

FLOW

Foreign
Language
Opportunities
in Writing

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**IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS THE SENTENCE: A FEW
REMARKS ON A LITERARY APPROACH TO WRITING CLASSES**

Abstract

Any text, whether literary or academic, is a set of sentences. It is my firm belief – and has been the organizing principle of my writing classes over the years – that no stylistic excellence can be achieved until one learns to develop well-crafted, reader-friendly sentences. The goal of my paper is to demonstrate the benefits of such a sentence-centered approach to writing. Many of my writing classes have featured workshop-style exercises where students would work on anonymous fragments culled from their essays. Firstly, they would analyze and then try to improve them in terms of grammar, syntax, economy or broadly understood style; the ideal upshot would be a “correct” sentence in the reading of which they would themselves take pleasure. In my presentation, I intend to briefly describe and classify the difficulties which they would have to face. Underlying the whole enterprise has been a hope that the students will learn to value stylistic elegance and to locate its center: several words, put together to good effect, between two full stops.

I wish to begin with a disclaimer of sorts. I am not a methodologist and I have never seriously studied the theoretical aspects of teaching composition. My main scholarly interest – and the subject of the bulk of the courses that I teach – is literature. Nevertheless, I *have* dabbled in teaching writing classes, which are sometimes assigned to literature scholars as part of the practical English curriculum in this country. The assumption beyond such assignments, I have always thought, seems rather clear: is literature not, after all, about writing? What follows is an account of how a passion for the written word can – both inadvertently and systematically – enrich one’s approach to teaching composition.

Certain important distinctions need to be made at this point. Surely, among the primary obligations of an academic composition are coherence and cohesion. Furthermore, we expect dependable knowledge of a subject from an expository essay, whereas in an argumentative one we require the student to reason

logically and to supply convincing evidence for his or her claims. In contrast, literary texts may violate both coherence and cohesion for the sake of an artistic effect. Nor can they, in any strict sense, be depended upon for information about the surrounding world; rather, they can be – and often are – intentionally misleading. Their argumentation may be purposefully flawed in order to bring a different, initially concealed point across. Thus, they rely for their success on certain effects which, it can be safely assumed, hardly ever work in an academic context. Thus, in the most general terms, literary texts seem to have precious little in common with academic writing.

And yet, haven't we all encountered works which were well-structured, well-argued and all-round well-intentioned but which still failed to engage us in the slightest? Haven't we yawned and groaned while reading the essay, and then been curiously at a loss to explain to the student why exactly it deserves a C rather than a B or an A? What I am implying here is that successful academic essays and literary texts *do* have something in common, after all: what they share is an obligation to arouse interest. Obviously, this 'interest', when applied to literature, is differently negotiated by aficionados of science fiction and admirers of modernist poetry; it is something else entirely when it comes to student compositions. Nevertheless, I am convinced that a writer needs to be aware of his or her audience and its expectations. Probably, it is not advisable either to fulfill these expectations completely or to defy them altogether because the first solution will lead to tedium and the other to utter confusion and probably failure. Actual practitioners of literature may take far more risks, talking 'above our heads', in the belief that they are addressing future generations. Students, obviously, are not advised to count on posthumous recognition; in their case, the ultimate evaluation will come sooner rather than later. Therefore, I believe that making students aware of their audience and its needs is absolutely crucial. I usually try to impress upon my groups the image of myself, craned over the desk in the small hours, fuming at another essay which begins: "Nowadays, such and such issue is very important to people in the world".

Allow me then to dip into the literary context to illuminate some of my beliefs about writing in general. John Barth, a contemporary American writer with an exemplary awareness of his craft and one of my personal favorites, famously compares the literary writer's fate to that of Scheherazade of the *Thousand and One Nights*. If you recall the tale, King Shahryar, who hates all womankind because of an amorous disappointment, takes a new bride every day and then puts her to death, to forestall infidelity. But Scheherazade, a renowned storyteller, devises a cunning strategy to divert the King from his murderous activities. She volunteers to become the next wife and, making the most of her

narrative skills, manages to keep the monarch so enchanted by her tales-within-tales that he cannot bear to have her killed until he has heard the rest of her monumental story. This she manages to do for a thousand and one nights, after which King Shahryar grants her pardon and makes her a permanent wife, thus putting an end to the carnage. Barth describes Scheherazade's fundamental situation as "apocalyptic", with catastrophe always looming large; the storyteller is forever 'on her toes' and – to quote Barth again – "her talent is always on the line". Scheherazade's plight, he argues, is a metaphor of every writer's predicament; the King – "the absolute critic" – stands for the audience, always threatening to stop reading and consign the writer to oblivion⁶.

It is my conviction that students should be made aware not only that they are writing for a demanding audience, but also that what is required is a *consistently* engaging work, a *sustained* effort. It goes without saying that ideas are needed to write an effective essay. Often, however, the ideas will be similar to those arrived at by other students in the group, and – worse luck – by students whom the teacher has coached before. Also, it is rather difficult, if not impossible, to teach students how to *have* bright ideas during your composition class; rather, we can instruct our charges how to estimate these ideas or arrange them to the greatest effect. Therefore, since it is difficult to dazzle the reader with a truly innovative idea, I believe that a greater emphasis ought to be laid on selling whatever ideas one already has. Students ought to realize that, firstly, style has a huge impact on the final grade and, secondly, that it is not – or at least not only – a God-given talent or some elusive, undefined magic that is always beyond their reach. Style can be broken down into a series of effects; it obviously can, and should, be taught.

John Barth, who was also an instructor of creative writing, once stated that his pedagogical mission was "saying all the things that go without saying: staring first principles and basic distinctions out of countenance; facing them down, for my students' benefit and my own, until they confess new information"⁷. One of the first things that I tell my students is the self-evident fact that any text, whether literary or academic, is a set of sentences. It is my firm belief – and has been the organizing principle of my writing classes over the years – that no stylistic excellence can be achieved until one learns to develop well-crafted, reader-friendly sentences. Of course, we could go further: any sentence is composed of words. Indeed, a rich vocabulary seems a prerequisite for good writing and students should be encouraged to use their

⁶ John Barth, "Muse, Spare Me". *The Friday Book. Essays and Other Nonfiction*. G. P. Putnam's Sons: New York 1984: 58.

⁷ John Barth, "Some Reasons Why I Tell the Stories I Tell the Way I Tell Them Rather Than Some Other Sort of Stories Some Other Way". *The Friday Book. Essays and Other Nonfiction*. G. P. Putnam's Sons: New York 1984: 11.

dictionaries, and to use them advisedly. Nevertheless, I believe that even a weak student can be taught relatively quickly the value of synonyms and where to find them. As regards the fine art of sentence writing, that is another matter altogether.

To return to the literary world yet again: one of the inspirations for this sentence-centered approach are the rather extreme pedagogical methods of Gordon Lish. Lish is an American maverick writer, who has also served as fiction editor for *The Quarterly*, *Esquire* and for the publishing house Alfred A. Knopf. Styling himself as “Captain Fiction” and fostering the careers of a host of important American writers of the 1980s (including Raymond Carver), he was reportedly very hard to please in his capacity as editor. As regards his writing classes, held in the 1980s and 90s (and apparently resumed in 2009 after a ten-year hiatus⁸) were notoriously bizarre⁹. Lish had an ultra-rationalist stance on inborn abilities, famously stating: “I see the notion of talent as quite irrelevant. I see instead perseverance, application, industry, assiduity, will, will, will, desire, desire, desire”¹⁰. In his classes, the intractable Lish would not allow his students to proceed with reading their story out loud if the opening sentence failed to arrest his imagination. Unsurprisingly, given the writer’s very harsh criteria, few actually progressed past this obstacle. Some of those who never got to read more than their first sentence in Lish’s class (for instance, GQ’s Neal Karlen) understandably felt inclined to censure his method in their articles. However, Lish believed that a person who could not produce one perfect sentence – perfect in his opinion, that is – had no business writing any longer piece¹¹. Among those who remember the classes fondly is Gary Lutz, himself an established writer nowadays. Lutz has recently stated approvingly that his mentor “recognized the sentence as the one true theater of endeavor, as the place where writing comes to a point and attains its ultimacy”¹². Occupying middle ground, Salon contributor David Bowman described Lish the writing instructor as “brilliant but out of his mind”. He also stated that, unfortunately, the legendary editor’s own fiction is “godawful”¹³.

Luckily, it is not our aim here to debate the merits of Gordon Lish’s literary output but rather to gauge the usefulness of his admittedly controversial ideas in

⁸ David McLendon, “Twisting the Story Into Its Original Twisted Form”. *The Collagist* Aug 2009 (<http://tinyurl.com/37929tj>, accessed 26 Sep 2009)

⁹ David Bowman, “Lashed by Lish”. *Salon* 1 Sep 1998 (<http://tinyurl.com/2wuolmb>, accessed on 26 Sep 2009)

¹⁰ [cited in:] Charles W. Sasser, *Magic Steps to Writing Success*. AWOC.COM: Denton, TX: 2003, p. 65.

¹¹ Bowman, *ibid.*

¹² Gary Lutz, “The Sentence is a Lonely Place”. *The Believer* Jan 2009 (<http://tinyurl.com/9lbnkk>, accessed on 26 Sep 2009)

¹³ Bowman, *ibid.*

the context of academic writing. Needless to say, I have never attempted to implement what Bowman calls Lish's "cult of the sentence"¹⁴ in its extreme variety. Instead, assigning writing tasks of traditional length, I have tried to alert students to the importance of the building blocks which they use to construct their compositions. Therefore, apart from vocabulary exercises and other staples of a writing course, very many of my classes feature workshop-style tasks where students work on anonymous fragments culled from their essays. Firstly, they analyze a sentence and then try to improve it in terms of grammar, syntax, economy, and so forth; the ideal upshot is a 'correct' sentence in the reading of which they can themselves take pleasure. Teaching students to relish well-crafted sentences is the first step; only then can they learn to produce them themselves. Naturally, as the course progresses, larger and larger chunks of written text get analyzed, rearranged, rewritten and remedied. Without losing sight of discourse, the initial focus is always on the sentence.

For instance, the opening sentence. Out of his mind or not, Gordon Lish is certainly on to something when he emphasizes its importance. Apparently, his response to a first sentence he did not enjoy would be: "I don't feel like I need to know this to keep on living"¹⁵. Naturally, it would be unreasonable to expect students only to tell us things that we need to know to keep on living, let alone do so in elegant prose. And yet that first sentence does set a certain tone, creating expectations of what follows. I always advise my students to consider their opening sentence very carefully and not to waste that major opportunity to grab the reader's attention. They should always endeavor to produce what I jokingly call a "killer opening sentence".

To briefly illustrate my point, I would like you to consider a few examples, culled from essays produced by first and second year BA students at the English Department, Faculty of Pedagogy and Fine Arts at the Kalisz branch of Adam Mickiewicz University¹⁶. In my private vocabulary, the direct opposite of a "killer opening sentence" is a "non-opener", which manages to add nothing whatsoever to the assignment's title. In the following cases, the students were asked to compare and contrast the university and kindergarten. Classic 'non-openers' from my files run as follows:

- 1a. Looking at university and kindergarten it is easy to notice distinctions between them but there are also similarities worth to be mentioned.
- 1b. It is known that both universities and kindergartens in spite of many dissimilarities, can be comparable.

¹⁴ Bowman, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Bowman, *ibid.*

¹⁶ All sentences are reproduced exactly as found in the essays.

Clearly, there are quite a few linguistic problems to sort out in both cases, but my primary reservation is that, fifteen or twenty words in, we have not progressed beyond the title. There is nothing in the sentences to jiggle the imagination; they are all entirely abstract, predictable and badly constructed to boot. If this were Scheherazade speaking, she would never make it to the second night.

Please consider another pair of examples, highlighting the students' lethal penchant for generalization. The first one is taken from an argumentative essay on the legality of music downloads, whereas the other comes from a descriptive essay entitled "My Room After a Party". Seemingly, nothing is as comfortable in the opening sentence as a long vista – the longer the better, in fact:

2a. Question if downloading music should be illegal or not has been always causing discussion.

2b. From the very beginning of western civilization people enjoyed throwing a parties.

Grammatical issues aside, I would rate these sentences slightly higher than the pair described above because they do begin to communicate something. Nevertheless, because of the humorous effect which they create as well as the predictability of the opening device, they would not be accepted, either.

Sometimes, students need to be reminded of the redeeming power of sheer logic. In the following example, the group was asked to produce an argumentative essay about prisoners' right to live comfortably. Here is my favorite opener from the batch:

3. Every single person on our planet has a right to live as they like but prisoners should not have.

Although the author in question states his opinion immediately in the first sentence – an acceptable and sometimes very effective strategy – it is logic, or rather lack thereof, that gets in the way and produces a sentence rather too amusing to fit the serious topic. The syntax is certainly of no help; Gordon Lish would probably not approve.

Everyone who teaches writing knows that one of the problems most difficult to uproot is purposeless repetition on the lexical or syntactical level. Enjoining students to consult a thesaurus frequently, we should also warn them against blundering in the following way:

4. TITLE: An unusual holiday

OPENING SENTENCE: I still remember my most unusual holiday.

CLOSING SENTENCE: That was my most unusual holiday.

However, I have found that after being repeatedly castigated for producing first sentences like the ones quoted above, students begin to approach this matter more seriously. Where previously they would simply put together a clichéd opener to get them going, after a while their initial sentences tend to become more thoughtful, if not always more linguistically accomplished. Here are three examples from a process analysis essay devoted to motivating students to learn, which – I believe – show progress in envisioning the introduction to one’s work (especially considering that two of these three authors have already been quoted above):

5a. Almost every day students have to choose between learning and something else.

5b. Students are incredibly clever community that instead of learning prefers to cheat.

5c. Probably most of the students would not learn if they could help it.

The opening sentence, although crucial, must obviously be followed by others, which should be equally well-constructed. Obviously, middles and endings are no less closely examined in my classes, as are transitions and methods of organizing material. However, I find that focusing on sentences provides the students with an effective tool for revising and improving their own work. From my experience, if students are told to read their essays before submitting, they may well do so, but their reading will probably be imprecise, simply because it will be unstructured. Conversely, I believe that establishing the sentence – to paraphrase Gordon Lish – as a world in itself¹⁷, with huge possibilities of syntagmatic and paradigmatic variation, teaches the students to be more careful readers, and therefore critics, of their own text. I always tell students – even the best ones – to judge their own work harshly. In fact, students have at times approached me at mid-term, for instance, saying that they had grown so suspicious of their own compositions that every sentence now seemed

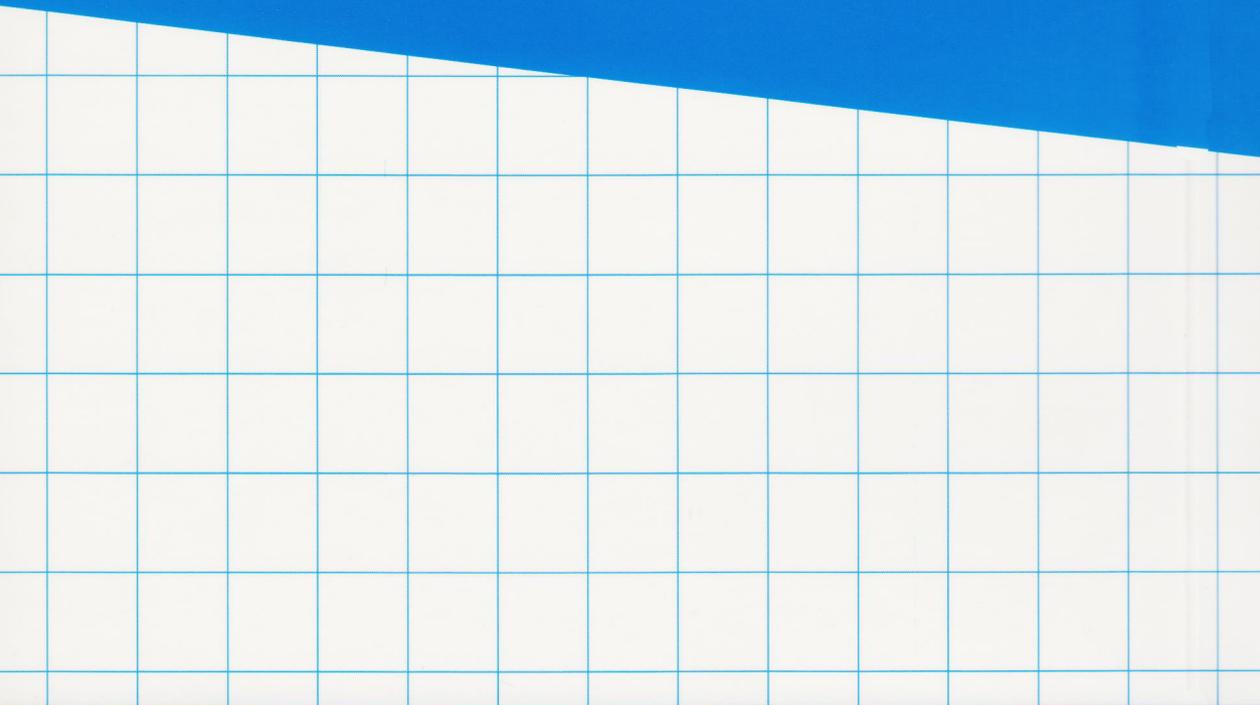
¹⁷ Lish apparently explained to his tutees that what they were after was “[n]ot a sentence about the world, but one that is the world entire” (cited in: George Carver, “Lish, Gordon: Reflections of a Former Student” *Pif Magazine* (<http://www.pifmagazine.com/SID/692/>, accessed 26 Sep 2009).

wrong to them. “Keep up the good work”, I would say, convinced that they had learned something.

To conclude, I would like to reestablish the points that I have tried to convey. Despite their many differences, I believe that the duty of an academic text – as well as a literary one – is to be ‘interesting’, in the sense specified, to a large extent, by its audience. John Barth’s image of a writer as Scheherazade, attempting to hold and seize King Shahryar’s attention by putting on a performance of unflagging quality, seems equally fitting in the context of writing classes. One must write with an unforgiving audience in mind and internalize its harshness so as to forestall its criticisms. Gordon Lish’s ideas about writing, on the other hand, indicate a feasible way of mastering style, whether literary or not, and learning to captivate the reader; style, it seems, is nothing but a series of successful sentences. If one can learn to recognize and enjoy them, one is that much closer to producing them. And, best of all – if we are to trust Lish – talent does not matter; what matters is “will, will, will, desire, desire, desire”.

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