuspecting dove.

The age-old wisdom of our grandparents certainly holds true today.

Welcome to the first Miss Pink contest where pretty ladies of fair complexions are invited to compete after thirty minutes in the hot sun.

How much did you lose in the stock market collapse?

The killing of the bull is part of Ukweshwama an annual ceremony that celebrates a new harvest.

Name which of the five simple sentence patterns each of the following sentences represents:

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

1. S + V (intransitive verb)
2. S + V + DO (transitive verb)
3. S + V + IO + DO (ditransitive verb)
4. S + V + C (static verb)
5. S + V + DO + OC (factitive verb)

She gave all her coworkers invitations.

The chess team elected a captain with a checkered past.

A seagull, obviously looking for a handout, hovered over the ferry's stern.

The banana peel stuck to the bottom of the principal's shoe.

The chef sautéed the short ribs in olive oil.

Bravely, she walked on.

He felt ridiculous in his Elmo costume.

Daniel's antics taught the sisters a valuable lesson.

Identify each of the following phrases by kind (prepositional, infinitive, etc.):

His cover having been blown, the spy leapt from the rooftop.

Texting her boyfriend while driving, the woman crashed into the apple orchard.

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Sid Vicious, the seventies punk legend, murdered Nauseating Nancy.

He lived to make cannoli.

Working feverishly to complete the project, the engineers could finally rest.

Frazzled by Rowan's comment, Mitzy searched her friend's face for a clue.

This strong wind makes the raking and bagging difficult.

To raise the voice is nature, to suppress the volume culture.

Cocoa, the spiteful mutt, stole my dinner last night.

After diving practice, Clarissa admitted her swan dive needed work.

This sentence, the opening of Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*, contains more than one error. Catch and correct each error, for 2 points total:

Like any tale which could take ten books, it is best to quit it by a parenthesis—less than ten volumes might be untrue.

Part two (25 points)

Parse these sentences from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll. Identify each word by part of speech (N, P, V, Aj, Av, Pp, C, I):

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do. Once or twice she had peeped into the book that her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it.

The hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid, but she was considering whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies. Suddenly, a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that.

Part three (25 points)

In the following sentences—modified from the opening of the first chapter (“Down the Rabbit Hole”) of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*—identify the phrases and clauses. That is, say what kind of phrase (appositive, gerund, etc.) or clause (independent, subordinate, relative) it is:

Alice did not think that it was so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!”

Phrase #1:

(When she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural.)

Clause #1:

Clause #2:

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Clause #3:

But when the Rabbit took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket and looked at it and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet.

Clause #4:

Clause #5:

It flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket or a watch to take out of it.

Phrase #2:

Phrase #3:

Burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

Phrase #4:

Phrase #5:

Phrase #6:

In another moment, down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

Phrase #7:

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

Week Sixteen: Let's Get Quizzical—a Whopping Review/Final Exam Answer Key

Part one (each question counts as 1 point; 50 points total)

Identify and fix sentence errors.

iTunes is currently running on this computer. **If you proceed without quitting iTunes, we recommend that you** restart your computer after installation. Continue with install? Yes/No (iTunes dialog box)

[PASSIVE CONSTRUCTION; ID-ING IT AS OBSCURE PRONOMINAL REFERENCE IS ALSO OK.]

The cathedral ceilings are painted **soft** eggshell white.

[REDUNDANCY]

One of the roles of the courts is to protect people who don't have a voice. . . . The vulnerable, the minority, the outcast, the person with the unpopular idea, the journalist who is shaking things up. That's inherently the role of the court. And if somebody doesn't appreciate that role, then I don't think **he or she** is going to make a very good justice.

(Barack Obama, quoted in the *New Yorker*)

[DISAGREEMENT IN NUMBER TIMES TWO. *SOMEBODY* IS SINGULAR AND NEEDS A SINGULAR PRONOUN AND A SINGULAR VERB.]

The Museum of Fine Arts has a new exhibit of Egyptian art, **you can see** canvases by John Singer Sargent, and **there is** a Boston Jewish Film Festival.

CONSTANCE HALE'S

[NOT PARALLEL; ID-ING IT AS A RUN-ON AND BREAKING IT INTO TWO SENTENCES IS ALSO ACCEPTABLE.]

Then I went back to the empty room in the sad little hotel and **laid lay** on the bed and tried to weep. (From "The Gift," in *Travelers' Tales: Paris*)

[LAY V. LIE/TRANSITIVE V. INTRANSITIVE]

No one is really listening to each other's points, just pushing **their his or her** own.

[NO ONE IS SINGULAR, SO THEIR SHOULD BE HIS/HER. ANOTHER GOOD FIX: NO ONE IS LISTENING TO ANYONE ELSE. EACH PERSON IS JUST PUSHING HIS OR HER OWN POINTS.]

The mailroom is tracking **for whom** these manuals are being distributed to, so be sure to give them the respective names. (From an email memo within

PricewaterhouseCoopers)

[WHOM IS AN OBJECT OF TO OR FOR, BUT NOT BOTH. THIS IS A VERY COMMON ERROR. THIS SENTENCE COULD USE RECASTING.]

No one in Harvard Yard tonight is thinking about summer.

[CORRECT: SINGLE SUBJECT, SINGLE VERB]

"See if you can **lie lay** your chest on the floor," said my yoga teacher.

[LAY V. LIE/TRANSITIVE V. INTRANSITIVE]

"Now **lay lie** on your backs for savasana," he said later.

[LAY V. LIE/TRANSITIVE V. INTRANSITIVE]

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

There is something powerful and provocative about Phil and **I-me** playing these parts, given our history as friends. (John Ortiz, reflecting on his role as Othello and Philip Seymour Hoffman's role as Iago in a fall 2009 production at the Public Theater)

[PRONOUN CASE: *ME* IS OBJECT OF *ABOUT*; OTHER PROBLEM WITH THIS SENTENCE: THE FALSE START *THERE IS*]

The Senate may or may not pass **it's its** version of health-care legislation.

[*IT'S* V. *ITS*]

The government bailed out the big banks, but **they it** didn't help small businesses in need of loans.

[PRONOUN AGREEMENT/NUMBER]

"Maybe that's a good idea," Charles said. "**Who Whom** do you report us to?" (From *A Wrinkle in Time*, by Madeleine L'Engle)

[PRONOUN AGREEMENT/CASE: *WHO* V. *WHOM*]

In the Great Depression, "fewer Americans married, fewer divorced, **and it's even been suggested that there was less, probably, fewer had sex.** Babies became relatively rare. 'I thought they'd gone out, like horse-cars,' a character in a 1934 novel quips." (From "It Happened One Decade," by Caleb Crain, in the *New Yorker*, September 21, 2009)

[*LESS* V. *FEWER* IS MAIN PROBLEM; OTHER ISSUES: PASSIVE CONSTRUCTION AND A LACK OF PARALLELISM]

CONSTANCE HALE'S

The dog **hungrily gobbled** up his food.

[REDUNDANCY. IT'S OK TO REPLACE *HIS* WITH *ITS*, BUT PEOPLE ARE DIVIDED ON WHICH PRONOUNS TO USE FOR PETS.]

No attempt has been made to hide the extension cords, which swing above each seat like nooses.

[NONESENTIAL CLAUSE NEEDS A COMMA; *WHICH* COULD ALSO BE REPLACED WITH *THAT* (NO COMMA) IF YOU INTERPRET THE CLAUSE AS ESSENTIAL. THE PASSIVE VOICE COULD BE FIXED, TOO.]

As I walked ~~Walking~~ down Cambridge Street, the wind whipped through my wool mittens and froze my fingers.

[DANGLING PARTICIPLE: THE WIND WASN'T WALKING!]

Alex was at the top of a long list of people whom I wanted something truly awful to happen to. (From *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People*, by Toby Young)

[THE *WHOM* IS CORRECT HERE. IF STUDENTS NOTED THAT *TRULY AWFUL* IS WEAK, THEY ARE STRONG. IF THEY RECAST THE AWKWARD SENTENCE, EVEN STRONGER.]

Fix or “stet” the punctuation in these sentences:

Do you have any vanilla beans? I'd like to make vanilla-bean ice cream.

[COMPOUND MODIFIER, COMPOUND NOUN; SECOND HYPHEN IS OPTIONAL]

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

Is Senator Joe Lieberman's stance on health care more Republican than Democratic?

[CORRECT]

President George W. Bush said he did not believe in nation building. Then came Iraq.

[CORRECT, ALTHOUGH IF YOU ADDED A HYPHEN IN *NATION-BUILDING*, I LET IT STAND.]

The administration's special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, intended to try to change Pakistan's perception of its own interests indirectly. One person on his staff, Vali Nasr, called it "remote-control nation building." (Paraphrased George Packer profile of Holbrooke)

[CORRECT, ALTHOUGH IF STUDENTS ADDED A HYPHEN IN *NATION-BUILDING*, I LET IT STAND.]

"Your speeches are long," said Matthew Freud, the public-relations man, who is married to Elisabeth Murdoch, Rupert's daughter. (Adapted from a *New Yorker* "Talk of the Town" piece, October 12, 2009)

[CORRECT; NOTE PUNCTUATION OF APPOSITIVE PHRASES AND RELATIVE CLAUSE. IT'S ALSO OK TO BREAK UP THE SENTENCE OR USE PARENTHESES FOR THE RELATIVE CLAUSE, WHICH WAS AN IMPROVEMENT OVER THE *NEW YORKER*.]

The clever cat crept up on the unsuspecting dove.

[REDUNDANT; IF STUDENTS LEFT IN *SLY*, GIVE THEM CREDIT ONLY IF THEY PUT A COMMA BETWEEN *SLY* AND *CLEVER*.]

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The age-old wisdom of our grandparents certainly holds true today.

[CORRECT. IF STUDENTS FOUND *AGE-OLD* REDUNDANT, LET THEM KNOW THAT IS A GOOD CATCH.]

Welcome to the first Miss Pink contest, where pretty ladies of fair complexions are invited to compete after thirty minutes in the hot sun.

[COMMA NEEDED BEFORE NONESSENTIAL RELATIVE CLAUSE. PLEASE NOTE THAT *WHERE* IS AN EXAMPLE OF A RELATIVE ADVERB. IF STUDENTS USED A COLON, RATHER THAN A COMMA, THEY SHOULD HAVE ALSO DELETED *WHERE*.]

How much did you lose in the stock-market collapse?

[HYPHEN IN COMPOUND MODIFIER]

The killing of the bull is part of Ukweshwama, an annual ceremony that celebrates a new harvest.

[COMMA NEEDED BEFORE NONESSENTIAL CLAUSE. A DASH WOULD ALSO WORK, BUT NOT A SEMICOLON!]

Name which of the four simple sentence patterns each of the following sentences represents:

1. S + V (intransitive verb)
2. S + V + DO (transitive verb)
3. S + V + IO + DO (ditransitive verb)
4. S + V + C (static verb)
5. S + V + DO + OC (factitive verb)

She gave all her coworkers invitations. [3]

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The chess team elected a captain with a checkered past. [5]

A seagull, obviously looking for a handout, hovered over the ferry's stern. [1]

The banana peel stuck to the bottom of the principal's shoe. [1]

The chef sautéed the short ribs in olive oil. [2]

Bravely, she walked on. [1]

He felt ridiculous in his Elmo costume. [4]

Daniel's antics taught the sisters a valuable lesson. [3]

Identify each of the following phrases by kind (prepositional, infinitive, etc.):

His cover having been blown, the spy leapt from the rooftop. [ABSOLUTE]

Texting her boyfriend while driving, the woman crashed into the apple orchard. [PARTICIPIAL]

Sid Vicious, the seventies punk legend, murdered Nauseating Nancy. [APPOSITIVE]

He lived to make cannoli. [INFINITIVE]

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Working feverishly to complete the project, the engineers could finally rest. [PARTICIPIAL]

Frazzled by Rowan's comment, Mitzy searched her friend's face for a clue. [PARTICIPIAL]

This strong wind makes the raking and bagging difficult. [GERUND]

To raise the voice is nature, to suppress the volume culture. [INFINITIVE]

Cocoa, the spiteful mutt, stole my dinner last night. [APPOSITIVE]

After diving practice, Clarissa admitted her swan dive needed work. [PREPOSITIONAL]

This sentence, the opening of Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*, contains more than one error. Catch and correct each error, for 2 points total:

Like any tale **that** could take ten books, it is best to quit it by a parenthesis—**fewer** than ten volumes might be untrue. [WHAT A HORRID FIRST SENTENCE! ONE POINT IF STUDENTS ADDED A COMMA BEFORE *WHICH* OR CHANGED IT TO *THAT*, AND ANOTHER POINT IF THEY CHANGED *LESS* TO *FEWER*. BONUS POINTS IF THEY CHANGED *LIKE* TO *AS WITH*, OR IF THEY REWROTE THE SENTENCE TO ELIMINATE *LIKE* ALTOGETHER. IT REFERS TO A "DUMMY SUBJECT," MAKING IT INCORRECT.]

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Part two (25 points)

Parse these sentences—ID parts of speech (N, P, V, Aj, Av, Pp, C, I):

Alice (N) was (V) beginning (V) to (Pp) get (V) very (Av) tired (Aj) of (Pp) sitting (V/N) by (Pp) her (P/Aj) sister (N) on (Pp) the (Aj) bank (N) and (C) of (Pp) having (N/V) nothing (N/P) to (Pp) do (V). Once (Av) or (C) twice (Av) she (P/N) had (V) peeped (V) into (Pp) the (Aj) book (N) that (P) her (Aj) sister (N) was (V) reading (V), but (C) it (P/N) had (V) no (Aj) pictures (N) or (C) conversations (N) in (Pp) it (P/N).

The (Aj) hot (Aj) day (N) made (V) her (P/N) feel (V) very (Av) sleepy (Aj) and (C) stupid (Aj), but (C) she (P/N) was (V) considering (V) ***whether (C) ***the (Aj) pleasure (N) of (Pp) making (N/V) a (Aj) daisy-chain (N) would (V) be (V) ***worth (Aj) ***the (Aj) trouble (N) of (Pp) getting (N/V) up (Pp/Av) and (C) picking (V) the (Aj) daisies (N). Suddenly (Av), a (Aj) White (N/Aj) Rabbit (N) with (Pp) pink (Aj) eyes (N) ran (V) close (V) by (Pp) her (P/N).

There (P/N) was (V) nothing (P) so (Av) very (Av) remarkable (Aj) in (Pp) that (P).

***Please note:

- ARTICLES (*A, AN, THE*) DO NOT THEMSELVES MAKE A PART OF SPEECH; THEY ARE INCLUDED UNDER ADJECTIVES.
- *WHETHER* IN THIS PASSAGE IS A SUBORDINATE CONJUNCTION (MUCH LIKE *IF*), BUT I ALSO ACCEPTED IT AS A PRONOUN, BECAUSE IT CAN SOMETIMES BE AN INTERROGATIVE OR RELATIVE PRONOUN.
- *WORTH* IS INDEED AN ADJECTIVE, BUT *WHICH* IS WEIRD. *TO BE WORTH IT* IS IDIOMATIC; *TO BE WORTH*

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ACTS LIKE A VERB, AND *IT* IS THE DIRECT OBJECT.
LET'S NOT FRET—IT'S A FREEBIE!

Part three (25 points)

Identify the following phrases and clauses—i.e., say what kind of phrase (appositive, gerund, etc.) or clause (subordinate, relative, independent) it is:

Alice did not think that it was so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!"

Phrase #1: INFINITIVE

(When she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural.)

Clause #1: SUBORDINATE

Clause #2: RELATIVE

Clause #3: INDEPENDENT

But when the Rabbit took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket and looked at it and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet.

Clause #4: SUBORDINATE

Clause #5: INDEPENDENT

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It flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket or a watch to take out of it.

Phrase #2: PREPOSITIONAL

Phrase #3: INFINITIVE

Burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

Phrase #4: PARTICIPIAL

Phrase #5: PREPOSITIONAL

Phrase #6: PREPOSITIONAL

In another moment, down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

Phrase #7: PARTICIPIAL. THIS IS A CONFUSING QUESTION, SINCE THERE IS AN ADVERBIAL CLAUSE AND AN INFINITIVE PHRASE WITHIN THE PARTICIPIAL PHRASE, SO I GAVE EVERYONE CREDIT FOR THIS ONE.

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Suite Two: Making Music

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Week One: Write to Unleash Your Unconscious

Reading

Sarah Baker's essay on freewriting:

sinandsyntax.com/sin-and-syntax-salon/sarah-baker-on-the-art-of-writing-free

The “Writing on Schedule” chapter of *Becoming a Writer*, by Dorothea Brande

Lesson and discussion

Making prose into music requires a constant back-and-forth between technique and untethered imagination. Start the focus on music with a little untethering.

Freewriting is a great way to launch a writing class, or to relaunch one at the beginning of a new semester. First, it just gets students warmed up. It also shows them how to get the juices flowing whenever *they* want to write—in class or on their own. And it sets up some of the lessons that are to follow, by attuning them to their own voice and sentence patterns.

When I introduce freewriting, I talk about it as a way of loosening the unconscious. No one will read the freewriting or judge students for it, so it can limber them up when they've stiffened, whether through lack of practice or inhibition. Freewriting helps us all get through writer's block.

Here are two readings that are useful to accompany the daily freewriting:

- “The Art of Writing Free,” an essay by Sarah Baker, a former book editor at Viking/Penguin and Simon &

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Schuster and now a freelance writer and the editor in chief of *Art New England* magazine. Baker researched freewriting and synthesized the guidelines of various experts .

- The “Writing on Schedule” chapter of *Becoming a Writer*, by Dorothea Brande. This classic work on writing and the creative process was first published in 1934. It recaptures the excitement of Brande’s creative-writing classroom of the 1920s, decades before brain research “discovered” the role of the right and left brain in all human endeavors. Brande encourages students how to see again, how to hold their minds still, and how to call forth the inner writer. The book was reissued in 1981 by TarcherPerigee and is available online and in independent bookstores.

If you’d like to familiarize yourself more with how other writing teachers endorse freewriting, you might take a look at Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers* (Oxford University Press, 1973) and Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way* (TarcherPerigee, 1992). Natalie Goldberg also combined the notion of freewriting with principles of Zen Buddhist meditation and developed a “writing practice,” described in books like *Writing Down the Bones* (Shambhala, 1986). The idea of writing practice is partly the idea of becoming more attuned to thoughts throughout the process. It may be an end unto itself, rather than a means to produce a more polished piece.

It’s good to ask whether anyone keeps a journal and to encourage students to continue freewriting or journaling on their own.

I often keep a journal particular to a story, *in addition to* my more formal reporter’s notebooks. In fact, I frequently end up using

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writing from my journals in key places in a story—especially descriptive passages. My imagination doesn't work on demand, so I find that metaphors can come through freewriting more easily than when I'm at the computer. Sometimes when I'm working hard on a reported article, and especially a piece of narrative journalism, I find it helpful to work on two parallel tracks: My reporter's notebooks and computer files are for "left brain" information and ideas; my freewriting or journal is for "right brain" information and ideas—more intuitive thoughts and imaginative musings. I often find that my ledes, or opening paragraphs, come to me in random moments (e.g., while I'm driving or showering) or during quiet reflection. I try to make sure to scribble these flashes in the journal when they happen.

I realize that's a lot about me and my practice, but if you can think of some other way to give students a link between journal writing and more polished writing, between letting their imagination go and then later shaping the words that flow, that's the idea here.

In-class exercises

1. Ask students to get out a blank sheet of paper or a journal. For ten minutes, have them write, in a complete stream of consciousness, whatever is in their heads or on their hearts. Assure them that you will not read this, and make sure that they do not fret about spelling, grammar, or anything else. Tell them not to let the pen leave the page—have them just keep writing without stopping. If they reach a point where they cannot think of anything to write, then they should write that they cannot think of anything, or just *I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck* as many times as it takes to get a new thought to flow. Tell them they can stray off topic; they can go wherever their thoughts lead them.

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2. For the week following this lesson, have students practice freewriting every day, for ten minutes per sitting. After one week, ask them to read what they've written—preferably aloud to themselves. Are there any hidden gems? Do any patterns emerge in their uninhibited writing? What is the natural flow and length of their sentences? Do they have a common voice or tone?

Homework

Read up. To familiarize yourself with the art of freewriting, read these two pieces:

- “The Art of Writing Free,” by Sarah Baker:
sinandsyntax.com/talking-shop/sarah-baker-on-the-art-of-writing-free
- The “Writing on Schedule” chapter of *Becoming a Writer*, by Dorothea Brande

Write down. Practice freewriting every day. Follow these instructions from Sarah Baker:

- Write longhand with a pen or pencil in a notebook. No typing.
- Write for ten minutes (initially). Set a timer. Some people like to write first thing, when they are still in a dreamlike state, to capture unconscious thoughts.
- Keep your hand moving the whole time, and I mean writing, not scratching your nose.
- Don't edit or cross out. Don't worry about punctuation, spelling, grammar, or handwriting. Don't ever look back, and never judge.
- If you get stuck, write, *I'm stuck*. Or, in my case, *My lower back aches*, or *My shoulders hurt*. Sometimes I just write *dumb, dumb, dumb* because that's the way I'm feeling. Once, *platitudes, platitudes, platitudes* emerged

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when I sensed I was holding back from the truth.

- Don't think. Don't get rational. Go for the raw.
- Do it every day, even if your dog needs walking, a letter needs mailing, or you have an unexpected urge to cook chili.
- Take risks. Go deep. Be free. This is for your eyes only.

Read back. At the end of the week, read back to yourself what you've written—preferably aloud. Are there any hidden gems? Do any patterns emerge in your uninhibited writing? What is the natural flow and length of your sentences? Do you have a common voice or tone?

Week Two: Freewriting as a First Stab

Reading

Many writing books offer prompts. Try *642 Things to Write About*, by the San Francisco Writers' Grotto (Chronicle Books, 2012), or *What If?*, by Anne Bernays (William Morrow, 1991).

Lesson and discussion

Another way to use freewriting, other than to limber up, is as a first step toward more focused writing. Freewriting on a particular topic allows thoughts to swirl around and then surface. After the freewrite, we can take a look, make connections, and find a structure that works for an essay. You might ask students to freewrite on a burning political issue, or on their impressions of a book they just read, or on something they'd want to teach their kids. Or you might give them a specific prompt.

After the freewriting, ask students to reflect upon the experience and share their impressions. Some questions to stir the discussion are: How did the freewriting go? What did you discover, if anything? Did it free your unconscious? Did you write anything you like? Did you discover anything about your voice, your raw style, your tics? Is there anything you'd actually like to work with, maybe turn into an essay?

In-class exercises

To illustrate this use of freewriting, begin the class with an assignment that uses a specific prompt. Otherwise, the rules are the same: ten to fifteen minutes of spontaneous writing. Here are some examples of prompts:

- What is your very first memory?

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- Is there a secret you've never revealed to anyone?
- Do you have a recurring dream?
- Complete this sentence and then keep writing: *The first time I _____ . . .*

Have students continue with the freewriting as homework for ten minutes a day, but with a twist. In a couple of weeks, we'll return to these as a basis for an essay assignment.

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Homework

Strip mining. Continue freewriting for ten minutes every day. Take the questions below, print them out, and cut the paper into strips, each strip containing one question. Put the strips into an envelope, then randomly pick one prompt each day.

- Think of the travels you've made in life. Is there one moment that seemed to have special meaning—perhaps because it offers some metaphor or archetypal situation, or perhaps because it's a story you find yourself telling people over and over?
- Think of someone who has been an extraordinary influence in your life. Can you riff off that person, writing down adjectives, memories, description, anecdotes, anything else that comes to mind?
- Is the trouble in the global economy affecting you directly? Affecting someone you love? How?
- Is there a hot-button issue—health care, banks, sexism, taxes, affirmative action—about which you may have special insight?
- Is there an incident in your life that gives you some peculiar perspective?

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Week Three: The Vitality of a Rich Vocabulary

Reading

Sin and Syntax: Introduction to the “Words” section; review the “Nouns” and “Adjectives” chapters

“Desperately Seeking Synonyms,” New York *Times* Opinionator: opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/02/desperately-seeking-synonyms

Lesson and discussion

When we talk about “music” in prose, the raw material we start with is deceptively simple: clear, strong, supple words. Our word choices give sentences luster, paragraphs meaning, and stories power. They deserve intense attention.

If you are using this suite of lesson plans (Making Music) after having already used the previous suite (Working With Words & Sentences), you and your students have boned up on the parts of speech. If you are using this set independently, it might be good to review English’s eight categories of words, the “parts of speech”: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections.

Let’s not forget, though, that some words don’t fit neatly into syntactical buckets. Is *however*, for example, an adverb, a conjunction, a conjunctive adverb, or just a “transitional expression”? (Answer: it depends on who you ask.) Other words fit into multiple categories. I can *fancy* (verb) a pair of leather boots, choose *fancy* (adjective) high heels, and entertain a *fancy* (noun) about being chic. Perfect fit or not, the parts of speech still give us a way to talk about words.

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Nouns are perhaps our most important building blocks. The word *noun* derives from the Latin *nomen*, which means *name*, so it can indeed be useful to remember that nouns name people, places, and things you can taste, touch, see, smell, hear. But a noun can also name concepts, emotions, and ideas. *Math* is a noun; so are *melancholy* and *mission*. The linguist Steven Pinker calls a noun “simply a word that does nouny things; it is the kind of word that comes after an article, can have an s stuck onto it, and so on.”

If we need to introduce ourselves to others, we rely on nouns, whether proper (*Edmund*) or common (*farmer's son*). We put them on our business cards (*doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief*), we use them for websites and Twitter handles (@Dr.WhoOnline), and we let them animate epitaphs. (“Here lies Dr. Keene, the good Bishop of Chester, / Who ate up a fat goose, but could not digest her.”)

Some among us use generic nouns when we're grasping for words to say who we are (*female, doctor, athlete*). When we write, though, we want to say as much as we can in as few words as possible, so we find specific nouns (*mother, cardiologist, kayaker*). *Mother* is better than *female*, because it reveals both gender and personal information. But nouns like *soccer mom, mother hen, or matron* say even more because they also give clues about age and attitude.

The best nouns, then, are concrete rather than abstract, specific rather than general.

When it comes to adjectives, impress upon students that if you pick a good noun, a specific one, you may not need an adjective at all. But if you do need an adjective, think carefully, use a thesaurus, brainstorm for the best one.

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The most skilled writers can make even the sky surprising. In *Bad Land*, a book about the settling and the abandonment of the Great Plains, the travel writer Jonathan Raban describes a lightning storm moving in from the west:

One could see it coming for an hour before it hit: the distant artillery flashes on a sky of deep episcopal purple.

That “deep episcopal purple” isn’t just original; it’s precise and carries rich associations.

When journalist Susan Orlean describes orchids, her images are equally precise and equally surprising. Here is the opening of the 1998 *New Yorker* story “Plant Crimes,” which eventually became a book and a movie, both called *The Orchid Thief*:

An orchid’s appearance is ravishing. One species looks like a German Shepherd with its tongue hanging out. One looks like an octopus. One looks like a human nose. One looks like a pair of fancy shoes. One looks dead. There are species that look like butterflies, bats, ladies’ handbags, swarms of bees, clamshells, camels’ hooves, squirrels, nuns wearing wimples, and drunken old men. The smallest orchids are nearly microscopic, and the biggest ones have masses of flowers as large as footballs. The petals of some orchids are as soft as powder; others are as rigid and rubbery as inner tubes. They can be freckled or mottled or veiny or solid, their colors ranging from nearly neon to spotless white. Some look like the results of an accident involving paint.

Orlean showers us with nouns and adjectives—and not just a German Shepherd, but one “with its tongue hanging out”; not just a

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nun, or “nuns wearing wimples,” but also “drunken old men.” The simplicity of the subjects and verbs (“One looks like . . .”) allows her to move through a veritable jungle of images, focusing intently on each flower. She spends the time looking hard at the orchids to give us the exact words that allow us to imagine each bloom.

In-class exercises

1. To turn students on to nouns, brainstorm, hold a contest, or use art to explore the many, many alternatives for the generic word *boat*. Some of the synonyms for *boat*, like *vessel*, are so vague that they could apply to any means of transportation—or any container, for that matter. Commonplace nouns like *boat*, *ship*, or *seacraft* are less abstract. But let's get precise: How about *scow*, *skiff*, *yacht*, and *yawl*? Brand names like Sunfish, Hobie Cat, and Boston Whaler give even more concrete images, while other proper nouns, like the *Titanic*, the USS *Kentucky*, and the *Hokule'a* allow us to precisely picture an exact boat. Nouns help us paint a scene, understand a character, or put a finger on a theme. It's worth taking the time to get them right. If you have already done this exercise as part of Suite One, pick another generic noun. *Friend* is a good one. Or *school*.

2. To better understand nouns, it can be fun to play with Twitter handles and the quick ways we identify ourselves to others. Have students look at their own Twitter profiles and rewrite them to convey not just “name, rank, and serial number,” but something about their personality or their passions.

3. Ask students to write a one-paragraph character description of a famous figure. They can start by jotting down details about the person's face. Then they can describe the whole body, the physical presence. Finally, can the sentences hint at personality? Pick some celebrities, politicians, or historical figures who are appropriate for

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your group; they might include Cleopatra, Abraham Lincoln, Vaslav Nijinsky, Josephine Baker, Eleanor Roosevelt, Woody Allen, César Chávez, Donald Trump, and Kamala Harris.

4. Nouns, of course, are augmented by adjectives, which, when chosen judiciously, make the description even more powerful. Have students discuss this sentence from a *New Yorker* story about truffle hunting. The journalist, Burkhard Bilger, uses nouns and adjectives to give us a vision of the place where he sat down to rest:

We'd wandered into a small glade open to the sky. A circle of shaggy sugar pines stood around it, like brooding hens, and gathered in the last of the day's warmth.

Adjectives and nouns work together here to transform a forest into a "small glade" surrounded by "shaggy sugar pines." Bilger lodges his distinctive image in our minds by comparing the circle of pines to "brooding hens."

5. Here's another example to discuss, from the novel *Solibo Magnificent*, by the Caribbean writer Patrick Chamoiseau, who relies on nouns to nail the character of the sherbet vendor Antoinette Maria-Jésus Sidonise:

She's a small woman, with the flesh and the curves of her forty years atop a child's fragility and finesse.

Fragility and *finesse* belong in that final, important category of nouns that name ideas and concepts; in this description, they allow the writer to take physical details and turn them into psychological secrets.

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Homework

Gaze at the sky. One of the hardest things to describe in a fresh way is the sky—whether at dawn, at dusk, or before a storm. Using Jonathan Raban's storm as inspiration, write three sentences that paint a realistic picture of a sky using precise and surprising nouns and adjectives.

Visit a hothouse (or be an "orchid thief"). For this assignment, I sometimes bring in color photographs of orchids from a horticulture book. Or I bring a few orchids into class. Or I send students on an assignment to a florist or a flower conservatory. In some way or another, I have them look at a lot of orchids. Then I ask them to try to find words to describe them. It works well to make this assignment before the class discussion of Susan Orlean's paragraph. When they've tried to come up with their own descriptions, the Orlean example shows how much further we can always go.

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Week Three: The Vitality of a Rich Vocabulary/Handout

The opening of journalist Susan Orlean's *New Yorker* story "Plant Crimes":

An orchid's appearance is ravishing. One species looks like a German Shepherd with its tongue hanging out. One looks like an octopus. One looks like a human nose. One looks like a pair of fancy shoes. One looks dead. There are species that look like butterflies, bats, ladies' handbags, swarms of bees, clamshells, camels' hooves, squirrels, nuns wearing wimples, and drunken old men. The smallest orchids are nearly microscopic, and the biggest ones have masses of flowers as large as footballs. The petals of some orchids are as soft as powder; others are as rigid and rubbery as inner tubes. They can be freckled or mottled or veiny or solid, their colors ranging from nearly neon to spotless white. Some look like the results of an accident involving paint.

Week Four: Make-or-Break Verbs

Reading

Sin and Syntax: "Verbs"

"Make-or-Break Verbs," New York *Times* Opinionator:

opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/16/make-or-break-verbs/

Lesson and discussion

The very best nouns and adjectives are nothing without verbs. Verbs kick-start sentences; without them, words would simply cluster together in suspended animation. We often call them action words, but verbs can also carry sentiments (*love, fear, lust, disgust*); hint at cognition (*realize, know, recognize*); bend ideas together (*falsify, prove, hypothesize*); assert possession (*own, have*); and conjure existence itself (*is, are*).

The most important thing to convey to students in this lesson is that, fundamentally, verbs fall into two classes: static (*be, seem, become*) and dynamic (*whistle, waffle, wonder*). (These two classes are sometimes called "passive" and "active," and passive verbs are also known as "linking" or "copulative" verbs.) Static verbs stand back, politely allowing nouns and adjectives to take center stage. Dynamic verbs thunder in from the wings, announcing an event, producing a spark, adding drama to an assembled group.

This sentence from *Tinkers*, by Paul Harding, shows how taking time to find the right dynamic verb pays off:

The forest had nearly wicked from me that tiny germ of heat allotted to each person...

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Wicked is an evocative word that nicely gets across the essence of a more commonplace verb like *sucked* or *drained*.

In-class exercises

1. Read and discuss the opening of Jo Ann Beard's short story "Cousins." The author quietly sets a scene in rural Illinois as two women fish for their "breakfast." Discuss the role of verbs in the passage. Beard begins with quiet verbs, even static ones. But she allows her scene to jump to life—or rather to "twist hard"—once the sun rises and the day begins:

Here is a scene. Two sisters are fishing together in a flat-bottomed boat on an olive green lake. They sit slumped like men, facing in opposite directions, drinking coffee out of a metal-sided thermos, smoking intently. Without their lipstick they look strangely weary, and passive, like pale replicas of their real selves. They both have a touch of morning sickness but neither is admitting it. Instead, they watch their bobbers and argue about worms versus minnows.

. . . It is five A.M. A duck stands up, shakes out its feathers, and peers above the still grass at the edge of the water. The skin of the lake twitches suddenly and a fish springs loose into the air, drops back down with a flat splash. Ripples move across the surface like radio waves. The sun hoists itself up and gets busy, laying a sparkling rug across the water, burning the beads of dew off the reeds, baking the tops of our mothers' heads. One puts on sunglasses and the other a plaid fishing cap with a wide brim.

In the cold dark underwater, a long fish with a tattered tail discovers something interesting. He circles once

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and then has his breakfast before becoming theirs. As he breaks from the water to the air he twists hard, sending out a cold spray, sparks of green light. My aunt reels him in, triumphant, and grins at her sister, big teeth in a friendly mouth.

In this languid start to a languid story, the verbs at first remain quiet. Then the world of the lake starts to come awake, the verbs signaling not just the stirring of life but a certain crisp tension: the skin of the lake “twitches suddenly,” ripples move “like radio waves,” and the sun “hoists itself up and gets busy.” The long fish with a tattered tail—who will return metaphorically at the end of the story—*discovers* something interesting, *circles* once, *has* his breakfast, *breaks* from the water, and *twists* hard. Then he meets his end. The verbs put us on the edge of our seats and keep us there throughout the story.

2. Have some fun with sportswriting. Sportswriters and announcers must be masters of dynamic verbs, because they endlessly describe the same thing while trying to keep their readers and listeners riveted. We're not just talking about a player who *singles*, *doubles*, or *homers*. We're talking about, as announcers described during the 2010 World Series, a batter who “spoils the pitch” (hits a foul ball), a first baseman who “digs it out of the dirt” (catches a bad throw), and a pitcher who “scatters three singles through six innings” (keeps the hits to a minimum). Depending on the age of your students, you might have them bring in favorite examples of sportswriting to lend to the discussion. Or you could use this passage by Laura Hillenbrand in *Seabiscuit*:

Carrying 130 pounds, 22 more than Wedding Call and 16 more than Whichcee, Seabiscuit delivered a tremendous

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surge. He slashed into the hole, disappeared between his two larger opponents, then burst into the lead . . .

Seabiscuit shook free and hurtled into the homestretch alone as the field fell away behind him.

Not all writers would be able to describe horses hustling around a track so that one of them comes alive like this. Discuss Hillenbrand's method of describing Seabiscuit's winning sprint.

Homework

Still the mind. Go find a quiet place to sit—a park bench, a church pew, a boat in the middle of a lake. Open your senses and take in the details of the place. Write what you see and hear and feel. Try to be as specific as you can with your nouns, so that a reader can fully imagine what you are looking at. And consider whether to let your verbs jump into the scene or stand by silently.

Make a scene. Find a busy place—a café, a playground, a gym. Write a description of what you see that focuses on all the things people are doing. Try to find a different dynamic verb for each person.

Play sportscaster. Want to practice finding dynamic verbs? Go to a horse race, a baseball game, or even a walkathon. Find someone to watch intently. Describe what you see.

Week Four:
Make-or-Break Verbs/Handout

Here is the opening of Jo Ann Beard's short story "Cousins":

Here is a scene. Two sisters are fishing together in a flat-bottomed boat on an olive green lake. They sit slumped like men, facing in opposite directions, drinking coffee out of a metal-sided thermos, smoking intently. Without their lipstick they look strangely weary, and passive, like pale replicas of their real selves. They both have a touch of morning sickness but neither is admitting it. Instead, they watch their bobbers and argue about worms versus minnows.

. . . It is five A.M. A duck stands up, shakes out its feathers, and peers above the still grass at the edge of the water. The skin of the lake twitches suddenly and a fish springs loose into the air, drops back down with a flat splash. Ripples move across the surface like radio waves. The sun hoists itself up and gets busy, laying a sparkling rug across the water, burning the beads of dew off the reeds, baking the tops of our mothers' heads. One puts on sunglasses and the other a plaid fishing cap with a wide brim.

In the cold dark underwater, a long fish with a tattered tail discovers something interesting. He circles once and then has his breakfast before becoming theirs. As he breaks from the water to the air he twists hard, sending out a cold spray, sparks of green light. My aunt reels him in, triumphant, and grins at her sister, big teeth in a friendly mouth.

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Week Five: The Flow and Ebb of Sentences

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Phrases and Clauses” and “Sentence Variety”
“Turning a Phrase,” *New York Times* Opinionator:
opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/14/turning-a-phrase/#more-128401

More advanced writers might like to take a look at the excerpt from Stanley Fish’s *How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One*, on NPR’s website: npr.org/2011/01/25/133214521/stanley-fish-demystifies-how-to-write-a-sentence

Lesson and discussion

I have purposely upended the cliché in my title this week. If the freewriting exercises were intended to help students get flow into their writing, now it is time to curb, shape, and play with the sentences they created.

Just as there is no one perfect boat, there is no one perfect sentence structure. Mark Twain wrote sentences that were as humble and sturdy and American as a canoe; William Faulkner wrote sentences as baroque as a Mississippi riverboat. But no matter the atmospherics, the best sentences marry a clear subject to a dramatic predicate, making a mini-narrative.

Some of this may be repetitive if you’ve used Suite One, but begin this lesson with a review of all the different kinds of phrases out there. If time permits, treat clauses in a second lesson. (It’s a lot to absorb at once.)

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What is a phrase?

A phrase is a group of two or more words that form a kernel of meaning. Phrases can contain nouns and verbs, but they do not have a subject and a predicate. Working as a unit within the larger sentence, a phrase can function as a noun, an adjective, or an adverb.

- The easiest to identify might be the **appositive phrase**, which allows us to tuck detail into a sentence without having to add a whole new one. I could write, *Sosostris is my mother's oldest sister. She loves the tarot.* Or I could write, more succinctly, *Sosostris, my mother's oldest sister, loves the tarot.*
- In **prepositional phrases**, a preposition like *on, of, above, or near* pairs with an object—often a noun, sometimes with adjectives. The entire phrase, in turn, acts as an adjective or adverb in the larger sentence. *Swann's Way*, by Marcel Proust, opens with an adverbial prepositional phrase, telling us when the narrator used to fall asleep: “*For a long time*, I went to bed early.”
- **Verbal phrases** are clusters of words that begin with a particular form of a verb but play a different role in the sentence. A gerund phrase acts as a noun. (In *Reading in bed makes me sleepy*, the gerund phrase *Reading in bed* acts as the subject.) An infinitive phrase, which begins with *to* and the base form of the verb, might act as a noun (*To sleep during the day is a luxury*), an adjective (*This is the bed to sleep in for a good nap*), or an adverb (*This bed is too comfy to resist during the day*).
- **Absolute phrases** look suspiciously like verbal phrases, especially since they contain an *-ing* verb. But, technically, they operate differently. They are full

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sentences from which the verb has gone AWOL, either morphing into a verbal phrase or disappearing into the mist. They allow us to make one sentence from two. Start with *We were dying from hunger but too lazy to cook. We decided to eat out.* Make them into one: *Dying from hunger but too lazy to cook, we decided to eat out.* Absolute phrases economically subordinate material; the absolute phrase hangs there in the sentence without being part of its syntax (i.e., it's not a subject, verb, object, or complement). When the absolute phrase functions as an adjective, it modifies the entire sentence (or clause), rather than a single noun within it: *The plates having been wiped clean, we considered dessert.* The absolute phrase can also act adverbially, modifying the verb: *The restaurant closing around us, we headed to a bar.* (*The restaurant closing around us* says when we headed to a bar.)

What is a clause?

A clause is the same thing as a simple sentence: It is a complete thought that contains a subject and a predicate. But a clause doesn't stand on its own—it is part of a larger whole, called a compound or a complex sentence. In compound sentences, clauses are joined by coordinating conjunctions. In complex sentences, they are joined by subordinating conjunctions or relative pronouns.

In-class exercises

1. This is an ideal time to discuss parallelism, which can have a huge impact on the music of prose. Especially in a list, it is helpful to conceive phrases so that they are parallel in structure. (*Politicians speak to reporters, in Congress, and on the stump.*) Parallel phrases

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flow logically, help readers follow the drift—and often lift an idea into eloquence.

Discuss with students a few examples of parallel phrasing. Start, perhaps, with the last clause of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Parallelism helps etch those three neat prepositional phrases into the national consciousness:

. . . government of the people, by the people, for the people,
shall not perish from the earth.

Parallel phrases can make ideas catchy as well as eloquent. Parallelism is at the soul of the Republican Herman Cain's wit. Voters could wrap their minds (or at least their tongues) around his "9-9-9" plan, and when he bowed out of the 2012 presidential race, he left us with this parallel phrasing:

I am at peace with my God. I am at peace with my wife, and
she is at peace with me.

Bartlett's Familiar Quotations is full of parallel phrases, because they help quotes stick in our minds. Mark Twain was fond of them ("Put your eggs in one basket—and watch that basket"), as was Timothy Leary: "Tune in, turn on, drop out."

2. Find a well-written article that is likely to appeal to your students. Have them identify the various kinds of phrases in it. For this, I prefer "The Power of Hair," by Burkhard Bilger (the *New Yorker*, January 9, 2006). Bilger's article contains everything but an absolute phrase, and the sentences (and phrases) are funny, so the exercise is entertaining. But you can use almost anything by a sophisticated writer.

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3. Ask students to freewrite about their commute to school—just a few quick lines, which can be serious or funny. Then ask each student to read the first sentence. Together, analyze the abundant examples to see how many different forms our sentences naturally take, even when the subject is the same. Once you've had a chance to review phrases, use the paragraphs students wrote to find examples. Do the same with clauses. (Of course, we all use phrases and clauses quite naturally, but it is interesting to note that some students tend to write simple and others tend to write complex.)

Homework

1-800-PHR-ASES. Companies love to cut down on payroll by automating their customer service. But those 800 numbers can be more confusing than helpful when they are not spoken in parallel. (Have you had that experience of waiting through all the options and then forgetting which number on the keypad you should push?)

Here's an example of a confusing one: "If your card has been lost or stolen, press 1; if your card is damaged, press 2; if you have not received a replacement card, press 3; to change your name on the card, press 4." See how much clearer it is if it's made parallel: "For reservations, press 1; for locations, press 2; for customer service, press 3." Dial a few numbers of your own, write down the lists, and see whether they are parallel. (You may have to hit "star" to repeat the choices a few times.) Can you improve on the list?

Bite the bullets. Below is a passage from a job description for a position in an outdoor-adventure company, the Norway-based Helly Hansen. The position is social media/community content manager in Helly Hansen's marketing department. Ideally, the candidate would understand parallelism better than the HR department. Rewrite the list, making each bulleted item parallel.

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Experience/skills required

- Ability to act strategically across the social media outputs while executing at the ground level (can think while getting hands dirty)
- Strong operational knowledge of marketing tools and tactics and the skills to align resources to achieve objectives
- Willing to multitask and work under pressure
- 4–5 years combined marketing experience
- The ability to aggregate data and generate actionable insights to inspire and suggest recommendations for possible course correction and improvements
- Strong verbal and written communication skills in English, with an attention to details
- Proficient user of Microsoft office products
- Proficient user of Adobe Creative Suite (Photoshop/Illustrator)
- Website development experience preferred (HTML/CSS)
- Understanding and experience of SEO best practices
- Experience working with a global consumer products brand preferred
- A “simplify and go” attitude combined with a “be good, be nice” personality
- Dedicated to getting the job done, but able to put things in perspective

Ratchet up the tension—or tame it. Spend a few moments recalling and recording a startling event you have witnessed. Let the

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sentences spill out naturally. Are they long or short? Do they stop and start, or flow in a stream of consciousness? Do the sentences include fluid phrases or lots of full stops? Experiment with different kinds of sentences and watch how the tone of your passage changes.

Freeshaping. After acquainting yourself with other writers' phrases, try to get to a point of feeling comfortable writing short phrases and long ones, appositives and absolutes, simple sentences and complex ones, staccato paragraphs and fluid ones. We want to have great freedom in crafting sentences that will have an intended effect on the reader. Pick one of your favorite pieces of freewriting and reshape it. Play with using different kinds of phrases to achieve different effects. Notice how phrasing changes tone and style. Play with simple sentences and complex ones.

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Week Six: Toning Up

Reading

Sin and Syntax: "Length and Tone"

"Sentences Crisp, Sassy, Stirring," *New York Times* Opinionator:
opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/28/sentences-crisp-sassy-stirring/

Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch: "Got Style?" pages 291–92

Lesson and discussion

Gabriel García Márquez writes unhurried sentences that almost defy parsing. William Faulkner wrote a nearly 1,300-word sentence that ended up in *Guinness World Records*, but he used the five words *My mother is a fish* as a complete chapter of a book. Joan Didion can stop us short with simple truths, and she can take us on strolls down labyrinthine corridors. Trust these great writers: There is no one way to render an idea.

Different sentences carry different weight, and we can craft them not just to get an idea across, but also to convey attitude or elicit emotion. Sentences inform us, but they can also touch us. Simple sentences can pack a punch or deliver a punch line. Muhammad Ali depended on them to make his point: "I am the astronaut of boxing. Joe Louis and Dempsey were just jet pilots. I'm in a world of my own."

Ads and adages also often use simple sentences to convey something straightforward (*A diamond is forever*), authoritative (*Don't change horses in midstream*), or cheeky (*got milk?*).

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Combining simple sentences with longer, more complex lines can give a passage rhythm and heighten drama. See the passages below, by Raymond Chandler and Joan Didion.

Literary lions like Ernest Hemingway and Cormac McCarthy have a reputation for short sentences, because both authors are so good at paring things to the bone. But often they string their stripped-down clauses along exquisite filaments, producing paragraphs like this one, from McCarthy's *The Road*:

Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond.

The phrases and clauses in that sentence, written without punctuation, add up to a kind of rushing prose, seemingly spontaneous but highly crafted. Such rhythms can be almost biblical in their power.

Sentence tone. The length of sentences, as well as your particular use of vocabulary, phrases, and clauses, all affects what we refer to as tone in writing. Tone might be defined as the expression of attitude or mood through writing:

- the *way*, rather than the *what*
- the writer's *attitude* about a subject and perhaps an audience
- it can be formal, informal, authoritative, intimate, academic, sober, investigative, ironic, light, humorous, or pompous

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- it can be achieved through word choice, length of sentences, and punctuation
- it is affected by point of view

In-class exercises

1. Take a look at some ads and discuss how simple sentences convey something straightforward, authoritative, or cheeky. (To review the five simple sentence patterns, see Suite One, Week Ten.)

Esso: "Put a tiger in your tank."

Heublein: "Pardon me, would you have any Grey Poupon?"

De Beers: "A diamond is forever."

Brylcreem: "A little dab'll do ya."

Nike: "Just do it."

Identify the sentence patterns in these, sometimes supplying words that have been elided:

Esso: "[You] Put a tiger in your tank." [2]

Heublein: "~~Pardon me~~, would you have any Grey Poupon?" [2]

De Beers: "A diamond is forever." [4]

[Could also be] "A diamond lasts forever." [1]

Brylcreem: "A little dab [wi]ll do [it] [for] ya." [2]

Nike: "[You] Just do it." [2]

A sharp student might make an argument that "A little dab'll do ya" is pattern 3. I'd give bonus points for trying to anyone who could make the argument that the *ya* is an indirect object.

2. Discuss the idea of tone. Combining simple sentences with longer, more complex lines can give a passage rhythm and heighten drama. The novelist Raymond Chandler is known for "hard-boiled" prose,

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like these powerful clauses he uses to describe the Santa Ana winds in his short story “Red Wind”:

There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight.

Joan Didion also follows a fluid sentence with short, crisp ones when describing the same winds in her book *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*:

I have neither heard nor read that a Santa Ana is due, but I know it, and almost everyone I have seen today knows it too. We know it because we feel it. The baby frets. The maid sulks.

Those last three, blunt sentences have the harsh force of the winds Didion is describing.

3. For more advanced writers: Nouns and scene, nouns and theme. Have students read the Jacobo Timerman passage (Suite One, Week Two) one more time, and lead a discussion about how nouns can set tone and style. Notice that most of Timerman’s nouns are unadorned, naked, stripped of attention-grabbing adjectives. They are as hard as the cell itself. The scene is painted plainly through *the cell, the floor, the mattress, a blanket*, as is the narrator, with his *arms, body, knees, shoulders*. Timerman chooses mainly common, generic nouns. In a few strategic places, and well into the description, Timerman adds capitalized words that signal some hard information—*Rolex watches, Dupont cigarette lighters, Argentine*

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security forces. These proper nouns give the piece an eerie specificity, though not enough to detract from the sense that the main character is less Jacobo Timerman than Everyman.

In a piece so sparely written, the intangible nouns stand out. Some of these nouns—like *semi-penumbra*, *contaminated air*, and *semi-air*—reinforce each other to name Timerman's grim predicament. Others—like *life*, *light*, *glow*, *sensation*, *freedom*, *universe*, *Time*, *existence*, *duration*, *eternity*—attest to his hopes. Such intangible nouns carry an author's themes. They offer glimpses into something larger—the human condition.

Homework

Advertising tone. Have students search for their own lively ads, billboards, and jingles, and pick out a few favorites. Ideally, they will find some that use short sentences and some that use long ones, some funny and some serious, some formal and some informal. Ask them to write up a little analysis of each one. What makes some ads funny? What is the tone of each ad, and what causes it?

Go ahead—quote me. Ask students to find some famous lines in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and do the same analysis they did for ads. How does the form of the quote make it memorable?

Me, myself, and I. Or, rather, you, me, and we. One thing that shifts tone quickly and profoundly is point of view. (For a refresher on this literary device, see Suite One, Week Three.) To play with point of view, do the exercise mentioned in that earlier chapter: Have students go to a favorite restaurant for a meal and write three capsule reviews—no more than a paragraph in length—each from a different point of view. Make sure they understand this doesn't involve only swapping pronouns. If you've already assigned the

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capsule review, you can alter the assignment so that they write in three different points of view about a class they are taking, or a sports event, or a friend they spent time with.

Week Seven: Words as Musical Keys

Reading

Sin and Syntax: "Melody"

"The Sound of a Sentence," New York *Times* Opinionator:
opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/the-sound-of-a-sentence

Lesson and discussion

I once had a long conversation with a college English professor about how and why Americans are deaf to the sound of language. The easy, but wrongheaded, explanation is that English isn't a mellifluous language like Spanish or Italian or Hawaiian. English may lack the vowel-rich syllables of some other languages, but its mix of vowels and consonants is quite musical, if perhaps more percussive than Italian. A better explanation for our tin ears is that we simply aren't tuned in to the sounds of words.

To encourage students to tune in to melody in prose, let's take them back, way back, to the first stories they fell in love with. We might start with everybody's favorite, *Goodnight Moon*, with its soft lines and easy rhymes ("Goodnight stars / Goodnight air / Goodnight noises everywhere"). I never tire of the story, no matter how many children I read it to. Another favorite is *Green Eggs and Ham*, with its topsy-turvy sentences ("I am Sam. Sam I am") and subversive humor ("And I will eat them in the rain. And in the dark. And on a train").

The playful language found in children's books comes naturally to us when we are young. We start with "Bye, bye!" and progress to singsongy clapping games:

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A sailor went to sea sea sea
To see what he could see see see
And all that he could see see see
Was the bottom of the deep blue sea sea sea.

As we mature, our delight in sounds becomes less visceral. We study the couplets of Robert Frost, send the subversive punctuation of E. E. Cummings to paramours, and contemplate the “widening gyres” of William Butler Yeats. However, we often lose the child’s love of chaotic vowels and knocking syllables. Even when writing about poetry, we get bogged down in the language of academia. Our sentences get longer as we pile up clauses and struggle to state a thesis. Then, in our professional lives, we get tangled up in bureaucrat-ese and forget our innate ability to play with sound and sense.

Language can still be an adventure if we remember that words can make a kind of melody. In novels, news stories, memoirs, and even to-the-point memos, music is as important as meaning. In fact, music can drive home the meaning of words.

Let’s review some of the devices that allow us to write for the ear:

- With **assonance** and **consonance**, we repeat, for effect, either vowel sounds (*clean, neat*) or consonants (Dr. Seuss’s island of *Sala-ma-sond*).
- **Alliteration** refers to the repetition of the initial sound of words in a phrase or sentence (*Hooray for Diffendoofer Day*). Rhyme, seen in that last title with *Hooray* and *Day*, sets up an exact correspondence between the final syllables of words. (Dr. Seuss excelled in unexpected rhyme, from *The Cat in the Hat* to *Yertle the Turtle*.)

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- With **onomatopoeia**, we name a thing (or action) by imitating the sounds associated with it. Comic books rely as heavily on onomatopoeia as children's books, with "words" like *zap*, *zowie*, *bam*, *socko*, *wow*, *oof*, *wham*, *bing*, and *grrr*.

But sound conveys sense in more serious contexts, too, whether the *splash* of water, the *sniffle* of a crybaby, or the *snicker* of a bully. Words can play with gravity (*bump*, *dump*, and *thump*) and levity (*float* and *flit*). A verb like *flutter* implies not just action but also lightness, speed, motion, and emotion. It can also cast a metaphorical net, catching images of things that flutter—butterflies, eyes—as well as related traits, like beauty, innocence, or delicacy.

Writers we love use these literary devices sparingly—to give their sentences a little lift or a little wit. Some, like E. B. White, do it seamlessly, so we almost miss it as we smile over a sentence like this, from an account of the 1932 Olympics (the first in the United States, much to the dismay of some Europeans): "Many came to scoff, and remained to ski."

For more advanced writers: These devices are often obvious in poetry, but we have to look harder to see them in prose, especially because they often work on a subliminal level. What do you notice about the relationship between music and meaning in this passage, from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*?

. . . the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, "I am guarding you—I am

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your support,” but at other times, suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind raised itself slightly from the task actually in hand, had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow—this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror.

Woolf uses *monotonous*, *soothing tattoo*, and *murmured* when she’s referring to the “kindly meaning” of waves on the beach (and the calming of thoughts) and then *ghostly roll*, *remorselessly beat*, and *thundered hollow* when she’s referring to more ominous forces of nature and consciousness. The first set of words murmurs with soft syllables. The second gives us sounds that register like the beats of a timpano.

Such devices don’t have to be literary. We see alliteration, for example, in the titles of best sellers (*Good to Great*) and advertising taglines (“Guinness is good for you”). It can be silly (General Mills’s “I’m cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs”) or serious (William Safire’s “nattering nabobs of negativism”).

In-class exercises

1. Do some fun reading with your class. If your students are young, get out the Dr. Seuss. Read some passages and talk about all the different sounds at play. If your students are high school age, try some Shakespeare, or perhaps *West Side Story*, with its rhyming, sung soliloquies.

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2. If your students are at a professional level and if you are using *Sin and Syntax*, start there. The title is an example of alliteration. Three of the section titles in each chapter, “Cardinal Sins,” “Carnal Pleasures,” and “Catechisms,” play with both alliteration and metaphor (playfully subverting the religious reference).

Homework

The exercises this week allow students to explore onomatopoeia in two stages: first by tuning in to sound (in this case, the rain) and then by jamming for words that capture that sound.

Read a little Rudyard. Ask students to find some of their favorite children’s stories and reread them. Have them find passages that use some of the musical devices we’ve just described—and identify the devices. If they can’t remember their favorite children’s stories, they can check out anything by Dr. Seuss, Rudyard Kipling, or Robert Louis Stevenson.

Splish, splash, splat. Go sit near a window when it’s raining—and listen. (If it’s not raining, sit near a fountain or the shore of an ocean, lake, or river.) Write down as many words as you can to describe the sound of the rain. Feel free to make up words. Does it sound one way when it’s falling on the roof, another when it’s falling on wide leaves, and another when it’s dropping into a puddle? As you listen to the water, pay close attention to the sound itself, and then to the sound of the words you find to describe it. For example, you might use *pound* (a single syllable, heavy with consonants) to describe the rain on a roof, but *splatter* for the sound of rain falling on wide leaves. How is the sound of the water different in each case, and how can you express that in the sound of the words you choose?

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Crash, bang, wallop. Find a scene that is a symphony of sound. (A busy street corner? A screeching subway? A quiet courtyard in which each footstep registers?) Tune in to those sounds only. (Ignore the panhandlers, the changes of the traffic lights, the people looking at you askance.) Find words that are onomatopoeic in some way, that suggest the sounds themselves. Write sentences whose rhythms evoke the sounds you are hearing.

The jingling and the tingling. Melody often comes in the rewriting; as we polish prose, we see the opportunity to play with sounds within sentences. Rewrite a passage of something you've already written, paying special attention to the way the words work together. Alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and onomatopoeia should not be forced, but it's OK here to let the pendulum swing all the way over in the direction of sonority.

Week Eight: Rhythm—the Secret Path Into the Soul

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Rhythm”

“The Sound of a Sentence,” New York *Times* Opinionator:
opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/the-sound-of-a-sentence

“There’s Parataxis, and Then There’s Hypotaxis,” *Lingua Franca* blog
post: chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2013/08/07/parataxis-and-hypotaxis

Lesson and discussion

Plato said that “music and rhythm find their way into the secret places of the soul.” Those of us who want to touch our readers must play with rhythm. Also called cadence, rhythm includes *beat*—a simple, steady pulse in time. It also includes patterns in time that are more complex than a beat, *per se*. This includes *meter*, like the 4/4 time of rhapsodies, in which the first of every four beats (if a quarter note gets one beat) receives a stress. And it includes *tempo*, the speed or beats per minute. Then there is the syncopation of jazz and the urgent lines of rap.

Moving from music to musical prose, we refer to meter when we scan the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare and the timing punctuation offers—pauses, say, or full stops. In conversation, oration, and narration, we might think of rhythm as a matter of patterns, of longs and shorts, ins and outs, ups and downs. In music, a crescendo indicates strains that get louder; in prose, a crescendo is a kind of climax brought on by various elements.

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Sometimes simple *repetition* is used as a device. It might be single words that are repeated for effect, or rhythms within clauses. And sometimes the repetition is enlivened by a twist, as when Jesse Jackson said, “Both tears and sweat are salty, but they render a different result. Tears will get you sympathy; sweat will get you change.” The power of that phrase comes from the repetition of the words *tears* and *sweat*, but also the repetition in his phrases.

Jackson was also cleverly alluding to earlier orators, including British prime minister Winston Churchill, who told his cabinet and later the House of Commons, upon replacing Neville Chamberlain in May 1940 (during the German invasion of France), “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.” Churchill’s monosyllables set up a staccato rhythm that is as bold and bracing as the statesman himself.

To move audiences, speeches must be ringing, strong, and visceral. The devices we’ve mentioned here allow orators to articulate moral imperatives and elicit powerful emotions. On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. moved the nation in a speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. His sentences, modulating from short to long, are pointed and poignant. He repeated *one hundred years later* four times, to emphasize the “chains of discrimination.” He repeated *now* to explain why civil rights could not wait (“Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy”). He reiterated *I have a dream*, elevating his speech to incantation. His wish that his children “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” became an iconic example of alliteration.

In the often-repeated quote credited to William Butler Yeats, a “poem makes a sound when it is finished like the click of the lid of a perfectly made box.” This click can happen in prose, too, when

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meaning and music, words and wisdom, combine to establish a writer's voice.

For advanced writers: The linguists Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendorf (who for twenty years was principal clarinet of the Boston Civic Symphony) have sought to identify which elements of music—rhythm, structure of melody and harmony, emotion—arise from cognitive processes that language shares. They found that large structures in music—the slow buildup of tension, a climax, and then denouement—resemble dramatic arcs in narratives. Perhaps both music and language exploit a human predisposition to understand events in terms of tension and resolution.

One way to play with this human predisposition is to develop a greater command of rhythm. Whether penning novels, speeches, essays, or lyrics, masterful writers know how to employ rhythm for emotional effect. Many writers hark back to early works of English literature, especially the King James Bible, to find rhythms that are almost encoded in our linguistic DNA and therefore work on us at a deep level. One device that leads to what critics might call “biblical rhythms” is parataxis.

According to Merriam-Webster Unabridged, the first known use of the term *parataxis* occurred in 1842. Today the word refers to the blunt juxtaposition of clauses or phrases without coordinating or subordinating conjunctions to smooth the alliance. Raymond Chandler, in *Farewell, My Lovely*, offers an example: “I needed a drink, I needed a lot of life insurance, I needed a vacation, I needed a home in the country. What I had was a coat, a hat, and a gun.” Chandler bangs out those words like shots from a gun, doesn't he?

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Other writers, most notably Hemingway, use another form of parataxis, in which they hold a string of phrases or clauses in equipoise through a series of coordinating conjunctions like *and* or *but*, as in the passage in *Sin and Syntax*, pages 126–27. These seem to contradict the definition cited above. (See “There’s Parataxis, and Then There’s Hypotaxis,” in this *Lingua Franca* blog post: chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2013/08/07/parataxis-and-hypotaxis.)

By contrast, *hypotaxis*, appearing a bit later, in 1883, refers to the use of subordinate conjunctions (*after, where, if, since*) to make one phrase or clause flow into another. Here’s an example, from “The Ring of Time,” by E. B. White: “After the lions had returned to their cages, creeping angrily through the chutes, a little bunch of us drifted away and into an open doorway nearby, where we stood for a while in semi-darkness watching a big brown circus horse go harrumphing around the practice ring.”

Sometimes it is not conjunctions but rather punctuation that creates a starting-and-stopping rhythm. If you are interested in examples from poetry, have students take a look at Sylvia Plath’s “Morning Song,” available on the Poetry Foundation website: poetryfoundation.org/poems/49008/morning-song-56d22ab4a0cee. E. E. Cummings uses line breaks and giant spaces between words to create the sensation of jumping and hopscotching in the poem “[in Just-],” also available on the Poetry Foundation website: poetryfoundation.org/poems/47247/in-just.

In-class exercises

1. To tune students in to rhythm, start, literally, with music. Bring recordings of different music into the classroom—African drums, a Hawaiian slack-key guitar, chamber music, hip-hop—and have a

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listen. If you've got younger students, bring in instruments (drums) and let them play around with beats. Help your budding writers find words to describe the rhythm, not just the genre, of the music, the sounds of the instruments, or the meaning of the lyrics—i.e., is it percussive? Irregular? Fluid? Herky-jerky? Even? Rough? Like an incantation? Like a lullaby?

2. Do a quick review of meter as it is used in poetry. (See pages 243–44 of *Sin and Syntax*.) Scan some poems. Recite some Shakespeare. And, since meter can turn prose poetic, too, act out a Mamet scene.

3. Explore the use of rhythm in poetry and prose, songs and speeches. Explore the notion of hard sounds and soft sounds, crisp monosyllables and mellifluous polysyllables. Recite Winston Churchill's speech to the House of Commons after the defeat at Dunkirk in 1940 (pages 212–13 of *Sin and Syntax*). Find a favorite poem and read it out loud. Where are the beats, or, as poet Donald Hall calls them, "the hard sounds"? Where are the soft sounds, the little lifts? Read a passage from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (pages 255–56 of *Sin and Syntax*). Ask students to take a favorite song, sing it, and feel the rhythm.

4. Read two very different passages from Ernest Hemingway (in the Handout). Start with the dialogue from "Hills Like White Elephants." Ask students to notice the repetition of certain words (especially *water*), as well as the rhythm of the sentences—the short, staccato dialogue and the fluid description. Next, compare that with the passage from *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (pages 248–49 of *Sin and Syntax*), or read the passage from *Green Hills of Africa*.

Discuss how the same writer uses very different rhythms to create very different effects—in the first case, a tense conversation between

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a man and a woman on the skids; in the second, a dreamlike, stream-of-consciousness interior monologue.

5. For more advanced writers: Keeping parataxis in mind, compare the rhythm in two passages from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Lead a discussion with your students about what effect the rhythm creates and why McCarthy employs the sentence rhythms he does. How does the rhythm relate to his themes?

In one description of a post-apocalyptic landscape, McCarthy's sentence fragments—blunt bursts of imagery without subjects and predicates—describe a world without grace:

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands star and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. Farther along were billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered.

In other passages, McCarthy uses parataxis (the stringing together of phrases and clauses with conjunctions like *and*) to establish rhythms reminiscent of the King James Bible. That is fitting, for in passages like the one below he is writing about the binding power of love between a father and son, of a modern-day death and resurrection.

They left the cart in a gully covered with the tarp and made

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their way up the slope through the dark poles of the standing trees to where he'd seen a running ledge of rock and they sat under the rock overhang and watched the gray sheets of rain blow across the valley. It was very cold. They sat huddled together wrapped each in a blanket over their coats and after a while the rain stopped and there was just the dripping in the woods. . . .

He slept close to his father that night and held him but when he woke in the morning his father was cold and stiff. He sat there a long time weeping and then he got up and walked out through the woods to the road. When he came back he knelt beside his father and held his cold hand and said his name over and over again.

Homework

Naming rhythms. Start acquainting yourself with rhythm by listening to the rhythms of very different music: African drums, a Hawaiian slack-key guitar, chamber music, hip-hop. Find words to describe the rhythm, not just the genre, of the music, the sounds of the instruments, or the meaning of the lyrics. Is it percussive? Fluid? Irregular? Even? Rough? Lurching? Like an incantation? Like a lullaby?

Rhythm copycat. Take your favorite song and try writing one stanza that repeats the rhythm the composer has laid down.

Conveying psychology through rhythm. Observe two people in a park, at a ballpark, or on a dance floor. Are their movements quick and jerky or graceful and fluid? If the former, write a series of staccato sentences (short words, hard sounds, and short sentences). Eavesdrop. Is their conversation brusque or baroque? If the latter,

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write a series of sentences with a more lyrical, languid, or liquid rhythm (polysyllabic words, softer sounds, stretched-out sentences).

Revising rhythms. Take a paragraph of something you've previously written. Does the writing have a rhythm? Play with different rhythms in your words and your sentences to heighten what you're trying to express.

Conjunction redux. Identify the conjunctions in the following passages. You've seen them before. But now, for a gold star, or for more advanced writers, identify whether the writer is using parataxis (coordination) or hypotaxis (subordination):

From *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, by John Milton:

If men within themselves would be governed by reason and not generally give up their understanding to a double tyranny of custom from without and blind affections within, they would discern better what it is to favor and uphold the tyrant of a nation.

From *A Moveable Feast*, by Ernest Hemingway:

You got very hungry when you did not eat enough in Paris because all the bakery shops had such good things in the windows and people ate outside at tables on the sidewalk so that you saw and smelled the food. When you had given up journalism and were writing nothing that anyone in America would buy, explaining at home that you were lunching out with someone, the best place to go was the Luxembourg gardens where you saw and smelled nothing to eat all the

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way from the Place de l'Observatoire to the rue de Vaugirard. There you could always go into the Luxembourg museum and all the paintings were sharpened and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cezanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry. I used to wonder if he were hungry too when he painted; but I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat. It was one of those unsound but illuminating thoughts you have when you have been sleepless or hungry.

From "Goodbye to All That," in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, by Joan Didion:

I remember walking across 62nd Street one twilight that first spring, or the second spring, they were all alike for a while. I was late to meet someone but I stopped at Lexington Avenue and bought a peach and stood on the corner eating it and knew that I had come out of the West and reached the mirage. I could taste the peach and feel the soft air blowing from a subway grating on my legs and I could smell lilac and garbage and expensive perfume and I knew that it would cost something sooner or later. . . .

For more advanced writers:

Parapsychology. Consider the rhythms in the following passages. Then, for a gold star, explain how the writer is using parataxis:

Julius Caesar:

Veni, vidi, vici. ("I came, I saw, I conquered.")

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Ezra Pound borrowed from Chinese and Japanese poetry the stark juxtaposition of images: The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals, on a wet, black bough. (“In a Station of the Metro”)

To the forest. Using this Virginia Woolf description from *To the Lighthouse* as a model, write a description of a landscape that focuses on one overriding quality of the natural scene (the freshness of color in early spring, the brittleness of the foliage in November, or the dissolution of shapes at dusk). After filling your paragraphs with vivid details, go back and rewrite using rhythm, maybe even parataxis, to emphasize the themes you’re developing.

And now as if the cleaning and the scrubbing and the scything and the mowing had drowned it there rose that half-heard melody, that intermittent music which the ear half catches but lets fall; a bark, a bleat; irregular, intermittent, yet somehow related; the hum of an insect, the tremor of cut grass, dissevered yet somehow belonging; the jar of a dorbeetle, the squeak of a wheel, loud, low, but mysteriously related; which the ear strains to bring together and is always on the verge of harmonising, but they are never quite heard, never fully harmonised, and at last, in the evening, one after another the sounds die out, and the harmony falters, and silence falls. With the sunset sharpness was lost, and like mist rising, quiet rose, quiet spread, the wind settled; loosely the world shook itself down to sleep, darkly here without a light to it, save what came green suffused through leaves, or pale on the white flowers in the bed by the window.

**Week Eight:
Rhythm—the Secret Path Into the
Soul/Handout**

In-class exercises

4. Read these two very different passages from Ernest Hemingway. How does the same writer use very different rhythms to create very different effects?

From “Hills Like White Elephants,” by Ernest Hemingway:

“It’s pretty hot,” the man said.

“Let’s drink beer.”

“Dos cervezas,” the man said into the curtain.

“Big ones?” a woman asked from the doorway.

“Yes. Two big ones.”

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glass on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

“They look like white elephants,” she said.

“I’ve never seen one,” the man drank his beer.

“No, you wouldn’t have.”

“I might have,” the man said. “Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything.”

The girl looked at the bead curtain. “They’ve painted something on it,” she said. “What does it say?”

“Anis del Toro. It’s a drink.”

“Could we try it?”

The man called “Listen” through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.

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“Four reales.”

“We want two Anis del Toro.”

“With water?”

“Do you want it with water?”

“I don’t know,” the girl said. “Is it good with water?”

“It’s all right.”

“You want them with water?” asked the woman.

“Yes, with water.”

“It tastes like liquorice,” the girl said and put the glass down.

“That’s the way with everything.”

From *Green Hills of Africa*, by Ernest Hemingway:

Riding a bicycle down it in the rain on the way home from Strassburg and the slipperiness of the rails of the tram cars and the feeling of riding on greasy, slippery asphalt and cobble stones in traffic in the rain, and how we had nearly lived on the Boulevard du Temple that time, and I remembered the look of that apartment, how it was arranged, and the wall paper, and instead we had taken the upstairs of the pavilion in Notre Dame des Champs in the courtyard with the sawmill (*and the sudden whine of the saw, the smell of sawdust and the chestnut tree over the roof with a mad woman downstairs*), and the year worrying about money (*all of the stories back in the post that came in through a slit in the saw-mill door, with notes of rejection that would never call them stories, but always anecdotes, sketches, contes, etc. They did not want them, and we lived on poireaux and drank cahors and water*), and how fine the fountains were at the Place de L’Observatoire . . .

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5. **For more advanced writers:** Keeping parataxis in mind, compare the rhythm in these two passages. What effect does the rhythm create, and why does McCarthy employ the sentence rhythm he does? How does the rhythm relate to his themes?

From *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy:

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands star and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. Farther along were billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered.

They left the cart in a gully covered with the tarp and made their way up the slope through the dark poles of the standing trees to where he'd seen a running ledge of rock and they sat under the rock overhang and watched the gray sheets of rain blow across the valley. It was very cold. They sat huddled together wrapped each in a blanket over their coats and after a while the rain stopped and there was just the dripping in the woods. . . .

He slept close to his father that night and held him but when he woke in the morning his father was cold and stiff. He sat there a long time weeping and then he got up and walked out through the woods to the road. When he came back he knelt beside his father and held his cold hand

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and said his name over and over again.

Conjunction redux. Identify the conjunctions in the following passages. You've seen them before. But now, for a gold star, or for more advanced writers, identify whether the writer is using parataxis (coordination) or hypotaxis (subordination):

From *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, by John Milton:

If men within themselves would be governed by reason and not generally give up their understanding to a double tyranny of custom from without and blind affections within, they would discern better what it is to favor and uphold the tyrant of a nation.

From *A Moveable Feast*, by Ernest Hemingway:

You got very hungry when you did not eat enough in Paris because all the bakery shops had such good things in the windows and people ate outside at tables on the sidewalk so that you saw and smelled the food. When you had given up journalism and were writing nothing that anyone in America would buy, explaining at home that you were lunching out with someone, the best place to go was the Luxembourg gardens where you saw and smelled nothing to eat all the way from the Place de l'Observatoire to the rue de Vaugirard. There you could always go into the Luxembourg museum and all the paintings were sharpened and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cezanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry. I used to

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wonder if he were hungry too when he painted; but I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat. It was one of those unsound but illuminating thoughts you have when you have been sleepless or hungry.

From "Goodbye to All That," in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, by Joan Didion:

I remember walking across 62nd Street one twilight that first spring, or the second spring, they were all alike for a while. I was late to meet someone but I stopped at Lexington Avenue and bought a peach and stood on the corner eating it and knew that I had come out of the West and reached the mirage. I could taste the peach and feel the soft air blowing from a subway grating on my legs and I could smell lilac and garbage and expensive perfume and I knew that it would cost something sooner or later. . . .

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Week Eight: Rhythm—the Secret Path Into the Soul/Answer Key

Homework

Conjunction redux. Identify the conjunctions in the following passages and identify whether the writer is using parataxis (coordination) or hypotaxis (subordination):

From John Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*:

If men within themselves would be governed by reason **and** not generally give up their understanding to a double tyranny of custom from without **and** blind affections within, they would discern better what it is to favor **and** uphold the tyrant of a nation. [HYPOTAXIS]

From *A Moveable Feast*, by Ernest Hemingway:

You got very hungry **when** you did not eat enough in Paris **because** all the bakery shops had such good things in the windows **and** people ate outside at tables on the sidewalk **so** that you saw and smelled the food. **When** you had given up journalism **and** were writing nothing that anyone in America would buy, explaining at home that you were lunching out with someone, the best place to go was the Luxembourg gardens **where** you saw **and** smelled nothing to eat all the way from the Place de l'Observatoire to the rue de Vaugirard. There you could always go into the Luxembourg museum **and** all the paintings were sharpened **and** clearer **and** more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I

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learned to understand Cezanne much better **and** to see truly how he made landscapes **when** I was hungry. I used to wonder **if** he were hungry too **when** he painted; **but** I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat. It was one of those unsound **but** illuminating thoughts you have **when** you have been sleepless or hungry. [EVEN THOUGH MANY OF THESE ARE SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS, I WOULD ARGUE THAT HEMINGWAY'S OVERALL EFFECT IS THAT OF PARATAXIS.]

From "Goodbye to All That," in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, by Joan Didion:

I remember walking across 62nd Street one twilight that first spring, **or** the second spring, they were all alike for a while. I was late to meet someone **but** I stopped at Lexington Avenue **and** bought a peach **and** stood on the corner eating it **and** knew that I had come out of the West **and** reached the mirage. I could taste the peach **and** feel the soft air blowing from a subway grating on my legs **and** I could smell lilac **and** garbage **and** expensive perfume **and** I knew that it would cost something sooner or later. . . . [PARATAXIS]

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Week Nine: Let Yourself Be a Little Lyrical

Reading

Sin and Syntax: "Lyricism"

Lesson and discussion

I use the word *lyricism* here to refer to the expressive power of words, and in particular to the way in which words can be used to evoke images, memories, and sensations. Lyricism, I think, has two distinct aspects. The first is a use of imagery and association; the second is a use of metaphors. (Metaphor is a complex subject, so let's handle that mostly in Week Ten.)

Lyricism turns words into sensory figments, whether pictures, smells, or sounds. It makes an idea visceral; it links the here and now with memory; it summons the imagination and invites it to sit down and join us. Lyricism springs from connotation, imagery, and metaphor:

- **Connotation** seeks felicitous words with layers of meaning and resonances beyond the concrete. One reason many Christians cling sentimentally to the King James Bible is the poetry in its words. In phrases like *Neither cast ye your pearls before swine*, the words have connotations that were lost in the New English Bible of 1961, with its *Do not feed your pearls to pigs*. *Feed* in the modern version cannot even imagine the nuances of *cast*, and *pig* trades the suggestion of evil and moral depravity of *swine* for the generic term for the barnyard animal.
- **Imagery** relies upon the re-creation in words of a concrete visual image, tapping deep feelings through visual

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descriptions. Images are our link to memory, to the imagination, to the collective unconscious. An image, though vivid, means only what it literally is: a marigold, an Appaloosa, a black Underwood typewriter. Jonathan Raban uses imagery to help us see a landscape on the Great Plains: "The earth was almost black, the grass and sage were emerald green."

- **Metaphor** is a way of talking about one thing by describing something else. Metaphors compare disparate things—surprising us, revealing deeper truths, and providing unexpected insights. (We are using *metaphor* here as a catchall term that includes *simile*, *symbol*, and *analogy*.) When William Finnegan describes the February surf at San Francisco's Ocean Beach in *Barbarian Days*, he makes an explicit comparison: "The first wall of sandy, grumbling white water felt like a barrel of gritty ice cubes poured down my back." Metaphor can also be expressed implicitly. Finnegan calls offshore winds, those that blow from land to sea, "the wonder drug of surfing" and compares them to an artist's implement: "On a good day, their sculptor's blade, meticulous and invisible, seems to drench whole coastlines in grace."

Metaphor can convey psychology, as well as topology and oceanography, as in this M. F. K. Fisher quote: "Once at least in the life of every human, whether he be brute or trembling daffodil, comes a moment of complete gastronomic satisfaction."

Many poems are essentially a sequence of images juxtaposed to create different sensations. One of the most famous proponents of imagery was the twentieth-century poet William Carlos Williams,

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who was famous for saying, “No ideas but in things.” His poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” illustrates this philosophy in verse:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

The images are simple, even stark. This, Williams says, is what poetry is made of.

The contemporary San Francisco Bay Area poet Maw Shein Win takes imagery even further. She is known as a Surrealist poet because of her habit of juxtaposing vivid images that don't seem to relate to each other. She often makes reference to Surrealist art and film, as in her poem “The Treachery of Images.” Its title alludes to the Belgian artist René Magritte—his 1928 painting of the same title features an image of a smoking pipe, under which is written, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. (“This is not a pipe.”) The pipe is one of many images that appears in Win's poem:

The sun is a cymbal.
A cat is a bear.
An accordion is a frosted cupcake.

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A gargoyle is a steering wheel.
The barber is a valley.
A tulip is a black and white film.

Architecture is a mustard sandwich.
A wild turkey is a forest.
The director is a fur sweater.

A mansion is a savage gown.
The guard is catnip.
A mink is a caveat.

The pipe is a magnolia tree.

The magnolia tree is a blanket.
The blanket is a flamingo.
The flamingo is a beach mat.
The beach mat is a soldier.
The soldier is a tangerine.
The tangerine is a villa.
The villa is a pony.
The pony is a peony growing
near an abandoned tool shed.

In prose or poetry, a single word can be enough to make a passage lyrical. An image can also come in a swift phrase that, in a deft stroke, zeroes in on a character or a subject. Staying with the idea of art, we can think of character descriptions as literary portraits, and of the ability to create images for the reader out of words as the essence of the art. For minor characters, we may have only a few words to make an impression. For major characters, the deft

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“character sketch” must become a deeper description that lays the groundwork for dramas to come.

Part of a good character sketch is finding just the right word. Often this is a precise noun, an evocative adjective. A character description must be more than just name, rank, and serial number. Most of us, in first drafts, grab generic nouns to name a character (*female, doctor, athlete*). When we write, though, we want to say as much as we can in as few words as possible, so we find specific nouns (*mother, cardiologist, kayaker*). *Mother* is better than *female*, because it reveals both gender and personal information. But nouns like *soccer mom, mother hen*, and *matron* say even more because they also give clues about age and attitude.

The best nouns provide more than one bit of information. They are concrete rather than abstract, specific rather than general. They are also evocative.

If you are lucky, you will be able to write paragraph-long character descriptions that go even deeper than a quick ID. Fans of the *New Yorker* will be familiar with the one-paragraph-long physical description that appears, usually on the first or second page, of the classic profile. Here’s a personal favorite, from “Dizzy,” by Whitney Balliett, of jazzman Dizzy Gillespie:

Gillespie, who is not a clotheshorse, was wearing a Sherlock Holmes hat, and houndstooth jacket, ruffled striped brown pants, a navy-blue T-shirt, and a couple of medallions suspended from a long gold neck chain. He hasn’t changed much in the last ten years. He has a medium-length grayish Afro, and he looks grizzly. His huge and celebrated cheeks are broadsides in repose and

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spinnakers in action, and he has a scimitar smile and a thousand tiny, even teeth. He likes to smile and roll his eyes in mock surprise, but most of the time his eyes are narrowed; they take in much and send out little, and when he puts on his dark-rimmed, two-ton glasses they disappear.

Balliett's precise images give us a clear snapshot of Gillespie. He starts with Gillespie's duds, focusing next on the jewelry, the cheeks, the mouth, and, finally, the eyes, and the perfectly pitched metaphors (cheeks that are "broadsides in repose and spinnakers in action") make the portrait breathe. (See pages 17–18 of *Sin and Syntax*.)

Homework

Object lesson. Have students bring to class some small objects (or pictures of objects) that are used as symbols—whether a lightbulb, a company logo, or the Nike Swoosh. Ask students to talk about the idea that each symbolizes.

Slow down and look closely. In a character description, stop to really look at the person you will describe. Write down everything you notice: height, hair, face shape, eye color, skin pallor. But don't stop there. What texture is the hair? What style is the haircut? Is the person tall, six foot three, willowy, lanky, commanding, or Amazonian? What brand of shoes does she wear? What shade of gray is his hoodie? And what is the sound of the person's voice?

Start sketching. Serious artists keep sketchbooks or work on countless charcoal drawings before moving to a final canvas. The writer, too, ought to become an inveterate sketcher. Dedicate one

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composition notebook or Moleskine to character sketches. To get yourself going, start with these three practices:

1. Whenever you are on a bus, in a park, or at a café, look closely at the faces of separate strangers and write down as many nouns and adjectives as you can to describe their features.
2. Go to some place filled with colorful characters. (A barbershop? The ballpark? San Francisco's Mission Street? New York's Times Square?) Eavesdrop on a conversation, recording it completely.
3. Focus on someone you know just a little but can observe a lot. Write a brief physical description that captures not just the person's face, but his or her physical presence.

Week Ten: Making Metaphors

Reading

Sin and Syntax: "Lyricism"

"Metaphors," by Sylvia Plath (see Handout)

Lesson and discussion

Metaphors are hard to teach. For starters, we need to help students understand the difference between imagery, analogy, simile, and metaphor. Then we need to understand the difference between dead metaphors, or clichés, and fresh, brilliant ones. (I was once amazed while listening to the poet Donald Hall talk about metaphor; he made me realize that the subject is infinitely nuanced. See my blog post sinandsyntax.com/blog/down-the-carved-names.)

Metaphor and **simile** involve comparisons between unlike things. In *simile*, the comparison is expressed through words such as *like*, *as*, *than*, *similar to*, and *resembles*: (*like a butterfly*, for example, or *louder than a bomb*). In *metaphor*, the comparison is expressed when a figurative term is substituted for a literal term. In *Bad Land*, as Jonathan Raban imagines a train leaving North Dakota in 1909, he compares the landscape to fungi: "With the sun sinking fast toward the horizon, the train crept through a sudden irruption of badlands terrain, past mushrooms of sandstone on stalks of pale gray clay." When describing the perfect spring weather of a week in June almost a century later, he uses simile: "Every creek and coulee brimmed with water like milky cocoa."

Personification is a particular type of metaphor in which an inanimate object or an idea is represented in human terms. Raban personifies trees when he gives them knees, instead of trunks:

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“Water swirled round the knees of the cottonwoods and filled the irrigation ditches.”

Symbol refers to the use of one thing to mean much more than what it is. A lightbulb is a trite symbol for an idea. The “road not taken” was Robert Frost’s symbol for the consequences of choice. The ruins of houses “skewed and splayed” that dotted the landscape Raban surveys symbolize the dashed dreams of long-ago emigrants:

Their windows, empty of glass, were full of sky. Strips of ice-blue showed between their rafters. Some had lost their footing and tumbled into their cellars. All were buckled by the drifting tonnage of Montana’s winter snows, their joists and roofbeams warped into violin curves.

Analogy, also known as **extended metaphor**, is a whole web of metaphors in which a likeness is drawn through parallel structure, like explaining sentences as boats, or comparing a man walking in the cold to a walking skeleton (see Handout).

Often we think in terms of nouns when we’re crafting images and metaphors. But let’s not forget verbs! Static verbs flow naturally when we write or speak—*is* appears endlessly in most first drafts. There’s nothing wrong with this. In the rewriting process, many sentences can be recast to be more dynamic, and thinking metaphorically helps. Describing a pair of boots on a landing, we might first write, “The boots are on the landing,” and later rewrite to say, “The cowboy boots slouch, waiting for Clint,” or, “The Doc Martens stand ready to rock.” See the metaphors?

Pointed verbs lead us to metaphors, too. Strike *speaks softly* and insert *murmurs*. Erase *eats quickly* in favor of *gobbles* or even

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hoovers. Race away from a phrase like *run quickly*. Maybe even *gallop*.

Verbs can help us arrive at metaphors in character descriptions, too. The journalist George Packer once described a group of congressmen by likening the U.S. Capitol to a menagerie: “Observed from the press gallery, the senators in their confined space began to resemble zoo animals—[Carl] Levin a shambling brown bear, John Thune a loping gazelle, Jim Bunning a maddened grizzly.”

In-class exercises

1. Play some music during this lesson, to liven things up and to find metaphors in the lyrics. These songs are good to start with:

- “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” by Hank Williams Jr.:
cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/williams-hank-jr/im-so-lonesome-i-could-cry-976.html
- “Just a Wave, not the Water,” by Butch Hancock:
risa.co.uk/sla/song.php?songid=18711
- “I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl,” by Nina Simone:
youtube.com/watch?v=XZm0jYXZ_2I

Other artists reliable for metaphor include the Beatles and, of course, Bob Dylan. This concert can be a loosening lead-in to a discussion of the song lyrics your students find.

Encourage students to find metaphors in writing they like. Ask them to take a look at their favorite songs and see whether the composer uses metaphors in the lines.

2. The Sylvia Plath poem “Metaphors” works well to explore the subject with high-school students. The fact that it is a “riddle”—that the metaphor isn’t at first obvious—is a pretty good sign that Plath

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has avoided cliché. What state does Plath describe in her series of metaphors? (Hint: What female state lasts nine months?) How do the metaphors in each line correspond to each one of nine months?

3. Read the example from the short story “Baptizing the Gun” (see Handout) and have students describe the way their insides felt in one especially scary moment in life.

4. **For more advanced writers:** Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* offers an object lesson in metaphors. It’s hard to ask students to read that dense, difficult, 637-page novel just to find metaphors, so I’ve extracted some you can use for discussion (see Handout).

Homework

Loll about in some lyrics. Take a look at your favorite songs and see if the composer uses metaphors in the lines. If you come up empty-handed, try these three:

- “I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl,” by Nina Simone*
- “Shelter From the Storm,” by Bob Dylan
- “Just a Wave, Not the Water,” by Butch Hancock

* There is a version of this song by Bessie Smith, too.

Play songwriter. Take the lyrics of your favorite song, ideally one with metaphors. Write another verse for the song, making your own metaphors.

Play poet. You read Sylvia Plath’s description of pregnancy. Without resorting to clichés, try to come up with your own metaphors for *pregnancy*. Do the same for *unrequited love* and *loneliness*.

Object of my affection. Wander around your house, looking at different household objects. Focus on the thing you would grab first

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if your house were on fire. Freewrite about it: Describe it as concretely as you can. Tell the story of how you came to it—or it to you. Why is it so precious? After you have written your paragraph, think about whether the possession is a metaphor. Consider making the link between the object and its deeper meaning explicit—either in a line of the essay or in its title.

Ghosting right past the logical mind. Want a metaphor refresher? Listen to Jane Hirschfeld's TED Talk "The Art of the Metaphor," available on YouTube. Not only does it explain the device clearly, it does so with the poet's own delightful words: "Metaphors think with the imagination and the senses," she says. "The hot chili peppers in them explode in the mouth and the mind. They're also precise." Metaphors get under your skin, she says, "by ghosting right past the logical mind."

Take a walk on the wild side. Take a foray in inclement weather—whether Jonathan Raban's shocking and insulting cold, or stultifying heat, or a tempest of Shakespearean proportions. Revisit Raban's description of the Montana cold (page 268 of *Sin and Syntax*). Using that as a model, find a metaphor for your own climate and extend it.

Week Ten: Making Metaphors/Handout

In-class exercises

Examples of metaphor.

2. From “Metaphors,” by Sylvia Plath (allpoetry.com/Metaphors americanpoems.com/poets/sylviaplath/7854):

What state does Plath describe in her series of metaphors? (Hint: What female state lasts nine months?) How do the metaphors in each line correspond to each one of the nine months? (In consideration of copyright, I’m reprinting the first two lines only here; the nine-line poem is widely available in books and online.)

I’m a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house...

3. From “Baptizing the Gun,” by Uwem Akpan (*the New Yorker*, January 4, 2010):

In this short story set in Lagos, Nigeria, the protagonist has hidden his Rolex from a man who offered to help him with a broken-down Volkswagen Beetle. The man insinuates his way into the car, and the protagonist thinks he’s about to be the victim of a carjacking. When the man asks him why he hid his watch, he says he didn’t. Then he uses metaphor to convey how he’s feeling. Describe the way your insides felt in one especially scary moment in life.

My stomach feels like a grater, and my insides hurt
as if they’d been shredded. Silently, I start saying
the Rosary to calm myself down. First decade.
Second decade. Third decade . . . The watch in my
left back pocket is a malignant tumor, an unripe
boil. It feels cold and quiet against my butt, yet all

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know it's ticking away, a countdown to my death and my corpse on the road. I shouldn't have lied. St Christopher, Patron of Travellers, what do I tell this man?"

4. **For more advanced writers:** Henry James was a master of metaphor, as he made manifest in *Portrait of a Lady*, a novel about a beautiful, spirited American orphan—Isabel Archer—who is brought to Europe by her aunt to, as James famously put it, “affront her destiny.” James rewrote the novel in 1908 (it was originally published in 1881), refining many of the metaphors, which he used to define everything from personality (“a perfect little pearl of a peeress”) to architecture (a library that was “a chamber of disgrace for old pieces of furniture whose infirmities were not always apparent [so that the disgrace seemed unmerited and rendered them victims of injustice]”).

Remember, a good metaphor describes *something* by comparing it to *an unlike thing*. James gives minor characters names that are themselves metaphors:

- The Vermonter-turned-London banker, who touches a lot of money, is named **Daniel Tracy Touchett**.
- The plucky American is **Henrietta Stackpole**.
- The eternal, hardheaded, spurned suitor is **Caspar Goodwood**.
- Isabel Archer's mercurial sister-in-law is the **Countess Gemini**.
- Isabel Archer's innocent, budding stepdaughter is **Pansy Osmond**.
- Pansy's sweet-smelling, gentle suitor is **Ned Rosier**.

James's character descriptions also depend on metaphor:

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- “Nothing tender, nothing sympathetic, had ever had a chance to fasten upon [Mrs. Touchett’s face]—**no wind-sown blossom, no familiar softening moss.**”
- Pansy Osmond “would make a **perfect little pearl** of a peeress.”
- Daniel Touchett “had been neither at Harvard nor at Oxford,” but he had acquired a “**fine ivory surface**, polished by the English air.”
- Isabel Archer, by the end of the book, reflects that “she had been an **applied handled hung-up tool**, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron.”

In his revision, James concentrated on a system of monetary or fiscal metaphors. Why? The book develops as a theme the corrosive influence of money, so the metaphors serve to subtly underscore the way in which her inheritance dooms Isabel Archer. Words like *bills*, *interest*, *debt*, *rich*, and *terms* are exploited for their double meanings, as is the noun *capital*, converted into an adjective:

- “Please explain about that young lady—your sister—then. I don’t understand about her. Is she a Lady? (Henrietta Stackpole)
- “She’s a **capital** good girl.” (Lord Warburton)
- “I should like to put some money in her purse.” (Ralph Touchett, asking his dying father to give his cousin Isabel Archer a substantial inheritance)
- “Ah, I’m glad you’ve thought of that,” said the old man. “But I’ve thought of it too. I’ve left her a legacy—five thousand pounds.” (Mr. Touchett, the banker)
- “That’s **capital**; it’s very kind of you. But I should like to do a little more. (Ralph Touchett)

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- “Why indeed should we perpetually be thinking whether things are good for us, as if we were patients lying in a hospital? Why should I be so afraid to not doing right? As if it mattered to the world whether I do right or wrong!” (Isabel Archer, after she has received her inheritance)
- “You’re a **capital** person to advise.” (Ralph Touchett)

Homework

Examples of extended metaphor.

Take a walk on the wild side. Here’s Jonathan Raban on the cold of Montana, with its “shocking and insulting quality, like a boot in the face.” On a night when it’s negative twenty-seven degrees, Raban decides to walk the nine-tenths of a mile from a restaurant back to the Edgewater Red Lion Inn. Using that as a model, find a metaphor for your own climate and extend it.

I had never felt my bones *as* bones before—the dry clacking of the joints of the skeleton. My kneecaps, thin and brittle as sand-dollars, came to my attention first, followed by my wrists, knuckles, shoulder-blades and ankles. I rattled as I walked, my trouser-legs flapping round bare white shinbones.

For the first few blocks, I was Captain Scott, bravely leading the way across the icecap. Then I became poor Titus Oates, with his enormous frostbitten foot. ‘Well,’ said Oates, leaving Scott’s tent at 80°08’S, “I am just going outside, and I may be some time.”

. . . The walking skeleton at last gained the hotel car park, enormous, rimed with frost—the final glacier. Keep going, chaps; almost there. I wanted a flag to plant. A side-

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door (Entrance D, as I remember) moved slowly forward to meet me . . . *Locked!* It required an agony of tomfoolery with a magnetically coded passcard to get the damned thing open. In the hot hallway, I had to lean against the wall for a minute, breathing in sobs, before I made the bar, where a jazz trio was in the middle of a number, and the talk didn't come to an abrupt stop when I made my triumphant entrance.

"I just *walked* here from the *Depot*," I said to the attendant waitress. "On foot." Still no response. "Christ, it is *cold!*"

From *Lost in My Own Backyard* by Tim Cahill:

In a description of a small pull-off in Yellowstone Park known as Artist's Paintpots, the ever-irreverent travel writer Tim Cahill, in *Lost in My Own Backyard*, compares this natural wonder to, well, natural functions:

If the geysers inspire awe—and they do—the paintpots generally make people laugh. They are the comedians in the pantheon of thermal features. Nathaniel Langford thought the mud in the pots looked like "thick paint." He wrote that in the pots a "bubble would explode with a puff, emitting . . . a villainous smell." He didn't say that while some of the bubbles burst like boiling water, rather soundlessly, others break in a flatulent manner, creating a sound that invariably makes people laugh. You might be the world's most sophisticated individual—it won't matter. You'll still laugh when the mud pot farts.

Cahill extends his metaphor of humanlike emissions, describing water sloshing, exploding, belching, boiling flatulently, and sounding

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like a giant's toilet, constantly flushing: "I was alone with the mud post for over an hour," he concludes, "thinking about artists and hotspots as well as flatulence and the end of civilization as we know it."

Week Eleven: Questions of Style

Reading

Sin and Syntax: “Introduction to the Music”

Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch: “Got Style?” (especially pages 293–96)

“Orlean, Bronson, Butler and Others on Style,” in *Talking Shop*:
sinandsyntax.com/talking-shop/orlean-bronson-butler-and-others-on-style

Lesson and discussion

The first task in writing, especially in nonfiction, is to find order in the chaos of ideas, whether that order emerges through logic, a structural device, or a narrative arc. But order is not enough for great writing. *Literary style* refers to the writer’s ability to express these ideas with a certain panache. Creative word choice is part of style, as is the ability to craft supple sentences. What I like to call “music”—elements like melody (the sound of words) and rhythm (repetition, beats, incantation), and the related idea of tone—also play into style.

Literary style might best be defined as “what is distinguished and what is distinguishing”:

- surprising word choice
- flair
- the use of metaphor
- beauty in phrasing
- sentences that flow
- the sense that the writer is in control

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But it also refers to the craft of writing as the very best writers apply it, when the form of the sentence reflects the substance of the sentence.

My all-time-favorite example of literary style is this paragraph from the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*, by Cormac McCarthy. Read the following paragraph at least twice out loud. Ask students to pay attention to the subjects and predicates in each sentence, as well as to the length of the sentences. Then ask them to note the use of concrete images and literal language, as well as the use of imagery and figurative language:

They rode out along the fenceline and across the open pastureland. **The leather** creaked in the morning cold. **They** pushed the horses into a lope. **The lights** fell away behind them. **They** rode out on the high prairie where **they** slowed the horses to a walk and **the stars** swarmed around them out of the blackness. **They** heard somewhere in that tenantless night a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was and **they** rode out on the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that **they** rode not under but among them and **they** rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing.

The repetition of the subject-predicate combo *they rode* keeps us grounded in the action as the sentences get more and more wild. It also sounds like the clip-clop of horses' hooves. Like the pace of the mounts they're describing, McCarthy's sentences start short, at a

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controlled clip, before they start to stretch out, just as the horses move out of the corral, into a trot, and then into a graceful canter. Finally, horses and riders reach the Texas high prairie: they gallop wildly, trusting their fate to the infinite night sky. From *leather creaking* and *stars swarming*, we move to the figurative language of the *tenantless night* and the *dark electric*. McCarthy is using many of the literary devices we've talked about, and the form of his sentences echoes the subject of his story. That's literary style.

In-class exercises

1. Have students pick a passage in which they think a writer shows a strong sense of style. Have them consider these questions: How would you define that style? What are the different elements that work together to create that style? Ask other students to comment on language, literary devices, musical sentences, tone, and voice in each passage.

2. Share the passages students found. Lead a discussion about literary style using the ideas in the epilogue of *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* ("Got Style?) and in "Orlean, Bronson, Butler and Others on Style": sinandsyntax.com/talking-shop/orlean-bronson-butler-and-others-on-style.

3. Read James Salter's "Last Night," (*New Yorker*, Nov. 18, 2002: newyorker.com/archive/2002/11/18/021118fi_fiction?currentPage=4.) Lead a discussion among students about James Salter's style. What kinds of words does he choose to influence our feelings about the characters and this particular chain of events? How does the style complement the central ideas of the story? Then listen to Thomas McGuane reading the story and discussing Salter's style with *New Yorker* fiction editor Deborah Treisman: newyorker.com/podcast

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/fiction/thomas-mcguane-reads-james-salter. McGuane and Treisman call Salter's sentences "terse." Do the students agree?

Homework

Personal style. Write three character sketches of a brother, sister, or close friend. You may decide to write about a different subject, but try to ensure that the subject is a peer, so that the first sketch can really be written in different language than the other two. Use slang and an informal tone in the first. In the second description, focus on intimacy in detail and language. In the third, use a more formal tone and more sophisticated language. Next, write a sketch of your mother and father, sharing insight that they might not have.

Professional style. Write a recommendation of your brother, sister, or close friend for college, for a job, or for an apartment. How is the style of each description different? Do you use different vocabulary? Is the tone different? Are the sentences different?

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Week Twelve: Let's Get Personal

Reading

“Modern Love,” the *New York Times Magazine*:

nytimes.com/2009/04/05/fashion/05love.html?_r=2 and

nytimes.com/2009/01/25/fashion/25love.html?_r=1

“Cutouts,” by Constance Hale: sinandsyntax.com/cutouts

A selection of your own favorite personal essays. (If you don't have readily available favorites, pick up an anthology of essays and find a few you like; try *Getting Personal*, by Philip Lopate, or *The Best American Essays*, published annually by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.)

This section on personal essays is spread out over two weeks. Next week: memoirs and longer essays that blend personal experience with larger social or political issues.

Lesson and discussion

*In a personal essay, the track of a person's thoughts
struggling to achieve some understanding of a problem is the
plot, the adventure.*

—Michel de Montaigne

Many of us keep journals to record experiences that seem important, incidents that are telling, or moments that seem to hold a secret about life. When we travel, we may send postcards to tell loved ones about highlights of the journey. Then, of course, there is the Facebook status update, which invites brief rumination on just about anything.

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Often a personal essay starts with a journal entry or a sequence of status updates. But in order to be an essay, the whole must equal more than a sum of its parts; it can't be a mere diary or chronicle of events. The particular experience the essay describes might be dramatic, and it might be quiet. But whether the story thunders or whispers, the writer needs to reveal some unusual insight. The personal essay encapsulates the process of discovery. There is an alchemy here: *the act of telling* shapes the recollection of the experience. It takes a form. It unfolds with fresh, lively language and a distinctive narrative voice.

The discussions this week can be partly guided by the essays you choose to have your students read (from the list above, or from your own list). Of course, discussions might focus first on the nature of a personal essay. Also relevant are who the narrator is and how we get a sense of the narrator on the page. (These discussions lead up to the notion of narrative voice, which we'll pick up in the last week.)

Before students start writing, it might be helpful to point out that they will be trying to make art from life. They might think about which characters are central to the story and whether they can use colorful, descriptive language to render them (as well as scenes) on the page. Something else to consider is the arc of the story: Where should it begin? Where should it end? (A narrative arc makes this different from just a collection of status updates.) Finally, it's worth identifying the deeper essence or meaning of the story you're trying to write. Ideally, it will touch on a universal theme. This theme is as important as the particulars—the “what happened.”

This central idea also has a practical purpose: It helps the writer make decisions about what to include and what *not* to include

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(always a challenge in first-person writing). Each incident or paragraph should illuminate the central idea.

In-class exercises

1. Discuss the readings above. Did the essays seem merely confessional, or do they get at something larger? What is that larger idea? How does the writer put himself or herself into the piece, but not too much? Note how the authors of these pieces wrote about their experiences with honesty, delicacy, and metaphor.

2. Ask students to write about something fairly common: “your first pet,” perhaps, or “a Fourth of July you’ll never forget.” Make the exercise like a freewrite. Then ask them to read it over and come up with one word to describe what the piece is “really about.” Finally, ask each student to read his or her piece, and ask other students to suggest one word for the theme. Then compare the writer’s theme with the ones listeners come up with.

Homework

Try an essay. The word *essay* has been used in English since the late 1500s. It originally meant *trial, attempt, endeavor*, as well as *a short, discursive literary composition*. It entered English from the Middle French *essai, for trial, attempt, essay*, and came from the Latin *exigere*, for *to drive out, require, exact, examine, try, test*. Imagine every essay as a test, a trial balloon, a chance to drive an idea out of your head and onto the page.

If you don’t have something you’re burning to write about, try answering these questions:

- Is there a possession you have strong feelings about? Why? Because you treasure it? Because of its

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usefulness? Because it connects you to the person who gave it to you? Or because it's burdensome or irritating?

- Is there something you've lost that you would really like to get back?
- When was the first time a friend or colleague betrayed you?

Try another. Take the piece you wrote in class (about your first pet or a Fourth of July) and rewrite it, now that you understand the theme at the center of it. Can you make that theme apparent to the reader, even if subtly?

Tell a tale. Review the freewriting you did over the past few weeks. Is there a memory that might be worth writing an essay about? Is there an archetypal person in your life whom others might recognize and learn from? Finally, can you tell a tale of modern love?

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Week Thirteen: The Self as Mirror of Something Larger

Reading

“The White Album,” by Joan Didion (the title essay of the book by the same name): Read at least the opening five pages, which you can find on Google Books.

“The Long Way Home,” by Nando Parrado:

<https://www.outsideonline.com/1824341/long-way-home>

“Trusty and Grace,” in *Hold the Enlightenment*, by Tim Cahill (Villard, 2002) published online as “Shed His Grace on Me”:

<https://www.outsideonline.com/1891261/shed-his-grace-me>

The opening of *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, by Jacobo Timerman (see Handout)

The LitBit series, by the San Francisco Writers’ Grotto, in particular the volume on crafting character, by Constance Hale. (The series will be published by Abrams in 2019.)

Lesson and discussion

The best personal essays are much more than just first-person confessions: They hold truths about the human condition, and in some cases they blend personal experience with larger social or political issues. And they do so with stylish writing! Last week, we looked at simpler personal essays. This week we look at examples by masters of the craft and of this particular form: Joan Didion, Nando Parrado, Tim Cahill, and Jacobo Timerman.

Discuss each essay answering these questions:

- Why and how is the narrator a part of this story?
- What is this story really about—is it just a narrative of a personal experience, or is there a larger central idea?

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- What structure does the writer employ—what's the organizing principle?
- What do you notice about the writer's style—the language, the descriptions, the voice?

We've talked about the role of a universal theme in a personal essay or memoir. It may take time to identify the theme. It could be a universal emotional/psychological/spiritual experience, but it could also be a burning issue. Once you understand the theme, which is often implicit, you can use that insight to tweak the language and also to make structural decisions. Being clear on the theme also helps to decide what to jettison from the piece and what to burnish.

Setting and characters are especially important in memoirs, which are longer and require more literary elements to keep the reader riveted. Characters need to be described succinctly, but in a way that gives a reader a visual image of the person, as well as a sense of a personality. I once described a man with quite a girth as "full-bellied," because that compound suggested not just the shape of his frame, but also the liveliness of his spirit. Quotes and bits of dialogue also help make a character distinct. And don't forget that in a memoir you yourself are a character!

Once you get the hang of characters and scenes, see if you can build action into your story. It might be helpful to think about exterior and interior plots—a sequence of events, but also the ways in which each of those events changed you.

In a book-length memoir, you want a distinctive narrative voice (created through language and vocabulary, melody and rhythm, tone and style). Finally, dramatic conflict always makes a story more gripping.

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In-class exercises

1. Further define the personal essay by asking students what they've learned from the readings. You may want to cover some of these ideas:

- “What I did on my summer vacation”—writing about journeys
- Bearing witness—writing about something interesting you've seen
- The art of argument—making a case for something
- Personal discoveries—writing about experiences that led to epiphanies
- Lessons learned—writing about experiences that teach us about life
- Impressions—personal reactions to art, events, movies, music
- Expression—exposing part of your heart or your history

2. Analyze the organizing principles for various essays. Is there a plot or a chronology? Is it organized according to a theme? Is there a dramatic conflict and a resolution? What literary devices are used?

3. Ask students to come up with an anecdote, or a favorite story they tell a lot. Now ask them to make up a conflict, or to accentuate one to make the story more dramatic. Or to stretch the truth to invent a plot. Is there some suspense they might draw out a bit? Have them write or retell their stories with one of these elements. How does it change?

4. **For more advanced writers:** Consider point of view: Does a personal essay have to be written in the first person? What saves an essay from sentimentality or navel gazing? (It might be self-

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deprecation or some other form of humor.) Can research or reporting deepen a personal essay or memoir, and does that change its tenor or import?

5. Once students have read a number of different essays and have tried their hand at a personal essay of their own, it's possible to have a deeper discussion about the art and craft of the genre. Here are some other ideas to explore:

- Offering insight into current events (journalism)
- Exploring burning issues (journalism)
- Expressing a point of view (op-eds)
- Insight into the human condition (fiction/storytelling)

Homework

Connecting to the collective unconscious. Few of us can write at the level of a Didion, a Parrado, a Cahill, or a Timmerman. But, after reading the work of these essayists, revisit the essay you wrote last week. Can you further draw out a theme? Is there a dramatic conflict that is there but latent? Does the essay have the trace of a distinctive voice or tone that you might continue to develop? Rewrite your previous essay to deepen it.

Find the universal in the particular. Don't make the mistake of thinking that the more general your idea, the more universal it is, or the more generic your language, the more "accessible." Work at making your anecdotes sharper, your characters more compelling, and your scenes more cinematic. Observe characters and places with new eyes. Ironically, the best way to arrive at universal truths is by being as specific as you can.

Focus on surprise. Writing—and reading—can be a process of discovery. Suspense makes a story more exciting; a twist makes it

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more satisfying. Write a letter to someone you know, telling the recipient something he or she doesn't know, or perhaps revealing a secret.

Focus on transformation. Review your life experiences: Is there one that stands out, that carries a certain meaning for you and to others? How did the experience change you? Were there moments of suspense? Can you lead the reader through the experience of that change?

**Week Thirteen:
The Self as Mirror of Something
Larger/Handout**

Homework

Connecting to the Collective Unconscious

**From *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, by
Jacobo Timerman:**

The cell is narrow. When I stand at its center, facing the steel door, I can't extend my arms. But it is long, and when I lie down, I can stretch out my entire body. A stroke of luck, for in the cell I previously occupied—for how long?—I was forced to huddle up when seated and keep my knees bent while lying down.

The cell is quite high. When I jump, I'm unable to touch the ceiling. The white walls have been recently painted. Undoubtedly they once had names on them, messages, words of encouragement, dates. They are now bereft of any vestige or testimony.

The floor of the cell is permanently wet. Somewhere there's a leak. The mattress is also wet. I have a blanket, and to prevent that from getting wet I keep it on my shoulders constantly. If I lie down with the blanket on top of me, the part of my body touching the mattress gets soaked. I discover it's best to roll up the mattress so that one part of it doesn't touch the ground. In time, the top part dries. This means, though, that I can't lie down, but must sleep seated. My life goes on during this period—for how long?—either standing or seated.

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The cell has a steel door with an opening that allows part of a face, a minimal part, to be visible. The guard has orders to keep the opening shut. Light enters from the outside through a small crack, which acts also as an air vent. This is the only ventilation and light. A faint glow, night and day, eliminating time. Producing a semi-penumbra within an atmosphere of contaminated air, semi-air. . . .

One of the guards has my watch. During an interrogation another guard offered me a cigarette and lit it with my wife's lighter. I later learned that they were under army orders not to steal anything from my house throughout the kidnapping but succumbed to temptation. Gold Rolex watches and Dupont cigarette lighters were almost an obsession with the Argentine security forces during that year of 1977.

Tonight, a guard, not following the rules, leaves the peephole ajar. I wait a while to see what will happen but it remains open. Standing on tiptoe, I peer out. There's a narrow corridor, and across from my cell I can see at least two other doors. Indeed, I have a full view of two doors. What a sensation of freedom! An entire universe added to my Time, that elongated time which hovers over me oppressively in the cell. Time, that dangerous enemy of man, when its existence, duration, and eternity are virtually palpable.

Week Fourteen: Developing a Narrative Voice

Reading

Sin and Syntax: "Music" and "Voice"

Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch: "Got Style?"

"The Voice of the Storyteller," *New York Times* Opinionator:
opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/the-voice-of-the-storyteller

Susan Orlean on voice in *Telling True Stories*, page 158

Roy Clark's *Writing Tools*: "Tool 23: Tune Your Voice"

Lesson and discussion

The connection between storyteller and audience is essential in writing. By using some subtle devices, a narrator can reach out to the reader and say, *We're in this together*. Narrative voice refers to the ineffable way words work on the page. It tips us off to the identity of the writer. Reflecting a combination of diction, sentence patterns, and tone, voice is the quality that helps a writer connect with a reader, and it turns the writer into a *narrator*.

Point of view revisited. One device that helps us develop voice is point of view, the perspective from which a story is told. Our choice of pronouns telegraphs it. We talked about point of view earlier, when considering tone, but let's consider it now in the context of *voice*.

In the first-person point of view, a writer chooses the soul-baring *I* or the inclusive *we*. (The plural *we* can also appear as the editorial *we* or the royal *we*.) In the second person, the writer uses *you*, which is capable of sliding from the informal and irreverent to the bossy imperative.

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In the third person, the writer usually relies on *he, she, it, or they*, which allows a kind of neutrality, the impartial distance of the detached observer. This is the classic point of view of journalism. The starchy *one* is another third-person option, and in fiction the third person yields a range of options, from the third-person omniscient, when the narrator knows what all characters are thinking, to the third-person limited, when the narrator is inside the head of one character.

Balladists, novelists, journalists, essayists—all must decide on a point of view for every story. Point of view affects tone: The third person seems more objective and hard-boiled, the first person more up close and personal. The second person can slide from directly addressing the reader—even telling us what to do (as in Bob Dylan’s case)—to a hipper, more informal form used by stylists as diverse as Jay McInerney in *Bright Lights, Big City* and Laura Fraser in *An Italian Affair*.

Voice and dialect. When writers capture accents or dialects, they are playing with the distinctive voice of their characters. Sometimes an author will write an entire poem, short story, or novel in dialect. (Doing this well is harder than it looks!) Have students read this passage from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. Much of Hurston’s story, about an African American woman’s struggle to live free and fulfilled, is written in the dialect of her native Florida. An entire culture, a way of life, a worldview, is packed into the simple song of Hurston’s sentences:

Course, talkin’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans
when yuh can’t do nothin’ else. And listenin’ tuh dat
kind uh talk is jus’ lak openin’ yo’ mouth and lettin’

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de moon shine down yo' throat. It's uh known fact,
Phoeby, you got tuh go there tuh *know* there. Yo' papa
and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and
show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh
theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh
find out about living fuh theyselves.

In Hurston's hand, the dialect is both distinctive and poetic. In the echoes of her heroine's speech, *to*, *a*, *you*, and *for* become examples of assonance. In phrases like *yo papa and yo mama*, she makes English as musical as Italian. And *got tuh go tuh God* uses assonance, consonance, and rhythm to make a phrase more musical than its "correct" equivalent, *must go to God*.

Voice at the podium and on the page. Previously, we focused on the bracing voice of Winston Churchill and the pastoral eloquence of Martin Luther King Jr. But voice can be comical, too—try reading the wry reporting of Mary Roach: "The human head is of the same approximate size and weight as a roaster chicken," she writes in the first line of *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, adding, "I have never before had occasion to make the comparison, for never before today have I seen a head in a roasting pan."

Voice can also be eclectic and highly distinctive. Junot Díaz, for example, mixes Spanglish, literary theory, Caribbean history, and no small amount of profanity in his fiction. The opening line in Chapter 1 of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* gives you a taste of his inimitable voice: "Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock."

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But voice can be understated, too. E. B. White may seem to possess the most seemingly natural, effortless voice possible, but that doesn't mean it's not carefully crafted. Here's the opening of his 1941 essay "Once More to the Lake":

One summer, along about 1904, my father rented a camp on a lake in Maine and took us all there for the month of August. We all got ringworm from some kittens and had to rub Pond's Extract on our arms and legs night and morning, and my father rolled over in a canoe with all his clothes on; but outside of that the vacation was a success and from then on none of us ever thought there was any place in the world like that lake in Maine. . . . I have since become a salt-water man, but sometimes in summer there are days when the restlessness of the tides and the fearful cold of the sea water and the incessant wind which blows across the afternoon and into the evening make me wish for the placidity of a lake in the woods.

What's magical about voice is the way we, as readers, recognize it. Anyone raised on *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little* will find comfortable familiarity in that last passage.

Summary. There are a lot of ideas in this last lesson. You may want to divide it into two weeks. A suitable way to end is by reminding students of the following things about voice:

- There is no "right" voice or "wrong" voice.
- You may have not "one" voice, but rather several voices.
- Trial and error are good; copying is good.
- Silence inner critics and let yourself play.
- Remove "shoulds" and ideas about whether or not you have a voice. You do.

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- Let the natural, the colloquial, shine through.
- You don't "find" your voice; it's always there, but sometimes latent.

Finding your voice involves focusing on a vision, an idea, an impulse; letting go of anxiety about right and wrong; experiencing sometimes agonizing trials; arriving at something true to you, something human, something joyous. Have fun with the writing.

In-class exercises

1. I teach voice partly through the Socratic method, partly by just reading and discussing a variety of pieces. In the first discussion, I ask students to do a little brainstorming, as well as a little research. (This could be as easy as looking up words in a dictionary.) We come up with definitions for terms that are really linked: *point of view*, *tone*, *style*, and *voice*.

Here are some ideas to cover in the discussion. In each case, I've suggested a quick writing exercise that allows you to play with them.

Language—vocabulary and word choice

- Generic or precise?
- Abstract or concrete?
- Simple or glorious?
- Literal or figurative (denotative v. connotative)?

Writing prompt: Describe the room you're sitting in, playing with *language* and then comparing the words various people chose to describe the same thing.

Syntax—sentence structure

- Short or long?

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- Simple or complex?
- Staccato or languid?

Writing prompt: Describe the street outside and what's going on.

Tone—the attitude

- The valence of words (i.e., their emotional weight)
- Young and slangy?
- Formal?
- Bossy?
- Light? Lyrical? Comical?

Writing prompt: Inspired by the ads we looked at earlier (for Nike, Grey Poupon, De Beers, Esso, etc.), write an ad for this class.

Point of view—who's talkin'?

- I/we—self, collective self
- You—informal “you” v. authoritative “you”
- He/she or they—straightforward, neutral
- One—lofty, pretentious

Writing prompt: Write restaurant capsule reviews, as suggested in Suite One, Week Three.

Pitch—who you talkin' to?

- Who is your audience?
- What is the conversation you're having?
- Define your reader:
 - Kids?
 - Techies?

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Women in their sixties?

New York Times subscribers?

Writing prompt: Tell the following to “sit down”: your dog, an eight-year-old, your grandmother, a school principal, or your boss.

Voice—the distinctive way a particular writer writes (regardless of tone or style):

- A particular sensibility when it comes to language
- A constant presence from one piece to another
- A reflection of the personality of the writer
- Characteristic speech and thought patterns of a writer
- A writer's nationality, race, gender, class, education, age, but also quirks
- Language + cadence + tone

Writing prompt: Listen to exercises others have written and see if you can identify the voice of the writer.

2. Take a look at some classic Bob Dylan songs for examples of different points of view. (In consideration of copyright, I'm reproducing very few lines here. It might be worthwhile to find the entire lyrics and discuss them in class.) Is point of view just a matter of pronouns? In his 1962 cover of the bluesy standard “Corrina, Corrina,” Dylan tells the story of longing in the first person:

I got a bird that whistles
I got a bird that sings
But I ain' a-got Corrina
Life don't mean a thing

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The 1964 protest anthem “The Times They Are A-Changin’” relies on the second person. The singer is talking to you, the listener:

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam...

Then, in “Hurricane,” written in 1975 about the controversial murder conviction of the boxer Rubin “The Hurricane” Carter, Dylan uses the third person:

Here comes the story of the Hurricane
The man the authorities came to blame...

3. Ask students to collect a few long letters they have written to family and friends. They can also collect a series of emails—or posts on Facebook—that seem to express something of who they are and how they like to keep in touch with people in shorter bursts. Have students read out loud selections of the letters, emails, and posts they have collected. Lead a discussion of the differences between their examples. For further discussion, ask a student to read a passage that has a particular **style** (reflected in vocabulary and length of the sentences). Then ask one to read a passage that has a particular **tone** (the attitude, be it earnest, excited, pissed off, or ironic) or **voice** (the overall sense of the person that comes through the words). Compare the letters with the emails or posts. What is the same in all, and what differs?

4. Read selections from Mark Leibovich, Frank McCourt, and Susan Orlean (in the Handout) Discuss them in terms of tone, style, voice.

5. Take a look at *Sin and Syntax* generally. Reread the passage about Papa Correa on page 214, which I wrote. Read my essay about

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taking my mother to Paris (sinandsyntax.com/souvenirs). OK. Three very different pieces of writing by one author. What is the same, and what is different? The difference in tone might be the easiest to spot. Are there differences in style? In voice? Does a writer have one voice or many voices?

Homework

Be a ventriloquist. Take a personal essay you've written and revise it. Decide ahead of time what tone, style, and voice you would like to try. Change the language and sentences accordingly.

Family ties. Write a sketch of a sibling or a cousin. Do the usual work of finding evocative details, but describe your character objectively. Once you've written it, rewrite it twice, first playing with tone then voice. Change the attitude, trying both reverence and irreverence. Change the point of view, from third person to first or second. Find words to express the intimacy, or distance, or lightheartedness, or grief, or frustration of the relationship. Think about diction, sentence dynamics, and pitch. When you're finished, decide which best showcases your own narrative voice.

Feel the blues. Find songs by singers in different genres—hip-hop, country-western, opera, Broadway, the blues. Compare the lyrics. What makes the songs different? Vocabulary? Attitude? Lingo?

Ode to a tape recorder. Transcribing talk is not tantamount to writing, but it offers one technique to cultivate voice. Some writers do start by speaking their ideas into tape recorders, to let their voices flow, to then be able to hear themselves. Others read their lines aloud, over and over, recasting any word or sentence that does not roll off the tongue. Anything that makes you cringe when you read it aloud needs rewriting.

Week Fourteen: Developing a Narrative Voice/Handout

In-class exercises

4. Read the following selections, and discuss them in terms of tone, style, and voice.

From “Facing the Music After a Bruising Makes for Alluring Theater,” by Mark Leibovich (New York Times, November 9, 2006):

WASHINGTON, Nov. 8—It was one of those once-a-decade days in Washington where news, rumor and recrimination crackled in every direction. But the wounded duck at the center of it all, President Bush, offered by far the day’s most mesmerizing spectacle.

He looked worn at his must-see midday news conference, in need of a haircut, good-night’s sleep, better makeup job, hug, vacation in Crawford or some combination thereof. The grooves across his forehead were dark and articulated, his voice slightly hoarse. He wore a maroon tie, the color of blood.

Yet for someone whose presidency had just been repudiated, whose party had been sent reeling and whose defense secretary had just been sent packing, Mr. Bush also appeared strangely giddy, like someone who is acting a little odd after suffering a blow to the head, or a “thumpin’,” to use the official presidential description.

From *Angela’s Ashes*, by Frank McCourt (Scribner, 1996):

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There may be a lack of tea or bread in the house, but Mom and Dad always manage to get the fags, the Wild Woodbines. They have to have the Woodbines in the morning and anytime they drink tea. They tell us every day we should never smoke, it's bad for your lungs, it's bad for your chest, it stunts your growth, and they sit by the fire puffing away. Mam says, If 'tis a thing I ever see a fag in your gob, I'll break your face. They tell us the cigarettes rot your teeth and you can see they're not lying. The teeth turn brown and black in their heads and fall out one by one. Dad says he has holes in his teeth big enough for a sparrow to raise a family.

From "Plant Crimes," by Susan Orlean (the *New Yorker*, November 30, 1998):

An orchid's appearance is ravishing. One species looks like a German Shepherd with its tongue hanging out. One looks like an octopus. One looks like a human nose. One looks like a pair of fancy shoes. One looks dead. There are species that look like butterflies, bats, ladies' handbags, swarms of bees, clamshells, camels' hooves, squirrels, nuns wearing wimples, and drunken old men. The smallest orchids are nearly microscopic, and the biggest ones have masses of flowers as large as footballs. The petals of some orchids are as soft as powder; others are as rigid and rubbery as inner tubes. They can be freckled or mottled or veiny or solid, their colors ranging from nearly neon to spotless white. Some look like the results of an accident involving paint.

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Acknowledgments

These lesson plans have evolved over so many years, and through so many different contexts, it's hard to know where to start with the thanks. Well, maybe not so hard. The first people who merit mention are my hundreds of students, beginning with juniors and seniors at the Urban School of San Francisco in the late 1980s. A creative bunch who yearned for some good guidelines, they inspired me to make grammar fun—and funny—while at the same time holding their prose to a high standard. Since then, there have been students in the UC Berkeley and Harvard Extension programs, journalists whose work I copyedited, participants at writing conferences, and colleagues at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism and the San Francisco Writers' Grotto. All have taught me lessons. Along the way, I've heard from teachers who use my books and have come up with their own inventions, which they've generously sent me.

Among those writer-teachers: Steven Laffoley, a novelist and middle-school principal in Halifax, Nova Scotia, who has brainstormed with me about how to make these ideas appeal to students still in the pirate phase. Tristan Destry Saldaña, a poet and composition teacher at College of Marin whose love of words (whether English, Greek, or other tongues) and whose ability to pack meaning into spare lines of text, always makes me want *more*. Kate Brubeck, a gifted writer and teacher—first at Mills College and now independently—who contributed many of the best “catechisms” in *Sin and Syntax* and imagined many more exercises here. Thank you, all three. You grasp the spirit of my work and enhance it.

The final phases of taking a rambling and disorganized Word file and turning it into an e-book would never have happened without the patient labor, abundant kindness, and amazing efficiency of Kailani Moran, my research assistant and a sharp editor in her own right. Trying to bring order to this document was a bit

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like trying to tell my unruly curls to cut it out and lie straight. In other words, an almost impossible and certainly vexing task. But Kai kept at it, and she kept me focused. This book is partly her creation.

Several gifted editors stepped in when it was time to whip this into publishable shape. Annie Tucker copyedited the manuscript, spotted instances of truly unnecessary passive voice, and made elegant suggestions. Amelia Weiss went over the final manuscript with a fine-tooth comb. A very fine one. Grace Ramsdell provided last-minute research and helped me manage the behemoth.

Tabitha Lahr designed a kick-ass cover and was, as always, a joy to work with. Coordinating with Tabitha, advising me, and shepherding the manuscript into digital form was the publishing wizard Brooke Warner. At She Writes Press and SparkPress, Brooke is committed to projects that traditional publishing won't touch but that deserve to be out in the world. She is an evangelist and an energizer rabbit. So many of us owe her thanks for her vision.

The folks at Three Rivers Press, especially Rebecca Wellborn, supported this project and have helped me get the word out. I owe them and their colleagues tremendous thanks for the way they have stood behind *Sin and Syntax*.

The motivating idea of all my language books is that we are all born with the gift of language and the love of words. This early infatuation (the cooing and the babbling, the riddles and the rhyming, the love of nonsense and the taste for the slightly scatological) is often beaten out of us. I don't want to assign blame, but there are many wrongheaded ideas floating around about what is "correct" and what is "incorrect," what is "standard" and what is "nonstandard." There are too many red pens and too few chanes to cut loose and play. So I thank *you* for reading this e-book, using this e-book, and adapting it to your own needs. Please keep insisting that your wards rediscover that early love for the way words work—on the page and in the air.

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Works Cited (an incomplete list)

My method of teaching relies heavily on the inspired work of other writers. I have tried here to stitch together a crazy quilt of examples, to show how many ways writing can make us think, laugh, sigh, and then pick up the pen. I urge you to swap some of my favorite passages for some of your own, because the passion for language and literature is infectious: if you are nuts about a particular story or poem or advertising jingle, your students will “catch” the bug.

The passages I refer to from *Sin and Syntax* and from *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* are reprinted with the permission of the authors, or are published under the fair use doctrine. To respect copyright, I send you to those books, and I’ve tried to give pages numbers for easy reference. Other passages are available online, and provided URLs or a publication date to help you find them. Still others are easy to track down in a good library. Unfortunately, copyright law has prevented me from printing more than a line or two of poems or songs, but I’m hopeful that you’ll be able to track down entire verses—or find a preferred lyric of your own.

The following is a list of other articles and books cited in the lesson plans, roughly in order of appearance. (If I have given publisher or date of publication in the text, the work is probably not included

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here.) This list is intended to give you information if you are interested in reading more of a work, but it is not a bibliography. (Some of these works are available in multiple editions.) I hope the list will launch you and your students on a journey of discovery.

- *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, by Jacobo Timerman (Alfred A. Knopf, 1981)
- *Gravity's Rainbow*, by Thomas Pynchon (Viking Press, 1973)
- *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, by Carson McCullers (Houghton Mifflin, 1951)
- *Whoredom in Kimmage: Irish Women Coming of Age*, by Rosemary Mahoney (Houghton Mifflin, 1993)
- "Death All Day in Kansas," by Richard Rhodes (*Esquire*, 1969)
- *The Last Cowboy*, by Jane Kramer (Harper & Row, 1977, and Pimlico, 2010): My apologies on this one. A very long time ago, I typed up a passage from this book, which was, I believe, excerpted in the *New Yorker*. At press time, I had not been able to confirm that this passage comes from the book itself.
- *Bright Lights, Big City*, by Jay McInerney (Vintage Books, 1984)
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About the Author

Constance Hale has carved a niche as a literary critic and a fiend about the craft of writing, especially through *Sin and Syntax* as well as *Vex*, *Hex*, *Smash*, *Smooch* and *Wired Style*. As a reporter, she has covered Latin plurals and Latino culture, Berkeley politics and Hawaiian sovereignty. Her freelance writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Smithsonian*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Honolulu*, as well as anthologies. Her eight-part series on the sentence launched the “Draft” series on *The New York Times* Opinionator. She has written a book on hula (*The Natives Are Restless*) and a children’s book (*‘Iwalani’s Tree*) set on the beach in Hawai‘i where she grew up. She also, a little secretly, writes poetry.

Hale is an editor, too, and her approach to the “Bones,” “Flesh,” “Cardinal Sins” and “Carnal Pleasures” of writing has been informed by her 25 years of editing journalism, essays, and nonfiction books. She has been a staff editor at the *Oakland Tribune*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, *Wired*, and *Health* magazines; she has edited more than three dozen books for Harvard Business Press and private clients. Her goal as an editor is to turn narratives about serious subjects into serious page-turners.

Hale began teaching when she was asked to create a composition course at the Urban School of San Francisco, and she has tutored scores of kids. This led her to focus less on grammar and more on “the underlying codes of English.” But she also teaches adults and has expanded her ideas in workshops, writers’ conferences, UC Berkeley, Harvard, and the San Francisco Writers’ Grotto.

Hale lives in Oakland, California, works in San Francisco, and spends as much time as she can on the North Shore of O‘ahu.