

By depending upon specific verbs, student writing immediately becomes more exact.

A second technique emphasizes the relationship between adjectives and the adjectival use of prepositional phrases. Frequently students utilize a prepositional phrase when an adjective would suffice. Students write that "In the back yard of my grandfather's house there are coops for chickens, a barn for cows, and a well for keeping melons cool." The sentence linguistically can be tightened by avoiding the numerous prepositional phrases. Instead of a sentence linked with prepositions, the sentence could read, "In my grandfather's back yard there are chicken coops, a cow barn, and a well to keep melons cool." The technique is to use the object of the preposition as the adjective for the noun the phrase modifies. Students who do not understand what a preposition is, can usually recognize them, and use this technique. Rather than "In the window of the store," you have "In the store window," or "On top of the box," "on the boxtop."

Similarly, students should avoid often using phrases when any specific word suffices. Rather than explaining an ill-chosen verb--"The boy keeps behind"--use "The boy lags." Or, with an adverb, "The birds sailed as if with a purpose"--"The birds intently sailed." This technique is easily perfected when correcting student themes in class.

A last guideline to improve student diction is to require students to use specific names, dates, and terminology. Rather than "Years ago, one king of France decided to persecute Protestants," have them be specific--"In _____, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes and ended toleration for the Huguenots." Practice in terminology helps students build effective diction.

Means of improving student diction rely upon providing students with methods to think of exact words and concurrently to keep students from relying on a general diction emanating from their spoken English. The relationships between grammatical concepts and composition provide these essential keys to better writing.

Examinations With A Lighter Touch: Anachronistic Encounters

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Assuming for the moment that examinations can serve several good purposes and deserve to be taken (and made out!) seriously, one may still wish to avoid limiting the questions to those that are academically sound and proper and therefore perhaps inevitable. I think it desirable from time to time to include questions that appear facetious or absurd, but which may arouse interest and response for that very reason. Such questions must, of course, be capable of suggesting a wide range of meaningful answers.

I recall that, as an undergraduate, I was cheered by the occasional change of pace when the instructor inserted some improvised "personal" advertisements in a section calling for identification of authors. Based, I believe, on some light-hearted entries in the Saturday Review of Literature, these brief classified ads were offers to buy or sell or appeared to be efforts to trace missing persons or goods, but they all contained the clues needed to identify some American writer. This part of the test was a game.

In recent years I have tried to inject the light touch, occasionally. One of the more successful devices has been the Anachronistic Encounter, in which impossible meetings or situations are contrived which, however ridiculous at first glance, will suggest some line of development. Here are some samples:

William Bradford is resting after having dug out his first crude shelter at Plymouth. Wish-
 int to occupy his mind while resting his body,
 he picks up a manuscript he has just uncovered.
 Glancing at random, he lights upon this passage:
 "I dug my cellar in the side of a hill sloping
 to the south, where a woodchuck had formerly
 dug his burrow....I took particular pleasure in
 this breaking of ground."

Arthur Dimmesdale, deeply troubled in spirit,
 seeks guidance from a one-time Unitarian minis-
 ter who has lectured on the Oversoul and on the
 human condition.

Coeds chart their strategy for equal rights for
 women. To their sessions they invite Anne Brad-
 street, Margaret Fuller, and Mrs. E. D. E. N.
 Southworth.

The publisher of Sexy Horror Stories hears of
 a new writer by the name of Poe, who has been
 turning out some fiction which, he understands,
 puts beautiful women in grave situations.
 Should he solicit material from this man Poe?
 Does he know how to write? The firm has pub-
 lished something by Brockden Brown in the past,
 and so the decision is reached to ask Brown to
 pass on Poe's qualifications as a writer of
 tales.

The publisher of a gift book decides that his
 writers have been too preponderantly women and
 clergymen. He would like to find some men
 writers capable of creating credible women
 characters.

"How about Cooper and Hawthorne?" asks
 his secretary as she adjusts her miniskirt.

Jonathan and Sarah Edwards are experiencing
 rhapsodic communion with nature when they
 stumble over Ralph Waldo Emerson.

"Yes," says Emerson, "in the woods we
 return to reason and faith."

One virtue of such questions is that they are open-
 ended: there is no "right" answer in advance, and the stu-
 dent can put his creative imagination to work on his

factual knowledge. Not infrequently students will write
 dialogue for the ensuing scene or will reveal the thoughts
 of the characters. The results can be unexpected, as once
 when I set up a tavern scene which had Cotton Mather and
 William Byrd, among others, being served by a saucy wench.
 One modest and virtuous coed reached back into her memory
 of Byrd's way with women--and her recollection of eight-
 eenth-century terms as well--when she had Byrd resolving,
 "I'll roger her good and proper."

The choice of characters and the conditions of the
 encounter may be adjusted to the level and expectations of
 the course, but almost any given situation could serve
 differing ages or degrees of literary sophistication. The
 Edwards-Emerson meeting, for example, might be limited to
 something in the anthology, possibly "Personal Narrative"
 and Nature, but it could draw upon Perry Miller in tracing
 a line of descent or, to mention the current interest in
 typology, could get at Professor Lowance's thesis that
 Edwards altered Puritan types to prepare for a symbolism
 of nature (see the essay, originally in EAL, included in
Typology and Early American Literature, edited by Sacvan
 Bercovitch, 1972).

Of course if humor--or what passes for it--is out of
 place in examinations, there is no point in fussing around
 with these ridiculous anachronistic encounters.

The End Of The Quarter

The midnight mocking bird
 Who sings till three a.m.
 Greets my restless nights,
 Trills joy while I grow thin.

Tomorrow night he'll sing
 As I fail again
 To meet the scheduled time
 When my ideas should
 Be neatly typed, turned in.

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