Teaching Writing: Analyzing the Craft of Professional Writers

In 1963, Francis Christensen, teaching composition at the University of Southern California, picked up the threads of his own dissatisfaction and began a quiet revolution in the teaching of writing. As James Gray and Robert Benson note in their monograph on sentence and paragraph modelling (1982), Christensen began with the notion that "In composition courses we do not really teach our captive charges to write better—we merely expect them to." Underlying Christensen's Notes Toward A New Rhetoric, published in 1967, was the simple idea that by studying the work of professional writers, analyzing sentences and paragraphs for their structure and style, we can discover the essential elements of craft, the elements that seem to impart control and add brilliance to all forms of composition. We can improve our own writing skills by increasing our awareness of the stylistic choices available to writers, and we can teach those choices to our students. In this way, teaching writing becomes a matter of research first and then instruction.

I did not know Francis Christensen, but I like to think of him in his university office, in the silent hours of the night, sitting, reading, surrounded by uneven stacks of novels and short-story anthologies, histories and collections of essays. From countless hours of careful study, poring over text like a nuclear physicist searching for sub-atomic particles, Christensen analyzed the rhetorical structure of sentences and paragraphs. He identified recurrent patterns and made important discoveries about their generative nature. He studied paragraphs as sequences, for the relationships that existed between the sentences; he classified three types: coordinate sequences, subordinate sequences, and mixed sequences. He studied sentences for their cumulative construction—in which additional phrases or free modifiers precede, follow, or are embedded in the base clause. He classified four types of additions: verbal phrases and clusters, absolute phrases, noun phrases and clusters, and adjective phrases and clusters.

Despite the simplicity of Christensen's vision and the inherent strength of his research, the theoretical framework was difficult to apply to actual classroom teaching. Christensen had provided us with a model for analyzing and describing written text, but teachers needed to develop classroom methods for using the model. Unfortunately, Christensen died before this critical step, the practical application of his research, could be achieved. Much of that important development has been accomplished since by William Robinson at San Francisco State University and James Gray at U.C. Berkeley, working in the 1970's, and by Robert Benson, who has worked with both Robinson and Gray and is continuing to develop new methods and applications of text analysis and description for his doctorate at Berkeley. I am indebted to Robinson, Benson, and Gray for enlivening Christensen's work and teaching me to see the possibilities.

Teaching "Christensen sentences and paragraphs" is an adventure into two realms, the familiar and the mysterious—patterns of common everyday writing and patterns of writing that clearly reflect artistry and style. Our task as teachers is to make the mysterious more familiar, to teach writing as craft. "Christensen sentences and paragraphs" provide fertile material to do just that.

I am in contact with teachers who analyze text using the Christensen framework to teach writing in high school and college courses, for which it was originally developed by Robinson, Gray, and Benson. I have used the same framework to teach sentence and paragraph modelling in grades five and six, and I am currently teaching the models in grade nine. It is clear to me that although teachers need to control the complexity of the models they select for their students at various grade levels, the principles of text analysis and description applied to teaching writing do not require modification; they hold for students at many stages of development. With careful guidance, even younger students are able to observe and understand the beauty,
clarity and effectiveness of a good model. What they have difficulty reading for themselves, we can read to them, with them. After all, that is one of the fundamental practices of good teaching. Once our students understand the possibilities, the choices, we can help them bring studied simplicity or complexity, depth, control and sophistication to their own work.

I understand Christensen's idea of a generative rhetoric as he stated it: "We need a rhetoric that generates ideas"--a form that generates--and encourages writers to generate--ideas, a form that carries meaning. A sentence is such a form. (I have heard James Gray talk about "... the rhetorical power of the comma. The comma is ecstatic at what it can do.") Teaching the sentence, like teaching the paragraph, is teaching a kind of generative logic.

Following the pattern set by James Gray, my principal classroom activity centers on examining models of writing, identifying the elements of structure and style, developing an awareness of the possibilities for their use in the writing process--in composition and revision--and practicing using those elements in directed writing assignments based on those models.

Sequence of Activities

I proceed with this general sequence of activities, which may take from ten to fifteen days:

(1) I prepare a complete packet of models, which I select from novels, short stories, autobiographies, essays, articles, textbooks--for their illustration of craft and style. I give the packet to my students at the beginning of the first lesson.

(2) I start by reading aloud several paragraphs (what Gray terms extended sequences). Together we identify the base clause/addition structure in key sentences, underlining the subjects and verbs of the base clauses, and pointing out the varied placement of additions--before, embedded in, and following the base clauses. Students ordinarily see that commas are used to separate the base clauses from the additions; if they do not see that function, I lead them to see it.

We discuss the effect of the additions on the meaning, impact, and rhythm of the sentences, as in this sequence from James Ramsey Ullman's *Banner in the Sky*:

The east face of the Citadel rose above him like a battlement. Cliff upon cliff, it soared up from the glaciers, its rock bulging and bristling, its walls veined with long streaks of ice.

One of my ninth grade students put it this way: "The first sentence is very compressed, you know, concentrated. I like the way it opens the view of the upper mountain with force. The rhythm of the second sentence is very different. It gives me a strong sense of motion. Putting the two contrasting types of sentences together takes my breath away."

We take note that, at least according to the rules of standard written English, base clauses are parts of sentences that can "stand on their own" grammatically; the additions--the "other stuff"--are technically fragments and cannot stand alone. I ask my students to experiment with moving the additions around, to comment on the rhetorical effect.

(3) I have my students copy one of the extended sequences exactly as it appears, including all punctuation, capitalization, and correct spelling. I intend for them to read closely, the first step in learning to analyze and describe text. Copying verbatim demands careful, deliberate reading.

(4) I call on students to read aloud a variety of sentence models, extracted from their extended sequences. They identify base clauses in some, noting subjects and verbs, and additions in others, noting relative placement.

(5) I present four new extended sequences, which I have reconstructed, removing the additions, leaving only the base clauses. I do not simply rewrite the paragraphs to include the same descriptive material in the form of coordinate clauses or separate sentences because I want to emphasize that including descriptive material to enhance meaning is a matter of primary decision. Once that decision is made, the rhetorical form becomes the matter of important choice; craft and style become the issue. Most of my students, by grade level standards, have been able to write acceptable independent and dependent clauses and separate coherent sentences in paragraphs. Beautiful writing certainly must achieve a balance, using all these forms effectively. But, at this point, by removing the additions from the models, I can focus the students' attention on possibilities they may not have considered. The idea of a generative rhetoric, the base clause/addition structure, with all the variations in placement, is new ground for all but the most careful, experienced, self-motivated readers and writers. We examine the effect of the additions on the imagery, meaning, sound, and rhythm in the original version. I have students "model" a paragraph of their own after one of the four original versions. Here are two of the models I use. (Each professional version is followed by a ninth grade student sample.)

Altered Professional Version

On the third day of summer in the late afternoon, Grandfather reappeared from the front door to gaze serenely at the two empty eye rings in the ceiling of the porch. He wet

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his finger to test the wind, and shucked his coat to see how short sleeves felt in the westering hours. He acknowledged the salutes of other captains on yet other flowered porches.

Original Professional Version

On the third day of summer in the late afternoon, Grandfather reappeared from the front door to gaze serenely at the two empty eye rings in the ceiling of the porch. Moving to the geranium pot-lined rail like Ahab surveying the mild, mild day and the mild-looking sky, he wet his finger to test the wind, and shucked his coat to see how short sleeves felt in the westering hours. He acknowledged the salutes of other captains on yet other flowered porches, out themselves to discern the gentle ground swell of weather, oblivious to their wives chirping or snapping like fuzzball hand dogs hidden behind black porch screens.

--Ray Bradbury, Dandelion Wine

Student Sample

On the first full moon of the year in the late evening, Henry reappeared from behind the back fence with his tools to saw silently at the two heavy-duty locks on the door of the farmhouse. Moving to the odorous boot room like a traveler enjoying the warmth and the warm-looking house, he dried his hands to ready himself to open the next lock, and took off his hat to see how his head felt in the soft indoor heat of the early winter night. He was alerted to the sounds of people in yet other warm rooms of the house, up themselves to thaw in the flickering warmth of a fire, oblivious to their visitor squeaking and stepping like a black cat camouflaged behind the soft noises of night.

--David G. (ninth grade)

Original Professional Version

Trees loomed high on his right: mostly elms, with an occasional beech. At the other side of the track was a stretch of wasteland, transformed by the snow from a messy array of rank weeds and scrub into a moon-landscape of white sweeping slopes and shaded hollows.

All around him on the snow-covered track, twigs and small branches lay scattered, brought down from the trees by the weight of snow; just ahead, Will saw a huge branch laying right across his path. He glanced apprehensively upward, wondering how many other dead arms of great elms were waiting for wind or snow-weight to bring them crashing down. A good time for collecting firewood, he thought, and had a sudden tantalizing image of the leaping fire that had blazed in the fireplace of the great hall: the fire that had changed his world, by vanishing at the word of his command and then obediently blazing into life again.

--Susan Cooper, The Dark Is Rising

Student Sample

Pillars supported the cavern archway along the west wall: mostly intact, but a few falling into ruin. On the other side of the organ platform was the wide staircase, shadows transforming the gargoyles crouched along its bannister into living beasts, watching him with eyes of stone. All around him on the dusty flagstone floor, pieces of shattered glass lay strewn recklessly, fallen from the once beautiful stained glass windows, as the cement binding them together rotted with time; just ahead he saw the cracked marble statue of a maiden lying right next to the organ. He glanced calmly up the stairs, wondering if he should pay a call to his lovely young visitors. A very, very good time to be young, he thought, and had a sudden chilling image of the time when he, himself, had been young: the time before the darkness had come, bringing with it the deadly despair that had eaten into the stones of the castle and then into the fabric of his soul.

--Rebecca L. (ninth grade)

(6) I introduce the four common additions—verbal phrases and clusters, absolutes, adjective phrases and clusters, and noun phrases and clusters—in four separate lessons. We analyze various examples of each type, again discussing placement and effective usage. At this point I begin to talk about craft and style and emphasize that the use of these elements is a matter of the writer's deliberate choice based on knowledge of the possibilities.

With each type of addition, we practice orally before writing. In many cases, before they discover balance and control, my students go to excesses: "Running to the full extent of the chain, rattling noisily, barking uncontrollably, his eyes bulging from their sockets, saliva flying from his jaws, steaming and trembling, the dog, a powerfully muscled black Labrador, lunged at the stunned
intruder, a terrified bundle of rags, limping and hopping on one leg, kicking up great clouds of dust, coming to rest with a thump against the wooden gate, unhinged and silent against the night and the nightmare sounds, panting heavily and dizzily, and finally dropping in a faint into the shadows, while the dog paced, growling menacingly.

We discuss Hemingway's notion that "prose is architecture, not interior decoration."

In some cases I supply the base clauses and ask the students to respond with additions. Other assignments involve students responding to photographs, incidents, or their own imaginations to create controlled, richly cumulative sentences that use the base clause/addition structure to enhance meaning and add brilliance. I encourage my students to manipulate the language, experimenting, taking risks, revising, listening to the sound and rhythm of their own voices.

Sometimes I have my students write to prescribed patterns (e.g., base clause + absolute + verbal phrase). I believe this discipline forces their exposure to the wide variety of possibilities. At first, for some, these exercises are confining. But as they develop dexterity with the language, they grow in confidence, and they begin to make the deliberate choices that writers make.

Following are examples of what we do with different kinds of professional sentences.

Verbal Phrases

Straggling, catching up with one another, keeping more or less together, they had wandered over half a mile down the fields, always following the course of the brook.

--Richard Adams, Watership Down

In the classroom, we discover that the base clause, "they had wandered over half a mile down the fields," could be taken as a complete grammatical sentence; it has a subject and a verb. However, four verbal phrases, placed effectively, set off by the simple use of commas, develop the imagery and enhance its meaning. Some student sentences:

Contrasting sharply with the opal's refined luminescent whiteness, the high energy of the stone's blue-green highlights leapt out into the light, sparkling in short, bright flashes.

--Andrea Q.

Thundering overhead, the jetliner streaked toward the runway, leaving behind the echoes of its passing.

--Matthew J.

Gagging as Andrith struck him, the man stumbled, then fell, coughing his life up onto the stones.

--Rebecca L.

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Absolutes

He looked at Ralph, his thin body tensed, his spear held as if he threatened him.

--William Golding, Lord of the Flies

Here, again, we see that since the base clause, "He looked at Ralph," has a subject and verb, it could stand alone as a grammatical sentence, ending with a period. Instead, the writer uses commas to set off two additional phrases, enhancing the descriptive power of the base clause. I show my students that in addition to the verbs they contain ("tensed" and "held"), these phrases have their own noun subjects ("body" and "spear"), references to specific aspects of actions of the subject of the base clause, "He," and that in this they are distinguished from the verbal phrases they worked with earlier. This construction allows the writer to focus on and magnify some aspect or quality of the subject or action in the base clause. My students produce:

Her heart beating wildly, her arms stretched to the limit, she reached hopefully for the books scattered on the crumbling shelf.

--Nathan B.

The dragon was all stillness, his massive wings outstretched, his eyes glowing with power, and I could hear the echoes clearly, the screams of my brother filling the suffocating darkness of the tunnel.

--Dev P.

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Adjective Phrases/Clusters

Lev went to meet Southwind as she came hurrying down the street, sleepy-eyed, smiling, a shawl drawn over her tangled hair.

--Ursula K. LeGuin, The Eye of the Heron

Again, my students discover that the base clause could be considered a complete grammatical sentence. As in the previous examples, the writer uses commas to set off additional phrases, enhancing the description. "Sleepy-eyed" and "smiling," adjective phrases, describe Southwind.

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"Smiling" may also be taken as a verbal phrase, since it can be perceived as an action as well as a quality. As a matter of instruction in the classroom, the classification of the phrase as verbal or adjectival is secondary to an understanding of its function and rhetorical effect. LeGuin may have chosen this construction rather than the conventional "adj + adj + noun" because it establishes a time-reference in the sequence of events and emphasizes the qualities of Southwind rather than Southwind herself. This illustrates craft at work. We also notice the use of the absolute ("a shawl drawn over her tangle hair"). Some student examples:

In sparkling white lace, Rebecca felt just as she thought she would, fresh and innocent and free.

--Gillian O.

Sarah stood next to him, demure, still, eyes downcast.

--Rebecca L.

Her black hair, shining, polished, flawlessly exact in style, clashed with the impudence of her laughing blue eyes.

--Andrea Q.

The ebony dragon, huge and menacing, slithered toward the burglar, silent and cautious in the gaping mouth of the passageway.

--Matthew J.

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Noun Phrases/Clusters

Three hundred feet the down rose vertically in a stretch of no more than six hundred, a precipitous wall, from the thin belt of trees at the foot of the ridge to where the steep flattened out.

--Richard Adams, Watership Down

My students find that the base clause, "Three hundred... six hundred... from the thin belt... flattened out" is interrupted by the noun phrase; that is, the noun phrase "a precipitous wall" is embedded in the base clause. The "down" is being renamed "a wall" in order to enhance the meaning; the "down" and the "wall" are the same. The students' contributions:

The battle was just as he expected, a bloody, horrid ordeal, as clumsy as it was frightening.

--Rebecca L.

In the bright sun she stood outside to watch her shadow, a silent, long black figure, that followed her everywhere she moved.

--Shelly W.

Slowly he broadened his smile, a white, toothy grin, mottled with the stains of cigarettes.

--Robb H.

From the island they could see the cay, a long strip of beach, pounded by the violent Pacific monsoons.

--Dev P.

(7) As my students develop their abilities to use the addition types seen above, we work on combining two or more additions with one or more base clauses, once again focusing on variety, control, and effective placement—rhetorical effect. Some of this can be seen in the previous samples of student work. Here is one more from Andrea Q.

The drop of water, a single clear crystal of purity, plummeted into the pond, sending concentric ripples, miniature waves, dancing across the surface, a perfect sheet of glass, its silence unbroken, reflecting the undulating branches overhead.

(8) Once the exercise phase of the sentence modelling lesson sequence is over, my students begin to write longer narrative-descriptive pieces. I begin this next phase by showing them a series of transparencies duplicated from The Family of Man. I instruct them to write one or, at the most, two sentences for each photo. I tell them to respond without intent to create specific types of additions or particular sentence patterns. I tell them to use what they have learned, to make choices that make sense and communicate the images effectively. I tell them to remember what Hemingway said about prose.

I use a series of eight to ten photograph-transparencies. I project each one on the screen for two to two-and-a-half minutes. My students write. At the end of each time period, I tell them to hold the image in their minds, and I proceed with the next photograph, in a rapid-fire demand on their intellectual output. Here are some student samples from this activity:

The man's face was a picture of unpleasanness, especially in the eyes—tiny, piglike, hooded, sunken into dark caverns of puffy flesh over which stern, gray eyebrows bristled.

--Rebecca L.
Forehead wrinkled, eyes throbbing, he searched for the letter.
——Robb H.

The city, still radiant and alive with crowds of people, was just a shadow in her imagination, as she returned for the first time since the day of the earthquake.
——Erik H.

Squinting querely and suspiciously, the judge opened the book, his fingers darting across the page.
——Wendy M.

The old ones gathered together, tired, listless, hopeless.
——Sarah L.

I ask each of the students to select one of their own sentences as the foundation for a longer piece. Their immediate assignment is to write two to three more sentences that extend the narrative in either direction in time; at this point, anticipating the lessons on paragraph modelling, I use Gray's term extended sequence. During the next week, my students work on their extended sequences and discuss revisions in their response groups. Armed with their new knowledge of rhetorical effect, their range of choice dramatically increased, their response to each other is intensified, and their writing continues to develop, showing elements of serious craft and style.

Here is an excerpt from Rebecca L.'s contribution, extended from her sentence in the set of student samples above:

DEATH OF A MILLIONAIRE

Mr. Le Rothe’s study was just as I had expected it to be—a huge, dark tomb formed from shining wood, any sound made within its walls muffled by the perpetual gloom. I could hardly see the far wall, where the door to the hallway sat lonely in a sea of polished oak paneling. The two walls flanking me were composed entirely of books, floor-to-ceiling leather, with the subdued lighting glinting coldly off brass bindings. A fire smouldered fitfully in the marble fireplace.

In front of it, brass gargoyles supported Le Rothe’s mahogany-topped desk, the unbroken black mirror reflecting features. It was the first time I had ever seen my target’s face, and I did not like what I saw.

The man’s face was a picture of unpleasantness, especially in the eyes—hooded, piglike, sunk into dark caverns of puffy flesh over which stern gray eyebrows bristled. His forehead was a vast expanse of pale skin, left bare at the temples by his receding hairline, and cut with jagged, asymmetrical lines like dark knife scars. His mouth was pulled into a permanent frown, creasing the flesh of his cheeks, and, even worse, his lips were the color of old Jack cheese.

His appearance made it easy to hate him, which was good. I could not have killed him if I had liked him too much...

Rebecca’s piece is a prize example, and—along with the other student samples—it illustrates a point about writing instruction. In Texts and Pretexts (1932), Aldous Huxley wrote about what the writer does: "Like all makers, he requires a stock of raw materials—in this case experience. Now experience is not a matter of having actually swum the Hellespont, or danced with the dervishes, or slept in an opium den. It is a matter of sensibility and intuition, of seeing and hearing the significant things, of paying attention at the right moments, of understanding and coordinating..." Huxley saw the writer as a maker and not, I would add, simply a doer. Making is not just a function of skill, but equally a function of perception, imagination, coordination. Teaching writing within the Christensen framework is teaching making. It exposes students to a wide variety of models, and thus involves reading, listening and imitating. It promotes analysis, discussion and experimentation, so that students can learn to manipulate the language to achieve meaningful and satisfying rhetorical effect, sound and rhythm, and intellectual and emotional impact.

It is possible to move elementary and secondary school students away from flat, one-dimensional writing. Expose them to the possibilities of the craft, and their choices can become powerful motivators. Writing can become more than something that they do. It can become something that they make.

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References

