

Teaching Writing Through Syntax

by Elizabeth Dobbs

This article is a revised and shortened version of my November 18 Faculty Teaching Workshop lecture, "Teaching Writing Through Syntax." The Linguistic Exercises to which I refer are located on the Web at <http://www.grinnell.edu/individuals/dobbs/DrSyntax/index.html>

The article will make more sense if you consult them as you read it.

In this workshop, I'm going to show you the Linguistic Exercises I've developed to teach writing. I'll set out the problem I'm trying to solve, give you a description and overview of my Exercises, and take a brief look at a few of them. The Exercises are designed to teach argument, but are also useful for teaching any kind of writing that calls for unity and coherence.

The problem I face, simply put, is disconnected writing. I find, for example, paragraphs composed of sentences only minimally connected to one another or to a topic sentence, and whole papers composed of paragraphs unconnected to one another or to a thesis.

A way to deal with this disconnection came to me after a moment I've repeatedly experienced in paper conferences with students. When I ask a student why she doesn't have, say, a comma in a certain place, her response is often a vague something about feelings or not needing breath. When I then reveal it's possible to be quite secure about the uses of punctuation--reliance on feelings or breath are unnecessary--and point out that here, perhaps, is an introductory adverbial clause which by convention should be followed by a comma I more often than not get a blank stare. If I ask whether the student knows the differences between a phrase and a clause or among kinds of clauses, I usually discover that the student either never knew or has long since forgotten these differences.

Now, I find punctuation only marginally interesting in the teaching of writing; I insist students practice the conventions, but I don't find that teaching punctuation gets at the more fundamental problems students have. This small-scale writing problem of punctuation, however, made me think about syntax. What kind of control do students have over their writing if they have no grasp of the sentence, no understanding of relations between parts of a sentence? In other words, what can they do if they know nothing about syntax? To help students, I realized I could start by teaching them to analyze--in a rough and ready way--the structure of a sentence, that is, syntactic relations between words; I could move from there to relations between sentences and then to relations between paragraphs, the last two being syntax by analogy. So I began to develop my Linguistic Exercises. I use the full-blown version of these Exercises in Tutorial, but I take students in other classes individually through parts of them.

I call them Linguistic Exercises, by the way, to avoid using "grammar," a word guaranteed to cause students' eyes to glaze over. A common student notion, as you know, is that grammar's a bunch of dumb rules invented by teachers and designed to make life difficult. Students don't realize that rather than being "invented," grammar is an inherent feature of their amazing ability

to use language. And they may not have heard that the linguistic study of grammar is one of today's most exciting fields.

I introduce the Exercises by telling students they understand what I'm saying to them not only because they know the meanings of the words I'm using, but also, and much more importantly, because they understand the relations among those words, even though they don't yet have names for those relations. A comparison to their study of foreign languages is sufficient to clarify this fact: they know that if they learn only the vocabulary of the new language and don't learn about possible relations among vocabulary items--that is, syntax--they'll recognize individual words, but they won't understand what's being said.

This idea of relations gives me the beginning point for the Exercises, each of which combines explanation and practice. In the first Exercise, I start with the internal structure of a sentence and focus on relations between words and phrases; in Exercises II to IV, I look primarily at relations between larger units within the sentence. In V, I step back to look at the whole paragraph as governed by its topic sentence, and I look in VI within the paragraph at relations between sentences. I have to deal with the topic sentence first, of course, because it will implicitly provide many of those relations. I step back again in VII to consider a large unit, the thesis statement governing the whole argument, and in VIII look more closely at the relations between thesis and topic sentences. Finally, in IX, I invite students to think about possible orders and structures in argument.

Let's look very briefly at some of the Exercises. The first is a straightforward setting out of what used to be called "parts of speech." All my definitions here are rough compared to the definitions of a serious linguist, but they're sufficient for my purposes. It's essential that students learn these definitions, or they're sunk in the next Exercises. And in this Exercise I really drive home the idea of syntax or connection.

This is how I explain what Linguistic Exercise I is about: if you put all the words of a language into a pile, you'd notice that some of them are more like others in what they are and what they do. That is, you don't have a pile without distinctions, but rather one in which you find groups. Precisely what those groups are may vary as you look at piles from different languages, but all will have groups. These are the "classes" of words, and, when you do syntactic analysis, your first question is "what is this word?"--not its meaning, but its kind. Closely tied to class is the notion of function. If your word is part of a unit--say, a sentence--you now need to identify its particular function within the sentence, its relation to one or more of the other words in the sentence. You might, for example, have a noun functioning as the object of a preposition. To name a word's "function" is to specify its syntactic relation.

I then move to larger syntactic units. In Exercise II, I consider "kinds" of sentences, each of which is defined by its clause structure. This is also the moment I introduce some punctuation. In IV, I look at large unit syntax from a different angle by asking students to think about the precise "meaning" relations they set up when they choose phrases rather than clauses or independent rather than dependent clauses. I want them to understand the implicit meaning carried by their choices from among these structures. I also want to show them that the choice of a particular subordinating conjunction is critical.

I'll end by looking at Linguistic Exercise VI, which brings up transitions between sentences, again, the "syntax" of the paragraph. If you look at VI, you'll see it relies on a distinction between two kinds of transitions, semantic and lexical. I discovered this distinction in an article by Jeanne Fahnestock ("Semantic and Lexical Coherence" in *College Composition and Communication*, December 1983); the difference between the two is that lexical transitions operate on the surface, while semantic transitions reveal deeper thought relations between ideas. Therefore, semantic transitions are about much more than just "smoothness" or "flow" in writing. I've found in fact that the idea of semantic transitions--if students get it--is the single most important key to their improving their writing. Once they begin to think in terms of relations or syntax on the paragraph level, their ability to construct clear and coherent arguments dramatically increases.

The crucial word I used just now was "think"; most writing problems of any interest are finally problems of thinking. If you've given your students a good writing assignment and if they've got something to say about it, but you still face paragraphs you struggle to understand, or indeed entire arguments that seem like mush, then I suggest you're seeing a symptom of undeveloped and unclear thinking.

The writing problem here is, of course, not solved by simple addition of some semantic transition. Rather, trying to analyze the relation between ideas in two sentences is more likely to reveal that there is no relation--the "paragraph" may really be a grocery list of sentences unconnected with one another. When a student finds no relation between two sentences, and therefore can't supply a semantic transition, it's possible that a step in the student's process of thinking is missing or, and this is more common, the two sentences are such poorly structured accounts of her ideas that she needs to clarify her syntax, and therefore her thinking, before she can supply a semantic transition. Once the student supplies the transition, she may discover she's doing something she doesn't want to do. For example, the semantic transition which properly reveals the relation between two sentences might be "specifically" having become aware of that relation, the student then needs to ask if she couldn't simply get that specification into her first statement.

In a word, analyzing syntax is one of the most direct ways to clarify both writing and thinking. Because writing is central to students' learning to think, it has to be central to what we do at the College.