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M E T A

Ever since high school, I’ve used nearly the same process for writing papers. First, I procrastinate by being productive in just about every way except for writing my paper; I write a brain dump of all the information I think I *might* need for my paper, I write an oddly detailed outline, and I pull lots of quotes from the source I’m working with. For most papers, I use (at most) half of what I prepared. Even though this preparation process seems—even to me—like a waste of time, it’s really important to my writing process. Looking back at my old papers hinted at this, I can see which of the papers were a struggle to string together in the brainstorming process, and which of the papers I rushed (but not doing much preparation). For this analysis of my prose style, I will be examining the overall effectiveness of four of my papers and discussing what affects the effectiveness of the papers.

When I took college writing my freshman year, one of the parts of my writing that I decided to work on was conciseness. I knew from the beginning that I could be really wordy if I didn’t pay attention to it, but I didn’t know the full extent of it until I read my old papers. One of the papers I decided to analyze was the research paper that I wrote at the end of 2017. I’d had a lot of issues with that paper when I wrote it. I had the flu, I didn’t have a clue how to write a research paper, and, worst of all, I picked a terrible topic. I chose to write about the Electoral College because I was already aware of the debate about it, but I underestimated how boring and difficult it would be. The paper was horrible for multiple reasons. First, I relied far too much on quotes, some of which were long enough to have been block quotes (but they just sat in my paragraphs). These quotes were partially responsible for another issue that plagued my paper: long, dragging sentences. For each of my papers, I decided to figure out how many words my sentences held on average. This paper had the largest average of all my papers, 34 words per sentence.

Wordiness was something I expected, but for paper with an already boring topic, long sentences made it an absolute pain to read. One utterly unmemorable sentence was made up of an incredible *96* words. I would use it here as an example and as proof, but no one should have to read that monstrosity. The sentence length in this paper was definitely an issue that negatively affected clarity, but overall it was that I wasn’t even clear about what I wanted to focus on. One of the reasons that made this paper difficult for me to write was that I couldn’t decide the main issue that I wanted to focus on.

Another, smaller, issue I had with this paper was that I made some very bad word choices. I wrote a lot about Electoral College reform and discussed the problems with trying to replace the electoral college. But the way that I wrote about it was to phrase it “support for Electoral College reform.” Which, to me, doesn’t sound nearly clear enough when it’s buried in a long sentence. In fact, it ends up sounding like I’m saying the exact opposite. A better way to phrase it could have simply been “support for reform” or “opposition to the Electoral College.” I said the original phrase so much in my paper that I’m sure the entire message would become clearer if I used wording that aided clarity.

This is the main takeaway I got from reading this paper again: I need to choose a specific and clear topic and need to be diligent in sticking with that topic. I felt like I needed to cover so much information about the electoral college that I was overwhelmed by the amount of information I was trying to stuff in a paper with a word limit (which I exceeded by 400 words).

In general, I’ve been better about not only decreasing my average sentence length, but also varying my sentence length more. The Electoral College paper was the oldest of my papers and had an average sentence length of 34 words; my sentence length didn’t vary much, the shortest sentence being 21 words long. The next paper I examined was from the spring of 2018, in which I analyzed two stories, one being the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*. For this paper, the average sentence length was 32 words. 32 words don’t sound much different from 34 words, but the sentence length overall seemed much shorter for the reader because I varied the sentence length a lot more; the shortest sentence was 10 words and the longest was 61 words. With this difference of variation, the paper was a lot less painful to read. The next paper was another research paper that I wrote in the fall of 2018. It’s about the Black Panther Party (both the party from the 60s and the party founded in the late 80s). This paper had an average sentence length of 31 words, but not as much length variation; almost all of the sentences were 20 to 39 words long. None of the sentences, thankfully, were spectacularly long, and the paper, despite being a research paper, was consequently easy to read and to understand (which was influenced by other qualities as well, which I will mention later). The last paper I looked at was a paper I wrote this semester, in February 2019. It was an analysis paper about a story from the middle ages, *Lanval*. The average sentence length was the shortest of the papers, at 27 words. In the *Lanval* paper, though, there was a lot of length variation in the sentences, with the longest sentence being 65 words long and the shortest being 3 words long. (Even without this three-word sentence accounted for, the average was still 27.5 words long.)

Of all the papers I examined, the least effective in terms of clarity and ease of readability was the Electoral College paper. The spring semester of 2019 is the first time I’ve had a class that has gone into detail about stylistic choices—I don’t think I’ve ever had a lesson on anything further than basic grammar. Even though I used some devices unconsciously, like parenthesis and zeugma, there are many devices that would have been useful if I’d been aware of them sooner. In class, we discussed how a lot of people probably use distinctio without being conscious of why, but I couldn’t find a single example of distinction in my writing. In my Electoral College paper (from 2017), I used several terms that aren’t necessarily common in everyday use, like “swing states,” and “senatorial bump.” These terms were very important to the topic of my paper, but I didn’t explain what they meant, which sacrificed clarity and emphasis. Although I knew that I could explain terms in a paper, I just wasn’t aware of the effect that doing so (or neglecting to) would have on my writing. Even if I just described how the electoral college actually worked, my paper would have been improved, but I’d wasted no time on the basics, and my paper was unfocused.

**I used very few devices in the Electoral College paper. I read through the entire thing, searching for anything noteworthy, but found only one device (which I’ll talk about at the end of this paragraph). I looked at my sentence structure, and found a nearly equal amount of both periodic and cumulative sentences, found no figures of speech or anything special in terms of syntax. One thing I was surprised about, though, was that I didn’t use nearly as many appositives as I thought I might have. This was a research paper where I had to introduce my sources, so an appositive would have been useful to stick a bit of ethos in when I talked about my sources for the first time, but there was nothing. I didn’t do that at all. The only place I actually found an appositive was near the end of my paper, where I was introducing the people I interviewed for my primary research section, but it was obvious I really didn’t know what I was doing. Here was the section: “those people include Sydney, who is a college senior majoring in political science and is pre-law, Emily, a graduate student who has researched the Electoral College, and Ben, a college Freshman studying political science.” The reason I say that I didn’t know what I was doing was that I used two appositives but should have used three (Sydney did not have an appositive attached to her name). Changing the first section of this sentence might not have changed the meaning of the sentence, but the parallel structure that would have been created would have made the sentence sound a lot better—I think, in general, appositives sound better than just plain old modification.**

**I originally wrote, before my revision, that I found examples of zeugma in my Electoral College paper, but when I went back through the paper for examples of this, I couldn’t find anything. I think that the problem was that I assumed that I used zeugma unconsciously, but most of my paper was written either in passive voice or in describing purely what my sources were saying, so I didn’t have a lot of opportunity to construct my sentences in this way. I think there are a lot of areas that could have been improved by zeugma, however, like when I was talking about my sources. I could have used diazeugma, linking a source with more verb phrases, like if I wrote something like “source 1 describes the role of the Electoral College, discusses the benefits of such a system, and reveals the major problems associated with it.” That would have been so useful! My paper was really stilted in this aspect because I used a lot of sentences to meet this same purpose.**

To contrast my Electoral college paper with another research paper that was more effective, I looked at the differences between it and the paper I wrote about the Black Panther Party (BPP). I think the main reason why this later paper was so much better than the first was because it was better focused. Even though I was using the same amount of sources for each paper, I paraphrased and used partial quotes more often in the BPP paper. This not only showed that I understood the topic more, but because I was able to put the source material into my own words, my analysis and incorporation of the quotes was much improved. It also helped to ease readability because the material was not as dense as the Electoral College paper was. In addition to shorter sentence length, and shorter quote length, clarity was better in the BPP paper because each paragraph was well-focused. Each paragraph had one main topic that contributed to the overall thesis of my paper, which was to examine the ways in which the nature of the Black Panther Party was more convoluted than much of the media presented it as. This included to first give a brief history of the party, then described criticisms against the party, then compared it to the civil rights movement in the south, explained the party’s views on violence, used two paragraphs to discuss the socialist-style “survival programs” the party provided to black communities, then used two paragraphs to explain the conflict between the original party members and the leadership of the New Black Panther Party (which is even more controversial than the first). Each paragraph was organized and focused to build on each other and contribute to building a broad picture of the Black Panther Party. In my Electoral College paper, however, I often changed subjects even in the middle of a paragraph only to return to that subject two paragraphs later (like I did when talking about swing states).

Another difference between the research papers was that in the BPP paper, I was much more deliberate in introducing the scholars I used. In the Electoral College Paper, I neglected to introduce a few of my scholars, which didn’t build ethos properly. For example, the first time I used a source was to say “Duquette, Mixon, & Cebula (2017) find preliminary evidence that…,” and never said who those people were or why their research was appropriate for my paper. I did the same thing a couple of sentences later, saying, “Virgin (2017) finds that…” To be clear, this paragraph is not the introductory paragraph; I pulled both quotes from my first body paragraph when I began to discuss what my sources researched. In the Black Panther Party paper, however, I introduced all my sources in a deliberate way that helped to give credibility to what I said. For example, I introduced one of my sources by paraphrasing his argument and interrupting the sentence: “the question that emerges from this statement, says Jerold Auerbach, a historian who experienced the height of the Black Panther’s popularity, is…” The construction of this sentence could have been better if I had placed the introduction at the beginning of the sentence instead of in the middle, but this method of introducing a scholar was more effective than the first example.

One thing I noticed as a trend in every paper except for the Electoral College paper was that I tend to use only very short pieces of quotes from the sources, avoiding quoting full sentences. For example (to go against this trend and quote full sentences), in the BPP paper, I wrote, “Ryan J Kirkby, a historian from the University of Guelph, said that a disproportionate amount of scholarship is “devoted to studying the party’s violent behavior,” and the party is “one of the most controversial and misunderstood” Black Power groups that arose during the 1960s (26).” In this example, it is clear that I’m mostly paraphrasing his argument but added a couple of quotes to show that I was being faithful to the source. Another example is from an analysis paper I wrote on the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee and “The Unseen” by Isaac Bashevis Singer. When I was discussing “The Unseen,” I wrote, “As Nathan died, however, he chose (with the help of the evil spirit) to “die like a dog.” The exact wording of this portion of the text was important to retain in my analysis because it used metaphorical language that would not have been beneficial for me to remove. Finally, in my most recent paper about the story *Lanval*, by Marie De France, I wrote, “He’d been the only knight not awarded with land and riches by Arthur, but he was now able to give “rich gifts” (209) and offer “great honors” (213).”

To emphasize the benefit these partial quotes, rather than complete quotes, have on my paper, here is a full sentence quote from my Electoral College paper: “According to research done by Virgin (2017), “the winning candidate, upon becoming president, uses his office to shower swing states with particularistic benefits, or what has become known as the ‘permanent campaign’” (p. 42). Not as clear, right? With phrases such as “particularistic benefits,” don’t do much to make the argument easy to understand. If I wrote this again, I would have paraphrased. The only part of the sentence I would keep, would probably be “shower swing states” and paraphrase the rest, because I think metaphorical language is really important to keep in a quote because meaning could be easily lost if it were removed.

**I made more interesting choices in my Black Panther paper device-wise as well. Right off the bat, I used appositives to introduce my sources, something I didn’t do for my Electoral College paper. For examples, my first source was introduced using one: “Ryan J Kirkby, a historian from the University of Guelph….” Another example can be seen a paragraph down: “Jerold Auerbach, a historian who experienced the height of the Black Panther’s popularity…”; and later: “Huey Newton, a co-founder of the BPP….” I’m not sure if I remember talking about this next device in class, but “style check 7” in *Writing with Clarity and Style* discusses parataxis and hypotaxis. I spent some time looking for what this device was called, so I’m glad I found it; I used hypotaxis a few times in this paper. I noticed that I don’t really use it when I was directly talking about my sources, but I used a contemporary example in the introduction and conclusion paragraphs, where I used hypotaxis multiple times. For example, my first sentence was, “during her Superbowl 50 halftime show in 2016, Beyoncé paid tribute to the Black Panther Party.” The first section of this sentence is subordinated to the independent clause. After noticing that I used this device only when I was freely talking about something that wasn’t as formal as my sources, I looked back at the paper that analyzed *Lanval*. This way of using a subordinate clause at the beginning of the sentence proved to be useful in providing context for the sentence, which helped to guide my paper along more smoothly than if I split it into independent sentences. For example, I wrote, “when Lanval returned home with his newfound wealth, he was finally able to afford others what he was never given,” and “After her rejection at the hand of Lanval and her subsequent injury caused by his insult against her beauty, Guinevere….” There were many other examples of this, but I think my point is clear. These were useful especially in my analysis of literature because I was able to highlight important parts of the story that were useful to my analysis by subordinating the less important contextual parts.**

**What was different about my *Lanval* paper when compared to others is that I was openly arguing my opinion. In both the Black Panther Party and Electoral College papers, I was supposed to simply talk about what scholars have said and leave my opinion out of it. The paper that included *Waiting for the Barbarians* was a little too unfocused for me to say that I had a coherent argument, though I should have been doing that. The *Lanval* paper, however, uses devices of transition that help when making arguments! How novel. (I mean, to be fair to my past self, this was the first paper I wrote after being in this class). I used procatalepsis several times. The first example, I used this device to open my paper: “Some may say that Lanval reverses the gender stereotypes that might be expected in a work written during the middle ages.” I used this sentence as a focus—I explored this perspective in the rest of my paper and ended up articulating my opinion (which was different) near the end. Near the end of my paper, I used this device again to return to the topic of gender in *Lanval*: “Some might argue that [Guinevere] is another rare example of a female character with a lot of power in a male-dominated society, particularly because of her role in the accusations against Lanval. But the queen's power came almost entirely by association with Arthur.”**

Even in my research papers, in which the importance was less on providing context than on providing an explanation, I made use of dependent clauses. The example that follows is from the Black Panther Party paper: “Because of this difference in the political environments, while non-violence proved to be an effective tool to integrate the south, many found non-violence to be inadequate for the issues black communities were fighting elsewhere (Auerbach 11).” This dependent clause at the **beginning and middle of the sentence** provided an explanation and emphasized the difference between the political environments in the north and the south, which was important for the reader to keep in mind. I used a similar dependent clause in the Electoral College paper: “Because so few voters can affect the election in Florida and potentially swing the national election to one candidate or the other, Duquette et al. (2017) found…”

In general I have found that I make different stylistic choices based on the genre of writing, but my style of writing stays consistent; in my literary analysis papers, I found it useful to provide context from the text using dependent clauses (complex sentences), often beginning the sentences with “when”; in my research papers, I also found use in dependent clauses, but more to the effect of providing explanation for an argument or event, often beginning the sentences with “because.” I’ve been able to decrease the average sentence length by trying to be more concise, decreasing from 34 words on average in 2017 to 27 words on average in 2019, and found that using partial quotes can be more effective than full-length sections from the source material.