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Sentence-Level Construction Methods: Skills Taught Are Skills Used

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Sentence-Level Construction Methods: Skills Taught Are Skills Used

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The findings of this study predict that students who utilize five specific sentence constructions on timed single-draft writing compositions will have higher holistic scores than students who do not utilize the specific constructions. Students in the treatment group who were taught to use the five constructions through thorough and consistent instruction in a semester length first year writing course showed statistically significant gains, 4.698 points on a 0-18 scale, based on comparison of pre-test and post-test writing samples. The findings suggest that specific style instruction at the sentence level should be part of the first year writing course curriculum, and possibly in the writing curriculum of secondary education as well.

Keywords: style, sentence-level instruction, explicit instruction

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Introduction

In the bottleneck of a crowded stairway, my student had to raise his voice to be heard when he said, “Hey, what we’re doing in class is helping me a ton. The tiny tricks really work.” He went on to say that he had just completed three papers for other classes and that the techniques we had worked on had saved him a “ton of” time and had made the papers “way better.” Acting cool and understated, I graciously told him thanks, but I wanted to high five everyone I saw that day because I had hopes the rest of the class had also been able to transfer composition skills, as he had. Jackson didn’t stop me to say conferencing and working with him on a certain required paper had helped; he said that the sentence constructions we emphasized in class helped him on writing assignments NOT assigned in my class. In order to prepare my students for a life of writing, where writing must be done quickly without the aid of an instructor, teaching them to use style techniques based on specific sentence constructions routinely used by professional writers has become my primary goal.

A secondary goal is to assure that my students write impressive compositions required in first year writing. At my university, these include an opinion editorial, a rhetorical analysis and a research “issues” paper over the course of a 14-week semester. For nearly all teachers of first year writing, including me, the process of teaching students to succeed on required compositions is guided, directed and long. The entire process can take over a month. Considering its expansive nature, it is improbable that increased writing improvement will come from expanding this already long writing process (prewriting, writing, revising, editing). Bass identifies this practice as problematic because it leans too heavily toward “remediation” (8), too often a system of responding to successive drafts. I claim that teachers can deepen the effects of the writing process by intervening during the drafting by teaching composing techniques associated with style, thus developing new skills.

I am aware of Francis Christensen's statement which has been cited hundreds of times: "In composition courses we do not really teach our captive charges to write better—we merely expect them to" (129). Expectations alone won't lead to college graduation or success at work, so I set out to identify simple style moves, sentence-level constructions, consistently used by professionals that could also be used by inexperienced writers. Journalists, research academics, and other professional and experienced writers have numerous opportunities to make discoveries with language and writing and, as a result, begin to employ powerful, specific techniques. For them, stylistic options become "decisions made unconsciously" out of long and practiced habit (Glenn 213). Milic has said that this indirect learning process can take over a decade (212).

Since it is highly unlikely that first year writing students have had the hours and years of experience necessary to simply pick up on specific sentence-level writing techniques, I claim that some of the stylistic techniques used by professionals can be identified for them by their instructors within the first-year writing course. Once the moves are identified and specific instruction in basic sentence-level construction is given, students will employ those specific techniques in their own writing. Killgallon believes students "should" use specific sentence structures in order to improve their writing, but "seldom do" unless they "become familiar with them through many examples and practices" (ix). In short, Killgallon believes that the lengthy acquisition of style and technique can and should be accelerated, even supercharged, if you will, with instruction in sentence-level composition. He professes the same bold claim made by Milic: "In the college composition course, which represents for most students their first formal training in rhetoric, an awareness must be instilled of the existence of alternatives, of different ways of saying the same thing, of the options that the language offers" (126). Both scholars believe

inexperienced writers can incorporate those “alternatives” into their writing if they are taught to do so.

Considering my students’ positive response to learning new sentence constructions, it’s hard to pinpoint why writing instruction at the sentence level has experienced a cycle of both popularity as well as neglect. This once honored emphasis of writing pedagogy fell out of favor in the 1980s. New practices including “free writing” and journaling were emphasized, most notably by Peter Elbow in his book, *Writing Without Teachers*. Many composition teachers migrated toward Elbow’s theories, eliminating sentence-level teaching and altering their instruction to match his claims that instruction at the sentence level should take a far back seat to writing volume. Hansen attributes this migration away from sentence-level instruction, “despite its demonstrable success,” to “three lines of criticism—anti-formalism, anti-behaviorism, and anti-empiricism— [which] converged and torpedoed both the research and the pedagogy” (254). Robert J. Connors chronicles this shift in his 2000 essay, “The Erasure of the Sentence.” As a lifetime college composition researcher and instructor, he laments the criticism and neglect of sentence-level instruction and emphasizes its ongoing pedagogical value.

Sharon Myers agrees with Connors and argues that instruction at the sentence-level does not have to eliminate instruction in other areas of composition (611). Also in this camp is Paul Butler whose article, “Reconsidering the Teaching of Style” advocates sentence-level instruction and imitation exercises to achieve what students simply refer to as “flow” (78). I am encouraged by the recent findings of Bacon, Rhodes and Vanguri, who found “that sentence-writing skills gained through classroom lessons and exercises transfer to papers” (2). They found that student writing “choices” improved with instruction in style.

In the research study described below, I respond to Chris Anson's call for "systematic investigation" of writing pedagogy by describing and summarizing the findings of an experimental study which investigates the positive impact of teaching five specific sentence-level constructions in a semester-length first-year writing class. Anson noted in 2014 that much of the investigation of writing relies on teacher experience and intuition. He claims that "a career teaching writing brings its own 'evidence' but as powerful as it may be from the lips or pens of charismatic and believable experts, testimony alone is insufficient for universal and sustained acceptance" (222). Holly Hassel also calls for SoTL (scholarship of teaching and learning) and "human subjects research" to answer the question, "What teaching methods, activities, or exercises seem most and least effective to you?" (56). I answer that question with statistical data that suggests teaching five specific, replicable, sentence-level constructions improves student writing by offering choices. As students practice with these constructions, knowledge about how to use them becomes entrenched and habitual, and it transfers to future compositions.

Methods

To test the hypothesis that instructing students in the use of five specific sentence constructions improves timed, single-draft, student compositions, I designed the following study, which my university's Institutional Review Board approved.

Participants

The study was conducted with four semester-length, first-year writing classes at a large, private university. Two classes were the control groups, which received no particular instruction in sentence-level techniques, and two classes received experimental treatment through instruction in the five sentence-level constructions described below. A total of 77 students and a total of four teachers participated. The two teachers of the control groups were

MA students who were not informed of the study's focus or purpose. They were simply asked to agree to give their students the prompt and questionnaire for the pre and post essays. The teachers of the experimental groups, including me, the investigator, were MA students teaching a section of the required first-year writing course. Both of us were, of course, aware of the purpose of the study, and we both planned to teach the five sentence-level constructions during the semester; however, lessons employed by the study investigator were very different than those taught by the other treatment instructor. At the end of the study, it became clear that the study had two separate treatments, which will therefore be called Treatment A, and Treatment B, the class taught by the investigator.

Materials

Students in all four groups wrote timed 45-minute narrative essays at the beginning of the semester prior to instruction. All students responded to the same prompt. These essays were compared to timed 45-minute narrative essays written at the end of the semester. Again, all students responded to the same prompt. The prompt for each essay is given in Appendix A.

Choosing Five Sentence Constructions

Students in the two experimental treatments received instruction in five sentence constructions. After considerate reading of all types of professional writing, I chose the following five specific sentence-level constructions. Over the course of a single semester, a perfect outcome for student writers might be a packed arsenal of *all* of the techniques a writing teacher can offer, for instance, I understand the impact strong verbs and nouns have on writing clarity and effect, but in order for transfer to occur, I limited the number of *emphasized* constructions to five. This number seems manageable for students. What follows is a justification

of the skills I chose to emphasize and teach over the course of the study. The terms are quite general. Often a more precise grammatical term exists; however, since student transfer was paramount, a general description was chosen. To illustrate the prolific nature of each of the techniques, all professional examples were gleaned from only two diverse professional texts: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize Winner; and *Beyond the Game* by Gary Smith, *Sports Illustrated* Award winning journalist.

1. Varied Sentence Lengths (especially altering sentence lengths to include a 3-5 word sentence following a long, compound or complex sentence)

“A short sentence is one of the most powerful devices in a writer’s repertoire. When a writer wants to drive a point home, . . . then a short sentence is often the right tool for the job—provided that it is well constructed, strategically placed, and sparingly used” (Holcomb 154).

First and last words often offer the most power in sentences. I have found that when those words are near each other, the relationship between them is more apparent and has greater impact.

Examples:

- But we had to do it alone, for none of the other girls would cooperate with our hostility. They adored her (Morrison 63).
- Ali’s jaw sags. Homes looks at him and, almost sorrowfully, throws his right again (Smith 182).

2. Dialogue Extensions (adding a description of what the quoted person was doing while speaking or adding how the dialogue was said)

Jeff Anderson labels what I call dialogue extension, “Tagging Dialogue.” He writes in *Mechanically Inclined*, “One thing many professional writers do is tag attributions with actions. . . . We can show so much about characters by describing, or in this case, really narrating how they talk and move” (145). Anderson claims that many professional writers use this

technique. It is liberally employed in creative journalism such as sports writing and is appreciated for its impact in academic writing.

Examples:

- “Good-bye, God bless,” he said and quickly shut the door (Morrison 175).
- We stopped talking and listened to the music. “But why do they fight?” I asked again (Smith 189).

3. Renaming (using an appositive or absolute, etc. to give additional meaning to the subject of a sentence)

Students who learn to habitually employ renaming have learned the skill of both the academic and the fiction writer. They are placing vital information in close proximity to the most important or interesting part of the sentence. Ostenson writes, “I’ve rarely encountered a student who knew the term appositive” (26). I concur, but that does not matter, as long as students get in the habit of giving additional information by renaming. He continues:

Using an appositive can be a powerful way of creating imagery or efficiently adding information about a noun. Appositives are not just for fiction writing: in fact, I often teach appositives when students engage in research-based writing. In these genres, writers use appositives to include information about sources (26).

Renaming with absolutes can be equally powerful in image creation or clarification in academic writing. Its use can “infuse action” into a sentence (Noden 7).

Examples:

- . . . head forward, eyes fastened on a rock, his arms higher than the pines, his hands holding a melon bigger than the sun, he paused an instant to get his bearing and secure his aim (Morrison 135). Absolute
- Dorothy, a sweet passive woman dedicated to the Pentecostal Church, began yelling that he would end up just like his father (Smith 129). Appositive

4. Dependent Clauses (using non sentences to introduce and/or modify the meaning of the independent clause adjacent to them)

Teaching first year writers to incorporate dependent clauses into their writing is most important in their research, analysis, or argument compositions. Students naturally utilize dependent clauses in narrative writing at a very elementary level (After I woke up, I . . .), but rarely utilize them in more academic genres, where this sentence construction is most useful. Dependent clauses show relationships and are extremely valuable when writing transitions. They commonly “show how events or bits of information are related in terms of time, cause and effect, importance and so on” (Holcomb 183).

Examples:

- When she finished, I went to look for Frieda (Morrison 98).
- When we speak of the power of sports today, it’s always in terms of their grip on the national marketplace. . .(Smith 88).

5. Specific Modifiers (giving specific meaning to a noun or verb using adjectives or adverbs)

I know what Mark Twain says about adjectives and adverbs. Don’t use them. I am not advocating using empty examples. Instead, when used purposefully, even a specific verb or noun is enhanced. Not following his own advice, Twain himself used plenty of them, and, in the following sentence, uses three in a row. “Her sister, Miss Watson, a tolerable slim old maid, with goggles on, had just come to live with her, and took a set at me now with a spelling-book.” I don’t think student writers (or any writers) can create specific images without them.

Examples:

- The creamy toe of her bare foot scratching her velvet leg (Morrison 162).
- He stares out through the black-tinted window at empty lots full of broken glass and rubble, rusting cars, washing machines toppled on their sides (Smith 69).

Procedures

Pre-test and post-test writing questionnaires were also administered at the same time the students wrote the essays. Students were given five minutes after completing the pre-test and post-test writing essays to complete the questionnaires which asked them to identify any style or sentence construction methods utilized in their writing. (See Appendix B.) Responses from both the pre-test and post-test writing questionnaires were counted and categorized before analysis. Responses associated with style were counted and accepted quite liberally. For example, accepted responses included the following: “I created a metaphor,” “I used sensory language,” “Dialogue,” “Descriptive words,” and “Verb choice.” All accepted responses, not only those emphasized in the study were noted in a “total responses” category. Any reference to any of the five sentence-level constructions which were the emphasis of the research study was also noted and recorded in separate spreadsheet categories. Student phrasing of these notations did not have to match the language used in the study. Responses that were overly general, or represented the student’s effort with essay organization were not counted.

Professional composition raters were hired to complete the holistic scoring. These raters participated in two training sessions totaling four hours of holistic scoring norming using a 0-9 scale. By the end of the second training, raters reached 100% adjacent agreement, where agreement is defined as giving the same score or adjacent scores on the scale. The rubric was created by combining elements of the Turnitin Common Core Standard Narrative Rubric and an AP English Language and Composition Rubric. (See Appendix C.) The rubric was never shown to any of the student writers.

After training was complete, the raters read the 154 essays in the study. This number includes three essays that were eventually removed before analysis by the study administrator

and the statistician because they were deemed off topic. One essay was in the Treatment B group, one in Treatment A and one in the Control group. A holistic score was given to each pre-test and post-test essay in order to note overall composition improvement. All 154 essays (77 pre and 77 post-test writing) were read twice, once by each trained rater, who scored the essays on the 0-9 scale outlined on the rubric. The combined scores created the final score. For example, an essay which received a 5 from one rater and a 6 by the other would have a final score of 11. Essays with scores that deviated more than one point were scored by an additional rater whose score replaced the rater's score which was deemed the least accurate by that additional rater. Only 11 of the 154 essays were not initially scored within the one-point allowable deviation.

At the conclusion of the essay scoring, informal interrater agreement on essay scoring was 93%. All essays were anonymized. Raters were not aware of which student essays were pre or post examples, nor were they aware of which were written by the control group or treatment group.

After scoring all essays holistically, the raters were informed of the emphasis of the research study and were then instructed to reread the essays, this time annotating them, noting each usage of any of the five prescribed sentence constructions within individual essays and the frequency of that usage within each essay. Each rater annotated and tabulated 77 essays. A final tally of the five specific sentence constructions was recorded for individual essays, then analyzed. Raters remained unaware of which essays were pre-test or post-test writings or which were control or treatment group writing. The number of usages was totaled for all essays from each of the four groups and recorded results were submitted to statisticians, who analyzed the data and helped with interpretation of results.

Results

After data analysis, four significant findings emerged.

1. For the Treatment B group (the investigator's class), which received consistent and thorough instruction in the five sentence-level constructions, the scores from pre-test to post-test rose 4.698 points on a 0-18 scale (created by the addition of the two rater scores using the 0-9 scale). Additionally, statistical analysis showed that Treatment B mean post-test scores were significantly higher than the scores for both Treatment A and the control classes combined ($p < 0.001$). Students in Treatment B improved far more than the combined control groups with a difference of 4.5452 on the 0-18 scale, or just over 25%. The combined average scores based on the grading rubric (see Appendix C) were raised more than two full scores from an average of low 4 to mid 6 on the 0-9 scale. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Pre-test to Post-test Writing Mean Scores and Pre-test to Post-test Gain/Loss

	Mean Holistic Score Pre-test *(0-18 scale)	Pre-test Standard Deviation	Mean Holistic Score Post-test *(0-18 scale)	Post-test Standard Deviation	Mean Pre-test to Post-test Gain/Loss
Control group (n=38)	7.879	3.919	7.579	3.895	-0.00425
Treatment A (n=18)	7.57	2.854	6.667	2.473	-0.8534
Treatment B (n=18)	7.474	3.062	12.222	2.016	**4.5409

*Addition of two raters' scores using 0-9 rubric scale.

** $p < 0.0001$

2. Post-test writing class scores for Treatment A did not improve; in fact, they were actually lower than the pre-test writing scores of that group and slightly lower than the scores achieved by the control group. This finding was unexpected. Instructors in Treatment A and Treatment B groups had agreed at the outset to teach the five specific sentence constructions, but did not

collaborate on instruction methods or lesson planning (see Table 1). This finding is discussed further below.

3. A direct correlation exists between usage of the constructions and higher holistic scores. As predicted in the study hypothesis, writers who received high scores used a high number of the constructions which were focused on in this study. Use of the constructions was a significant predictor of higher holistic scores. This was true of both pre-test and post-test writing. Writers who received lower scores on the pre-test writing but improved their scores on the post-test writing used a higher number of the constructions on the post writing. There was not a single exception to this correlation in the spreadsheet data. The gains for students in Treatment B from pre-test to post-test are statistically significant. Even if this gain had not been achieved, the correlation between higher scoring compositions and the usage of the sentence constructions prescribed in the study should be noted. (See Table 2.)

Table 2. A Comparison of Post-test Mean Holistic Scores, Post-test Writing Constructions and Post-test Questionnaire Total Responses for All Groups.

	Total Post Writing Constructions For All Students	Mean Holistic Score Post * (0-18 scale)	Questionnaire Total Responses
Control A	242	8.421	56
Control B	159	6.737	53
Treatment A	155	6.667	40
Treatment B	301	12.222	98

*Addition of two rater s' scores using 0-9 rubric

4. A correlation also exists between the holistic score of the essays and the ability of writers to identify specific sentence constructions in their questionnaires. (See Table 2.) Almost without exception, if a writer could identify a technique or construction he or she used, even if using

language not used in the study, that student wrote a higher scoring essay.

Discussion

The data have significant implications for teaching. The results show that improved compositions result when student writers incorporate the five specific sentence constructions in their essays. Whether in pre- or post-test writing, the correlation exists between higher holistic scores and utilizing a greater number of the prescribed sentence constructions. There were a few outlying high scores in both pre-test essays and control groups, all of which used a high number of the sentence constructions prescribed in the study. It is possible that students who wrote these rare high scoring essays in the pre-test writing, as well as those in the control groups who received no treatment instruction, were taught more specific techniques in high school, or that they had broader writing experience than their peers, possibly through employment or high school journalism experience. These outliers remained outliers. However, their performance was characteristic of individuals, not groups. Nearly without exception, the only student writers who logged high scoring essays on the post-test writing, also logged high scoring essays on the pre-test writing. The only exception is the Treatment B group. Their scores improved by slightly more than 25%. These data suggest that the five prescribed sentence constructions were used by students who did not use them in the initial pre-test writing. The only explanation for this large difference is that those students had sufficient instruction and practice with the sentence-level moves. This conclusion is supported by the increased use of the prescribed sentence constructions in the post-test essay by the Treatment B group, which logged statistically significant post-test holistic score gains.

Student writers' abilities to identify style moves or practices employed in their essays is an additional predictor of higher holistic scores as evidenced by the correlation between a greater

number of style moves identified on questionnaires and higher holistic scores. The findings of the study suggest that, in addition to practicing sentence construction techniques, putting a name to a technique through repeated class reference encourages the use of the construction.

Students in the Treatment A course did not achieve gains similar to those of students in Treatment B. This was an unexpected study result, which raised questions such as teacher influence or other factors which may have contributed to holistic score gains. After the end of the semester, the investigator asked the Treatment A teacher about the pedagogy she employed. The Treatment A instructor explained that she emphasized the five sentence constructions that were chosen and agreed upon by both treatment group instructors as a resource for revision rather than something students should try to employ initially and in all phases of the writing process, including first drafts. In order for holistic score gains to be achieved by both Treatment A as well as Treatment B, increased collaboration resulting in equivalent teaching methods would have been necessary. The lack of emphasized collaboration is one of the limitations of this study.

As the investigator and the teacher of the Treatment B group, I have learned that in order to ensure that the five targeted sentence level constructions become part of my students' writing habits, I had to make sure that the class climate revolved around these skills. Deborah Dean, author of *What Works in Writing Instruction*, advises, "Implementation of a good idea requires full commitment to all the principles involved in the practice. That is essential to gaining the benefits." Dean was surprised to find that the 11 elements of the *Writing Next* report were often not implemented in classrooms through the same instructional practices advocated in the report. When questioned, teachers "dismissed" the research saying, "I already do that in my classroom, but it doesn't work." Dean explains that a "watered down or simplified" version of any practice will not produce the same outcomes (Dean). Bruce Sadler agrees. He writes that before students

transfer what they have been taught to their writing, they must become “mindful” of other choices through teacher instruction. He advocates “extensive” repetitive written and oral practice in the classroom where students, often in pairs, create more complex sentences through combining “kernel” sentences (469). Harry Noden, whose sentence construction techniques have been adopted by public school districts across the country, emphatically calls for a change in the classroom emphasis in order to promote improved student writing. He writes, “Having students recognize the beauty of an author’s art differs from having them create their own art. . . .” He explains how it is possible to get student writers to “emulate outstanding” writers.

The answer to this lies in the total literacy environment of the classroom: learning strategies, environmental opportunities for students to immerse themselves in print, options for collaboration, choices for learning modes, and so forth. This environment emerges from a combination of teaching-learning strategies including mini lessons, discussion activities, small group inquiry, independent reading, independent writing, individual investigations and conferences with peers and the teacher (13).

In Noden’s classroom, all of these strategies are aimed at teaching students a “repertoire of sentence structures” (4). Sentence construction is practiced every day and throughout the year in his secondary classrooms. Corroborating Noden’s claim, Bacon, Rhodes and Vanguri found that teaching specific sentence structures in college classrooms had an effect on the choices students make in their papers. Students’ ability to “manipulate stylistic elements” and transfer of knowledge can occur after even a short amount of instruction. They claim “five to six hours of class time-can have an impact” (2016). However, I believe that instruction in this “manipulation” cannot happen all at once, over the course of a few classes, nor haphazardly if it is to become

habitual and have lasting effects on future writing. The unexpected results from the Treatment A group are evidence that focus must be consistent and sustained.

To that end, Treatment B used a variety of techniques to achieve the positive outcomes found in the study. Starting with the first day of regular instruction, students were introduced to what I titled “The Bible,” which included a definition, a description, and examples of the five targeted sentence-level skills. I printed this important reference on neon pink cardstock and told students not to lose it. Often during craft or analysis lessons held at the beginning of class, I would ask students who were stammering for appropriate responses to take out “The Bible” as a cheat sheet which could give them solid possibilities. We referenced it constantly.

Because any learned skill requires extensive practice before mastery and prior to transfer, we drilled the five sentence constructions. Killgallon advises that practice is essential; it is “hardly busywork” he argues, and continues, “Practicing is the only way to guarantee that a skill becomes a permanent part of the way students compose their sentences” (23).

Implications for Classroom Teaching

Style instruction in each class meeting targeted at least one of the constructions with most student responses written in a writer’s notebook. The following teaching practices were utilized in the Treatment B group in order to achieve the statistically significant gains in composition holistic scores. Specific methods for teaching the five sentence-level constructions are outlined.

Daily student presentations

Daily student presentations highlighted the targeted elements as a class opener. Each student signed up for a day within the semester to present a piece of published writing that included three of the five sentence constructions. The student presenter identified the three constructions by underlining them or using a different font on a half sheet of paper that was

distributed to all. One sentence construction was chosen for class practice. Students composed the selected skill and also wrote a sentence of analysis which explained how the construction was purposeful in the printed piece. After reading the piece and giving classmates adequate time to compose and analyze, the presenter chose two students who shared their writing.

Both presenter and respondents received credit. Because of this student-led activity, each class period contained a five minute review of at least three of the five prescribed constructions. The student analysis responses were often highly insightful, sometimes not, but they fulfilled a larger emphasis of the course as an introduction to rhetoric and reminded the students each class that professional writers construct their sentences with a purpose in mind. This daily practice was enjoyable because the articles reflected the presenter's interest and personality. Chosen presentation passages ranged from Tolkien's description of a hobbit hole to an excerpt from a *Cosmopolitan* article about Jared Kushner. Notebook entries were also a directed review and practice of the five sentence constructions. Freewriting was rare; instead students were most often given guidelines and asked to practice some or all of the skills.

Love it or Hate It

During the opinion editorial unit, students were asked to write at least two items on the whiteboard under the headings "Hate It" and "Love It." After any unclear topics were explained, each student was required to write a mini opinion editorial in the notebook about one of the listed "hates" or "loves." They were directed to use dependent clauses and renaming, two of the five sentence constructions which could serve them well and improve their writing within the final required paper.

Alexa's line from her final opinion editorial essay is a possible outcome of practice with both dependent clauses and with renaming. She wrote, "According to Laurence Steinberg, a

member of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Law and Neuroscience, the part of the brain that controls impulsiveness and risk taking is not yet developed at age 18, the average age of college freshmen.”

Violence without gore

Another notebook entry is a favorite with students and with me because it always produces such impressive writing. Student writers must eliminate their first inclinations to employ shock value and instead must construct sentences with greater audience impact. The topic is violence. Of the five sentence constructions, three are emphasized in this exercise: altering sentence lengths, dialogue extensions and specific modifiers.

Mentor texts by master storytellers are introduced. I include the work of Ernie Pyle, a WWII correspondent and Bo Caldwell, using a passage from her *City of Tranquil Light* that includes an execution in China. Students are warned that they cannot include any gore, no brains splattering on walls etc., but should aim for image creation.

Mark’s notebook illustrates his practice with specific modifiers and altering sentences lengths, “I could still hear the muffled sounds of my parents being dragged away. Then silence, interrupted by gunshots and screaming. Breaking glass.” After notebook practice, Jacob uses a dialogue extension very well in the research paper. He wrote, “With similar regard, a later section of the chapter mentions, “sponsorship of new technology through research. . . .”

Sharing and analysis

Notebook entries are shared in a variety of ways, so that there is an immediate audience where experimentation and good writing is celebrated. Sometimes I ask for volunteers to read their entries, but more often I will choose “everyone who’s sitting in a back seat” or an entire row of five students to read. I also have student writers pair or triple up and read aloud to one or

two peers. As a way to encourage peers to listen carefully, I will often require that the listener share one line of impressive writing from the partner's entry. The sharing usually begins with the editorial comment, "I really like the part where she said. . ." and then the quoted line from the classmate's writing is read to the class. Invariably, after the partner's line is read, I will ask, "What technique was used to create that line? Why was it effective?" As the semester progresses, student responses to my questions become much more specific and insightful. They have had analysis practice responding to daily presentations and they become accustomed to the idea that professional writers' choices matter and so do the writing choices made by their peers and themselves.

Mentor texts and imitation

I use mentor texts that highlight the five sentence constructions liberally in class. Sometimes the text is used as a broad style suggestion where specific elements are used as models but there are exercises when I use a passage of text such as the foreword to Jennifer Armstrong's book *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World* as an imitation exercise. I print the text in size 20 font using double spacing to create open lines, then have students write directly beneath the model text, mimicking style elements to create a piece which is as close as possible to the model. Students imitate a professional writer and practice altering sentence lengths, renaming, and specific modifiers.

About one quarter of the utilized passage is listed below with possible imitations below each line.

"Just imagine yourself in the most hostile place on earth.
Just imagine yourself in the most hostile place on campus.
It's not the Sahara or the Gobi Desert. It's not the Arctic.
It's not the baseball stadium. It's not the home student bleachers.

The most hostile place on earth is the Antarctic,
The most hostile place on campus is the Marriott Center section 135,
the location of the South Pole”
the location right next to the visiting team’s fans.

Building Modifiers with vocabulary from varied fields

Improved specific modifiers are encouraged in the following activity which directs writers to experiment with language from varied fields. A field of study is provided. Students first brainstorm associated terms in pairs or small groups, then compose sentences using vocabulary from each area. Listed below are two of the ten topic areas used on the exercise including vocabulary brainstormed by students and sentences they composed using the brainstormed vocabulary. This activity was first meant to encourage the use of stronger modifiers, but had the happy outcome of writers discovering and using stronger verbs and more specific nouns as well.

Biology: symbiotic viscous organism life genetics cells
 Sentence: The symbiotic relationship of the businesses led to unprecedented growth.
Ecology: animals evolution adaptation organism recycle diversity
 Sentence: The engineers used recycled ideas in order to save time.

Chemistry, finance, psychology, medicine, physics and three original fields brainstormed by students were also used for practice. During peer review in the research unit, student writers freely congratulated each other when impactful modifiers from other fields were skillfully used. This activity also improved descriptions in creative nonfiction writing.

Sentence combining

Simple sentence combining exercises also promote the skill of renaming as well as the use of dependent clauses. As a class, we spent five to ten minutes on several occasions playing with this activity, one that answers many of the needs of inexperienced writers, according to Sadler. “Syntactically complex” sentences are far more likely to emerge from student writers if

they engage in sentence combining (469). There are dozens of practice examples online that can be used as puzzles for students to solve.

Renaming with appositives

Renaming is a skill that does not come naturally to students unless they are referencing people they know. For instance, they naturally say, “My cousin Bailey and I hopped in the car.” But, they rarely use this simple skill to create better descriptions and images. Simply supplying students with a topic or specific noun that they must rename forces them to practice this powerful skill which is useful in both creative and academic writing. The underlined words are those that students were asked to rename in sentence practice.

Cancer, the unsolvable medical mystery without a cure, continues to promote rigorous research. The bank teller, a fat bald man, sat on the other side of the counter with undeniable boredom. My backpack, a rugged bag stuffed with books, fell to the floor.

After practicing renaming, the use of this construction was used by student writers in final papers as they combined ideas in the rhetorical analysis and research “issues” papers. Jason’s example is from his research paper about primate language, “Kanzi, a bonobo (*Pan paniscus*), has demonstrated an understanding of human syntax”

Reflections and Recommendations

The writing process teaches students to revise deeply. Teaching specific sentence constructions teaches them to revise instantly as they compose. Emphasizing technique and style through these simple, yet often untapped resources gives inexperienced writers confidence. They know they are capable of making stylistic choices in their heads. This metacognitive ability has tremendous impact, not only on required first year writing compositions, but also on the writing they encounter out of class. In an anonymous survey, during the final day of instruction, students

in Treatment B group responded positively to a question about instruction at the sentence level. One student said, “I think these tools help in all areas of writing and I have tried to use them in all classes.”

Deep writing revision that addresses global concerns will always be necessary, but teaching inexperienced writers the same sentence constructions used by professionals makes writing purposeful and playful. The class climate alters. Students are more willing to take risks and try new techniques because they are aware that choices in writing alter effects and even create power. Students see themselves as capable writers, rather than someone just filling a seat.

After emphasizing the five sentence constructions that were part of the writing study, my students became accustomed to using them, even eager to do so. This is evident in their choices to include them on formal assignments (I never made this a requirement) and their ability to include them in the spontaneous post writing essay. Nora Bacon writes, “. . .as any experienced writer will attest, style is not the consequence of untamed self-expression. It is, instead the outcome of deliberate choice making” (2). Giving students deliberate exposure to choices, and particularly choices that are simple and easy to use once practiced, has become a central aim of my classroom.

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Appendix A

Writing Prompts:

Pre-test Writing:

Tell the story of an experience with a family member which was meaningful to you. Your essay should be 1 to 2 pages in length. Use any composition strategies that you have learned up to this point.

Post-test Writing:

Tell the story of an experience with a friend which was meaningful to you. Your essay should be 1 to 2 pages in length. Use any composition strategies that you have learned up to this point.

Appendix B

Questionnaire Instructions:

Referring to your essay, specifically identify any stylistic choices you included in your writing. Pay particular attention to the writing choices you made about the way you constructed sentences. Write those choices on the numbered space below. It is not necessary to list a choice for each number. [Numbers 1-8 were listed vertically.]

Appendix C

Rubric for Pre-test Writing and Post-test Writing

9 -Essays earning a score of 9 meet the criteria for essays that are scored an 8 and, in addition, are especially sophisticated or impressive in their control of language.

8- The text demonstrates sophisticated narrative techniques such as engaging dialogue, artistic pacing and vivid description to develop experiences, events and/or characters. The text uses eloquent words and phrases, showing details and rich sensory language and mood to convey a realistic picture of experiences, events, setting, and/or characters. The prose demonstrates an ability to control a wide range of the elements of effective writing but is not flawless.

7-Essays earning a score of 7 fit the description of essays that are scored a 6 but are distinguished by a more mature prose style.

6- The text demonstrates deliberate use of narrative techniques—such as dialogue, pacing, and description to develop experiences, events, and/or characters. The text uses precise words and phrases, showing details and controlled sensory language and mood to convey a realistic picture

of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters. Though the language may contain lapses in diction or syntax, generally the prose is clear.

5-The text uses narrative techniques, such as dialogue, description, reflection, to show events, and/or experiences. The text uses words and phrases, telling details and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters. The writing may contain lapses in diction or syntax, but it usually conveys the writer's ideas adequately.

4-The text uses some narrative techniques, such as dialogue or description and merely retells events and/or experiences. The text uses words and phrases, telling details to convey experiences, events, settings, and/or characters. The prose of 4 essays may suggest immature control of writing.

3-Essays earning a score of 3 meet the criteria for the score of 4 but demonstrate less control of writing.

2- The text lacks narrative techniques and merely retells events and/or experiences. The text merely tells experiences, events, settings, and/or characters. The prose of essays scored a 2 often demonstrates consistent weaknesses in writing, such as a lack of development, grammatical problems, or a lack of control.

1-Essays earning a score of 1 meet the criteria for the score of 2 but are especially simplistic or weak in their control of writing.

0- These essays did not address the topic.