Beyond Basic

If reluctant writers have been in a writing workshop for any length of time, they can usually name two of the key qualities of good writing—focus and development. Unfortunately, sometimes even when they know the focus they want their piece to have, they find it difficult to express that focus clearly if they don’t have a command of sentence formations beyond the simple sentence.

For example, it’s not unusual for a basic writer to compose a passage like this one from Amber, a 17-year-old. In her piece about date rape, Amber is attempting to focus on a girl’s acceptance of a ride home from a party with an acquaintance, but her choppy sentence structure not only makes the piece irritating for a reader, it also diffuses her focus. Here’s a sample passage:

The girl was a freshman. She was naive. Her name was Sylvia. She accepted a ride home from a party with a friend of a friend.

Novice writers also have difficulty with development. Even when response groups or their own developing instincts tell them they need to add information, they frequently tend to devote an entire sentence to each added detail. In the following sentence Billy, a secondary remedial writer, attempts to apply the advice of group members who have told him he needed to add a location to his original sentence from a history paper:

The battle of Chattanooga was fought on Lookout Mountain. The battle sealed the South’s doom.

Billy felt his history teacher would be pleased with the addition of the first of these sentences which identifies the “where” of the battle, but he was still not comfortable enough with grammatical constructions to incorporate that information into his original sentence. Instead, by writing the sentence separately, he loses in focus what he gained in specific detail.

How can an understanding of grammar help students such as these write richer and more focused prose? None of the students in the remedial class with which I was working felt they had a strong command of sentence structure. They put their heads down when they heard “participial phrase” or “appositive,” yet those structures were just what their writing needed if they were to add detail while maintaining their
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original focus. A brief series of lessons (two class periods) designed to help these students incorporate certain grammatical structures into early drafts of their own writing yielded immediate improvements in their work.

I’ve used the same lesson with fifth, tenth, and twelfth graders and with college freshmen. All responded positively. Their first step was to bring with them an early draft of something they were writing, whether for English or for any other class.

My first step was to identify four grammatical constructions to teach the students: the appositive; the present participial phrase; the complex sentence structures using who, that, whose clause; and the subordinating clause. We worked with the following subordinators: although, even though, when, if, because, since, due to, after, before and unless. Why did I choose only these constructions and only those subordinators? Because they all help accomplish the same rhetorical purpose of adding information while keeping the sentence itself focused on its subject.

Next I introduced each grammatical structure by giving the students short sentence combining exercises (often made up on the spot using the students’ own names and information about them for the sentences). I then guided them into writing the structures before we named and defined them. For example, I put the following on the board for one secondary group after gathering some information about them:

Jessica works at Coconuts Records.
Jessica is 16.

The students combined this information into one sentence. When someone came up with “Jessica, 16, works at Coconuts Records,” we were able to use this as a model to define the appositive. When someone said, “Jessica, who works at Coconuts Records, is 16,” we defined the relative clause. This pair of sentence examples also made it easy to explain how the focus of the sentence changes depending on which structure a writer chooses. In the same manner, students were always able to produce orally samples of the complex sentence constructions while I captured their words on the board or overhead projector.

The next step was the crucial one. Armed with their new awareness of grammatical forms, their drafts, and response-group feedback as to where their readers needed extra information, they were instructed to revise, choosing one of the structures we had just practiced. They could combine two sentences already there, or they could add new information.

All students composed at least one sentence to improve their drafts, and the average number of revisions was two combined or improved sentences. Some students’ revisions made dramatic improvements, either in focus, development, or both. For instance, Amber added the present participial phrase below to her previous sentence from the date rape essay:

The naïve sixteen-year-old, wearing khaki pants and an oxford shirt, accepted an offer of a ride home from a guy she had just met.

Amber saw readily that she could defuse criticism of her character by adding the details of her non-seductive outfit, but she also knew she wanted the focus of the sentence to stay on the girl’s action. This sentence accomplishes both.

Billy’s choppy version of his history term paper became, “The battle of Chattanooga, fought on Lookout Mountain, sealed the South’s doom.”

Reggie, a senior, was writing a piece about how the arrival of a Down’s Syndrome child affects family and friends (occasioned by the birth of a Down’s Syndrome child in his best friend’s family). Originally, he had written a sentence which his response group did not understand:

Doctors are the first to traumatize new parents.

His revision that incorporated an anecdote he had picked up from his friend, made impressive use of the “who” clause:

Doctors who rudely announce the presence of Down’s Syndrome with remarks such as, “She’ll probably die soon anyway.” are the first to traumatize new parents.

It has never been my aim that students be able to identify and define grammatical structures in others’ writing; instead, my goal has been to see novice writers learn to produce prose that is fully developed, yet more focused. This lesson is a reasonable place to start to make that happen. It is also an example of what Hook and Evans (1986) call a “pedagogical grammar”: a grammar which enables the teacher to turn linguistic features of the language into tools to improve the competence of student writers.

Reference
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