**WRT308 Exercises in Style**

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Note from Collin Brooke:

I taught a style course in the spring of 2015 structured primarily around Raymond Queneau’s *Exercises in Style*. In that book, Queneau takes a simple scene and iterates it in dozens of different styles. I began by asking students to compose a short narrative and then, over the course of the next several weeks, they recast their narratives in some of the styles that Queneau employs. This process culminated in a project where they took another writer’s prose, and prepared a portfolio that presented it in multiple styles.

The iterative process of the course continued, in that students continued to rework their narratives, but we pivoted away from overall “styles” to specific elements. So one week, they rewrote their work using particular sentence lengths; in another, they focused on specific parts of speech.

I’d argue that one advantage of focusing on iteration (as opposed to revision) is that students experience it non-teleologically. That is, because they often revise their writing in the interests of assessment, they tend to focus on the elimination of error rather than the exploration of viable alternatives. Iteration is about making it different, rather than making it “better,” and eventually, students come to understand how the former can lead to the latter.

Below are nine exercises used as a sequence in the class.

**WRT308 Exercise #1: A Simple Scene**

**Due Tuesday, January 20th**

For your first exercise, you need to compose a scene, much like the once that Raymond Queneau works with in *Exercises in Style.*

It does not need to be complicated. Queneau writes about seeing a man on a bus who is later engaged in conversation on the street. The most style-neutral version of Queneau’s scene is probably the “Narrative” on pp. 43-44.

Your scene should run about a page, and it should contain the following minimal elements:

* At least two people
* The passage of time
* An identifiable location
* A handful of details

You should aspire to the same level of descriptive neutrality that Queneau achieves in “Narrative.” Focus on the activity and the elements of the scene, and simply relate them. There doesn’t need to be any overarching story or moral or resolution. Your scene can be something as banal as a person ordering a latte at Starbucks, eating lunch on a park bench, picking up a piece of trash, or choosing between different brands of pasta at the grocery store.

Don’t overthink this. As you might have gathered, these scenes are going to be used as raw material for subsequent exercises, so I don’t want you to spend too much time thinking carefully about them. Obviously, they should be error-free, but in terms of composing, you should do them quickly.

**WRT308 Exercise #2: Re-Verb-Eration**

**Due Tuesday, January 27th**

For your second weekly exercise, you are going to take one of the scenes produced for Exercise 1, and “re-verb” it.

We’ll talk in class about how to divvy them up, but I want you to work on someone else’s text. There are certain advantages to this—we tend to be able to view other people’s work more clearly than we do our own. Our own writing always carries our assumptions with it, attitudes that we may not realize we’re holding or infusing into the text.

I want to be clear about this: This is not an assignment about “improving” someone else’s writing. Instead, think of this as an experiment. Constance Hale has a number of things to say about verbs: using dynamic rather than static verbs, avoiding the passive voice, embracing action rather than abstraction, et al. Your job here is to choose one or more of these pieces of advice and to embody them in this assignment. But this will depend upon the piece of writing that you’re working with.

So, look at the verbs. Isolate them if you need to (make a list, use a highlighter, etc.). If there are a lot of static verbs there, then maybe your assignment should be to make them more dynamic. If they feel more abstract, then perhaps you can contribute a dose of directness.

You can revise terms other than verbs, in order to make your changes “fit” the grammar of the sentence, but you should focus on the verbs as exclusively as you are able. You do not need to change every single verb, but your reverbing should be aggressive.

You are also permitted to take your piece of writing and make it “worse”—imagine writing the entire scene with passive voice or with “Haig verbs” (p. 70)! The goal here isn’t improvement per se; instead, it’s conscious practice. Choose your strategies, and achieve an effect with them, even if the effect is one that you would normally avoid.

**WRT308 Exercise #3: Too Much Information?**

**Due Tuesday, February 3rd**

For your third weekly exercise, you are going to take one of the scenes produced for Exercise 1, and approach it from the perspective of adjectives and adverbs.

Since we already have an ordered list, I’m going to suggest that everyone use the scene produced by the person *before* them this time, with Maya using David’s (top of list flips to bottom)

Much like our verb assignment, your goal here is not to “improve” the other person’s piece of writing. Instead, you should focus on using adjectives and adverbs to create a mood or a particular effect.

Rather than rewriting the entire scene this time, I’m going to suggest that you take an excerpt. Because different people write paragraphs of different length, I suggest that you take an excerpt of 7-10 sentences to work with. At the top of your page, go ahead and copy/paste the “Original,” and then rewrite it twice. What I’d like you to try and do is to create two contrasting moods or effects with your rewrites. That doesn’t necessarily mean opposites, although it can.

You should restrict your changes as best as you can to adding/editing the adjectives and adverbs, however. There may be situations where this means changing other words —that’s okay, but keep those changes as minimal as possible.

It’s likewise acceptable to have a little fun with this. Perhaps your adverbs will undermine the activity that they describe, for example, or present them with as much hyperbole as possible.

**WRT308 Exercise #4: An Exploration of Register through the Judicious Application of Etymological and Semantic Knowledge**

Due Tuesday, February 8

For the fourth weekly exercise, and our last before the first project, I’m going to ask you to do something a little more complicated than word substitution. As we discovered in class this week, altering the register of language can be difficult, particularly when we try to keep the meaning of a passage intact. The words we use have an obvious effect on the meaning we achieve, and messing with register is more than simple substitution.

What I would like you to do is to take your original scene (or someone else’s, if you find that makes it easier), and to rethink that scene in a different register. In most cases, this will mean making it more formal, more distant, and perhaps more linguistically complex than it currently is.

There is some creativity involved, however, because I want you to feel free to approach this from a different perspective and genre as well. Your exercise should be recognizable as connected to the original, but otherwise, you are not responsible for matching detail to detail.

Here’s an example, one that I’ll try to execute this weekend so that you can see what this might look like. Imagine rewriting the opening paragraphs from Tolkein’s The Hobbit as a letter from the Shire Housing Authority to Bilbo regarding the proper care and maintenance of underground domiciles.

You can rethink your scene as a bureaucratic letter (as in this example), a scientific article, an academic essay, or anything number of possibilities. The main thing here is that I want to see you trying out a different register, a level of formality that you might not otherwise use in your own voice.

**WRT308 Exercise #5: Less is More**

**Exercise #6: More is more is more is more**

Both are due Tuesday, March 3

These two exercises are meant to work somewhat in concert, and that’s why I’m going ahead and combining them.

The idea behind these exercises is a relatively simple one. Working with the same text for both exercises, I want you to write a version whose sentences are no longer than 7 words for Exercise 5, and then to write a version that is only a single sentence (and at least 100 words) for Exercise 6.

You are welcome to use your own Weekly Exercise 1 as your source material, but you are not confined to that. If you’d like to choose another source for this, you can, as long as you use the same source for both exercises.

It may prove difficult to stick too closely to the language of the source material itself—and that’s partly the point of this. Even something as simple (and usually invisible) as sentence length can have an impact on what we’re able to articulate through language. So, as long as your versions are recognizable as variations on their original, you’re fine. It’s okay if that means changing up the language to get it to fit in either direction.

**WRT308 Exercise #7: A Martian Completes a Weekly Exercise**

Due Tuesday, March 24

For your seventh weekly exercise, I’d like you to rewrite your scene, and to engage in a bit of defamiliarization. I apologize that we weren’t able to spend more time this past week discussing this strategy, but there really isn’t a wrong way to do it, so experiment and have a little fun.

Defamiliarization is a fairly typical strategy, particularly in certain kinds of genre fiction. Think about, for example, the way that the Harry Potter series introduced readers to a whole new set of vocabulary (Hogwarts, muggles, etc.) as a means of building a world parallel to our own. Based on the readings from this week, there are a few strategies you might employ:

Jabberwocky: Carroll’s poem relies on a fairly standard narrative structure, but uses words that “feel” like related terms. So you might invent some terms like we did for the Scarlet Letter introduction—blending words together, focusing on the sound and feel of words more than actual dictionary provenance. “Chortle” (a combination of chuckle and snort) is one word from “Jabberwocky” that has actually made it into regular usage.

Raine: The Martian poem takes everyday items, like books, clocks, and telephones, and interprets them from the perspective of someone who’s never seen them before. Even responses like crying (eyes melting!) are made strange, but discernible. In some cases, this might mean treating inanimate objects as though they were alive and acting; in others, you might shift perspective to treat an object as the protagonist, and humans as the objects of its will.

Marcus: We didn’t get a chance to discuss the excerpt from The Age of Wire and String, but it’s perhaps even more “out there” than either of the poems. Marcus uses language in very odd ways, but he obeys the rules of grammar and diction. In some ways, his voice is not unlike Raine’s Martian—his perspective is very different.

You don’t need to make your scene unrecognizable—that’s not the point of defamiliarization. Instead, you should try to identify a few key moments where you might flip our perspective, or invent a word that somehow captures your ideas, but does so in an unfamiliar way.

**WRT308 Exercise #8: To the Author of the New-England Courant**

Due Tuesday, March 31

For your eighth weekly exercise, I’d like you to take your first weekly exercise (or another of the texts we’ve looked at recently), and to try to emulate the style that Benjamin Franklin uses in his Silence Dogood letters or that Thoreau deploys in Walden.

It will almost certainly feel odd to write so formally, to capitalize your nouns (in the case of Franklin), but try and stay as close to his style as possible. Look at the way he forms sentences, the kinds of references he relies on, and the strategies he uses.

I’m more interested here in the style of your piece than I am in your ability to capture your first scene completely. It’s okay to take a small piece, or a single observation, and to write about it in this style, since one of the features of Franklin’s prose is its tendency to draw out such observations.

**WRT308  Exercise #9: The Hour Dedicated to the Ceremony Known as the Weekly Exercise**

Due Tuesday, April 7th

For your ninth weekly exercise, I’d like you to take your first weekly exercise and rewrite it (or a portion of it, depending on length) in either the style of Henry James or Ernest Hemingway.

Since we’ve already looked at those writers in conjunction with each other, you should have some sense of how best to capture their particular styles. If you’d like to try and take a single paragraph and recast in each style, that’s an option here as well.

As we talked about in class on Thursday, you may find yourself needing either to add or subtract description, and.or to change particular details to fit the style that you’re using. And that’s perfectly acceptable.