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BEYOND SENTENCE COMBINING

I wanted my eighth grade students' writings to sound natural, to have variety, and to flow. (I didn't think that was too much to ask.) Yet, despite my coaxing, the writing I generally received was choppy, monotonous, and filled with boring repetition. It sounded dead or dying. My students were frustrated with their writing, and I was desperate for a way to help them improve.

At this time, I was introduced to sentence combining—a method that promised syntactic maturity. I was drawn to it immediately. It appeared to be the answer for which I had been searching. I found three basic approaches—a guided approach, a focused approach, and a free-style approach.

After experimenting with each of the approaches, I found that the free-style approach, dealing with paragraphs or longer, worked the best for me. Since I felt that variety was important, I wanted an approach which opened up the greatest possible number of solutions. If my students were to understand variety and rhythm, they needed to become aware of the various ways they could construct sentences.

It worked. Perhaps because of their readiness to be turned loose, students began experimenting with their combinations. They played with the paragraphs, moving words around, letting one sentence flow into another. Needless repetition was eliminated. Suddenly my students felt a power over language, and they became impressed with their long, flowing sentences.

As I didn’t want my students to think that I wanted them to write long sentences only, I focused class discussions on the impact of a simple sentence amid a mass of long ones. These discussions with partner observation enabled students to keep sentence variety in mind when they revised.

For some students, the transfer from paragraph exercise to paragraph writing was not always made independently. While they were combining sentences during exercises, they were not demonstrating this skill in their writing. To solve this problem, I made sentence combining a part of each student’s re-writing/revision process. For the majority of students, this additional step worked. Near the end of the year, one girl admitted, “I like to write when I can begin with easy thoughts and then go back and combine to make my paper sound good.” Her papers

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had not only met my demands of flowing and having variety, she was also beginning to understand the process of writing.

That summer as I began planning for my next group of eighth graders, I learned that I had been transferred to a high school. I secretly doubted whether these students would learn anything from sentence combining. I wondered if there was anything that I could teach them.

I soon discovered that my high school students exhibited many of the same writing characteristics that my eighth grade students had. The high school students, however, were able to gain more from the sentence combining, and so I began searching for a way to connect these writings with their literature.

In October, during a discussion of a short story, one student commented, “The story would have been better if only the author had combined some of his sentences like we do.” The student went on to explain that the story seemed monotonous, and that, by combining a few sentences and increasing the sentence variety, the author might have made the story more appealing. He even pointed out some of the sentences that could have been combined. I was excited. This student had just shown me one way to go beyond basic sentence combining.

With this new approach, sentence combining linked the students’ choices in writing with the stylistic choices of the writers in their literature books. To introduce and reinforce these stylistic choices, students combined sentences from the works of major writers. They began with several paragraphs from Hemingway’s “Big Two Hearted River.” In one exercise, they had to combine two paragraphs about Nick cooking and eating flapjacks. One student’s combination resulted in longer, but, he concluded, not necessarily the best sentences:

... When it was cooked, Nick greased the skillet using all the batter making another big flapjack and one smaller one.

After he ate the big flapjack and a smaller one, both covered with apple butter, he put apple butter on the third cake, folded it over twice, wrapped it in oiled paper and put it in his shirt pocket, putting the apple butter back in the pack and cutting the bread for two sandwiches...

For the most part, the students preferred their combinations to Hemingway’s. They felt that their flowed and Hemingway’s did not. However, they concluded that their combinations made the actions sound continuous, while Hemingway’s did not. His shorter sentences separated each action the way Nick may have performed them. Their sentences were more descriptive and lost sight of the individual movements. Hemingway’s rhythm created a feeling of separate actions. After repeating the exercise several times, they decided that stories with action required more short sentences. Although a simplistic view, it was a discovery for my students—fitting form and subject together.

At that time, I read an article that suggested using sentence de-combining with the works of major writers. This idea seemed perfect for Poe and Faulkner since students were complaining about the lengths of the sentences in works by these writers. After de-combining or breaking apart the long sentences into simple sentence parts, students found the results childish sounding. A student de-combination of a paragraph from Faulkner’s “The Bear” created the following paragraph:

He was ten. But it had already begun. It was long before that day when he wrote his age in two figures. It was long before he saw the camp for the first time where his father, Major deSpain, old General Compson, and the others stayed. They stayed at that camp two weeks each November and June. He had inherited a tremendous bear. He had never seen the bear. The bear had one trap ruined foot. The bear had earned a name. It was a definite designation like a living man. It was known in an area almost a hundred miles deep.

This student concluded that not only did the repetition in the paragraph sound immature, it sounded boring. She concluded further that Faulkner’s sentences sound more like someone telling a story “the way some people go on and on.”

On the other hand, when students de-combined and then attempted to recombine Poe’s writings, they often preferred their combinations. They felt that they used repetition for effect and drama, yet they also simplified some of his wordy sentences. They did conclude that his purpose was to make his writing sound dramatic and frightening, and that his use of phrasing and repetition accomplished that goal. From the exercises with Poe, they began linking purpose with form.

Students looked not only at the writings of major writers, but at their own writing as well. After wondering why some ideas got lost in their papers, students examined how information was emphasized. They experimented with the position of words and phrases within sentences and sentences within paragraphs in their combining exercises. One girl, writing about the trial of two murder suspects, became very frustrated because the emotion and outrage she was trying to convey were not coming through in her paper. After discovering her purpose, she was able to rework, combine, and rearrange her sentences to emphasize her point. Her original paragraph lacked variety and rhythm as well as emphasis:
The girl’s body was found with many bruises. Many of her bones were broken and she had been cut. These two men got only seven years in jail even though she had been tortured before she was murdered.

Her revised paragraph emphasizes the relatively short sentence the two men received compared to the crime that they had committed:

...Bones broken and badly bruised, the young woman had been beaten and tortured for hours before she was finally murdered. She suffered a slow and agonizing death, and her family will suffer forever knowing how she died and that she is gone forever. Yet, these two men were sentenced to only seven years in jail.

This student as well as the others discovered that short sentences were often suited for emphasizing. They decided that repetition emphasized an idea as well as a rhythm pattern. In this student’s revision, the use of rhythm as well as sentence length and position help to emphasize the short prison sentence. Students also concluded that the middle was the least effective place to position an important word, phrase, or sentence. For most of their purposes, the ending was the most effective position. That discovery led them to tell me where a thesis statement should be positioned in their analysis papers.

As the students combined and de-combined the writings of famous authors, they would experiment with a specific literary technique used frequently by that writer. With Poe they practiced repetition and ended up learning about alliteration and its uses. By revising the combining exercises so that their objective was to create a rhythmic sentence by repeating sounds, words, or phrases, students got even more practice with alliteration. They discovered that alliteration could be found not only in poetry and prose, but also in advertising and in the sports pages.

After manipulating sentences to produce a desired rhythmic effect, students wrote several original advertisements applying what they had learned and what advertisers know—repetition emphasizes a message. They also examined the rhythm in poetry and concluded that its purpose was similar to that in prose.

The method of manipulating sentences to produce a desired effect also worked with teaching tone. Looking back, I can see its possibilities for teaching point of view as well. I am convinced that by freeing themselves from the initial worries of what to say, students can concentrate on how to say something. They are free to grapple with the issue of effective choices. They can also experience a connection between what they have attempted to accomplish and what famous writers have accomplished.

Sentence combining is not the only writing aspect studied in my class. Yet it has become a base, familiar to my students, which I can revise to obtain a variety of results. My students learn about the way sentences work together and alone by taking them apart and putting them back together similarly to the way someone learns about the workings of a clock.

My goals of having my students’ writings sound natural, flow, and have variety have been met and more. I have found a link between the two halves of my curriculum. Beginning with prepared combining exercises, my classes advanced to literature-based and student-based exercises. My classes have gone beyond sentence combining to an analysis of style. There are a few students who are still struggling, but perhaps something else will evolve, and they will go beyond that hurdle too.

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