Teaching Style as Content: Some Sentence-level Revision Strategies for First-year Composition

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In *The Writer's Way*, a first-year instruction book, Jack Rawlins unfavorably compares style to clothing, or "the decorative covering we put over the content" (163). For at least two decades, some teachers have shared the sentiment, disparaging style as an editorial afterthought, ignoring it, or separating it from substance. This paper, though, will examine the theoretical and practical implications of several sentence-level concerns—comma splices, repetition, and variety—not as stylistic "covering" but as a choice crucial to the creation of content. Style, then, should not be treated as "independent of content," as Rawlins continues (163), but the inverse: style creates content.

For students who regularly produce sentence-level errors, the separation of style from content, ideally liberating, can be counter-productive. One way to improve their content may be to focus explicitly on their sentences.

Style, despite criticism, can and should empower rather than humiliate. Teaching style does not have to mean correction, archaic prescription, or red-pen tyranny, however; and once students understand this shift they may benefit more from sentence-level attention than they do from global analysis, especially early in the semester. Examining sentence-level concerns before essay-level ones can usefully destabilize oppositions between content and style, between rhetoric and ideas. Treating style as distinct from substance misleads students into believing that substance must come first and that style, like clothing, can be donned or changed later, suggesting that style is superficial but what lies underneath is immutable. This implication is misleading, and dangerous.

The idea of style as content is not new, and it, in fact, precedes its separation. The medieval university taught the trivium as "grammar, logic, and rhetoric," the three subsets of learning that constitute language. Grammar, logic, and rhetoric, discussed separately, must ultimately be understood as one, unlike clothing and the body. Writing decades before Rawlins but anticipating his metaphor, William Zinsser, in his famous book *On Writing Well*, instead suggests that the writer "will be impatient to find a 'style'…You will reach for gaudy similes and tinseled adjectives, as if 'style' were something you could buy in a style store and drape onto your words in bright decorator colors…Resist this shopping expenditure: there is no style store" (20). Style is not clothing—it is inseparable from the body of prose itself. Zinsser suggests that treating style as clothing results in artifice and ostentation, rhetoric not as effective expression but as mere semantics.

Writing recently in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Stanley Fish suggests that teaching effective rhetoric and correct grammar, far more than specific content, should be the goal of first-year writing instructors. Students who don't submit themselves "to the conventional meanings of words and to the grammatical forms that specify the relationships between the objects words refer to" cannot write intelligibly (n. pag.). For Fish, "the ability even to have certain kinds of thoughts depends on the prior ability to produce (and comprehend) certain kinds of sentences" (n. pag), so that style and syntax generate, not reflect, patterns and processes. Attention to style in the classroom will allow students to learn and explore those patterns, resulting in stronger writing and thinking.

Linguist Steven Pinker would disagree, however, saying that the notion that language, as Fish suggests above, "pervade[s] thought" is "wrong" because "language is not a cultural artifact" (17-18). Pinker goes to great lengths in *The Language Instinct* to distinguish between "pedagogical and stylistic 'grammars,' which are just guides to the etiquette of written prose" (22) and Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar, "the basic design underlying the grammars of all human languages; also refers to the circuitry in children's brains that allows them to learn the grammar of their parents' language" (483). But while linguistics and composition

studies, then, seem to define "grammar" in irreconcilable ways, the former as descriptive and the latter as prescriptive, perhaps these seemingly contradictory notions of grammar can merge.

One reason that Pinker denigrates the rules of prescriptive grammar as "hobgoblins of the schoolmarm" (88) is because of the ways in which "linguists repeatedly run up against the myth that working-class people and the less educated members of the middle class speak a simpler or courser language" (28). A better definition for Pinker, drawing upon the work of linguist William Labov, for "'ungrammatical sentences' ... include[s] randomly broken off sentence fragments, tongue-ties hemming and hawing, slips of the tongue, and other forms of word salad" (31). Here, pedagogical and linguistic notions of grammar converge: grammar, when taught in conjunction with logic and rhetoric, is a matter of neither etiquette nor elitism but a way to elude formations that are—linguistically and peda-gogically—unsound, unclear, or ambiguous. Pinker later makes the point more explicit: while he provocatively argues that "many prescriptive rules of grammar are just plain dumb" (400), he grants that "the aspect of language use that is most worth changing is the clarity and style of written prose" (401), and that foundations of good writing lie not in rules but in revision.

Few people, then, actually want to eliminate style completely from the composition curriculum, but few people know how to incorporate it into writing or revision practice, treating instead like a separate, somewhat untrustworthy, entity. Indeed, composition handbooks still address aspects of style, despite that some theories of linguistics, pedagogy, process writing, and theme- and content-based composition classes implicitly or explicitly suggest that learning style can be stifling. While it would be dangerous to see Fish and Zinsser as merely old-fashioned or conservative, how, then, can instructors of first-year writing merge rhetoric and content in classroom practice? How does one teach style? How can it avoid the hegemony that, for linguists, promulgates class bias and that, for expressivists, curbs creativity?

Perhaps we as writing teachers can rescue grammar from its "correct/incorrect" binary by looking at the trivium to see how grammar, logic, and rhetoric connect and intersect. But again, how? And does it have to be at odds with linguistic conceptions of descriptive grammar, composition theory, process pedagogy, and self-expression? I would argue that it does not. Teaching style (or, in related terms, mechanics, rhetoric, local concerns, or lower order concerns) should not disempower students but have the opposite effect: it should allow them to convey what's on their minds, write more persuasively, and feel better. I will now discuss some specific ways in which the first-year writing class can accomplish this merge in practice.

In the trivium, grammar comes first, and this word by itself makes students nervous, seemingly synonymous with being wrong, the one way in which English teachers can be scientifically objective. It all seems mysterious. Yet mechanical error—Pinker's "hobgoblins"—may be an excellent preliminary way to discuss meaning, and not just ways to discuss rules. Students need to write correctly, for grammar, even in linguistic terms, involves constructions that are "well-formed according to consistent rules in the dialect of the speakers" (Pinker 31); but the connection between their language with logic and rhetoric provides a stronger justification for correctness than rules, "because it's right," convention, etiquette, audience expectation, because certain errors serve as social class markers, because the book or the teacher says so, or, my least favorite, because employers disdain errors on job applications. Many syntactical rules provide the sense, clarity, and complexity necessary to sustain thoughtful written argument, so to dispense with them on the grounds of self-expression is counter-intuitive. Syntax makes self-expression possible. And explicit rules seem necessary, since the "dialect of the speakers" may differ between student and instructor.

I like to begin my classes with discussion of comma splices and fused sentences. Here are sample sentences, from my College Reading and Writing summer 2002 students' first papers, about the relationship between their names and who they are (permission has been granted although all names throughout this paper have been changed):

I don't believe that my name determines who I am as a person, I would have the same personality with a different name.
My name is Joe this name fits my personality well.
I was named after a great aunt of mine her name was Sara.
I do not think you can always determine anything about a person by their name that may be pretty difficult to do.
My name says a lot about who I am, it also says a lot about my heritage

The initial problem, pedagogically and linguistically, is the grammar (although Microsoft Word's grammar-check flagged only the first example). The *Bedford Handbook* defines run-on sentences as "independent clauses that have not been joined correctly.... When two independent clauses appear in one sentence, they must be joined...with a comma and a coordination conjunction [or] with a semicolon (or occasionally with a colon or dash)" (Hacker 251). Yet this definition, despite its clear articulation, may not resonate with students, even after repeated explanation. Although he dismisses "stylistic grammar" (different from "generative grammar" and "mental grammar") as "the guidelines for how one 'ought' to speak" (477), Pinker still recognizes a problem: "we all sense that some strings of words that can be given common-sense interpretations do not conform to the grammatical code of English" (87).

Once students become a part of Pinker's "we," they begin to see that there is a missing signal—that the comma alone, without the coordinating conjunction, or the signal-less fused sentence, does not demonstrate an intended connection, that the reader lacks "confidence that the speaker [here, the writer] has used the same code in producing the sentence as we used in interpreting it (Pinker 88). And with this realization students can now discuss two aspects of style that stem from grammar. Some sentences only superficially benefit from a rote insertion of a conjunction—that is, it makes the sentence syntactically correct but does not eliminate its inherent ambiguity. "My name says a lot about who I am, **[and]** it also says a lot about my heritage" means the opposite of "My name says a lot about who I am, **[but]** it also says a lot about my heritage," since either is grammatically correct, but only one is true to the student who wrote it. The syntax creates the content, and students can use their choice of coordinating conjunction to distinguish between technical and factual correctness.

More importantly, however, these errors are symptoms of larger stylistic maladies. These, and many sentences composed early in the semester, contain redundancies instead of examples. That same sentence, for instance, repeats the phrase "says a lot about," and the paper, even in context, fails to show *how* the name says a lot, or even what "says a lot" precisely means, repeating the vague phrase instead. Many comma splices and fused sentences are riddled with repetition, and this overlap between mechanics and rhetoric is revealing, and useful: the way into these sentences is technical—here, the relationships between two disconnected clauses. The way out, though, is rhetorical and stylistic: repairing the splices may satisfy the rule, but it's not the end of revising. Syntax, though, has a fine set of rules that students can look up and rely on, an aura of objectivity. But as Strunk and White observe in their canonical *Elements of Style*, once we leave "what is correct, or acceptable" in English, "we leave solid ground" (66). Revision, in addition to correction, becomes more interesting: students can begin to see writing as a set of discrete but personal choices.

Even more than run-ons, then, repetition plagues students' prose. As any handbook will indicate, repetition bores readers, belabors points, and is uneconomical. (Of course, some students criticize their college texts similarly.) Here, however, style intersects with substance. Instructor feedback often centers upon a lack of a (strong) thesis or (adequate) support, but repetition is the stylistic manifestation of these higher-order concerns: students repeat when they don't know that they need to say more, don't have enough to say, or don't know how to say it. It prevents writers from being specific but allows them to fill pages. Each of the above sentences was isolated initially because of the mechanical error, and all seem reasonably repairable. But after fixing the error, we may revise for concision, and in doing so the writer is more clearly poised to explain "how" and "why."

For some students, redundancy creates the illusion of explanation. Once errors are corrected and repetition revised, the writer is free to provide the necessary detail and nuance. "I was named after a great aunt of mine her name was Sara," through group discussion, became "I was named after Sara, a great aunt of mine," which sounds and feels more like a topic or introductory sentence. "Sounds" and "feels" are the sort of subjective terminology that students fear, but this rhetorical approach to the sentences can help students to analyze the difference between these sentences. Similarly, "I do not think you can always determine anything about a person by their name that may be pretty difficult to do" is so error-ridden that it becomes hard to consider. But addressing the run-on and redundancy together produced the following revision: "I do not think you can always determine anything about a person by their name" (leaving aside the less significant problem of "person"/"their" for now). Now, the student can show how and why we can't determine anything about people by their names, and discuss difficulty separately. "My name is Joe this name fits my personality well" can correct the run-on and eliminate the repetition as "My name is Joe, which fits my personality well," or "My name is Joe, and it fits my personality well," allowing the class to discuss subordination, coordination, and emphasis. What began as a potential lecture about correctness has become a conversation of possibilities and choices, and the initially incorrect and redundant sentences, once revised, set up the students to follow with examples.

Here is another student passage from the same assignment: "Every single thing has a name, otherwise we would not be able to distinguish one thing from the next. Names are not that important. They do not define who we are." The sentences are grammatical, yet they seem illogical, because of crucial missing transitions. Again through discussion, the class revised the passage: "Every single thing has a name, otherwise we would not be able to distinguish one thing from the next. **[However,]** names are not that important. They do not define who we are." Or more: "Every single thing has a name, **[or]** we would not be able to distinguish one thing from the next. **[However,]** names are not

that important **[, because]** they do not define who we are." Each version is clearer, more correct, and—with the inclusion of metadiscourse—more clearly poised to explain and support its point. When students practice this approach to sentences, and continue to revise in this way oer the course of a semester, the cumulative effect is striking. Such an approach is not so different from what many teachers already advocate, but inverted: begin with the syntax, rhetoric, and style, and students will be forced to provide content. This reversal allows students to practice using concrete exercises and steps while using examples from their own prose that they will have the chance to formally revise on their own later.

After analyzing isolated sentences or short passages, the class moves on to paragraphs or short whole compositions. One exercise, usually introduced in the first or second week of classes, asks students to circle repeated words. The results often surprise them. The following student paragraph, for example, has no major errors but is nonetheless ineffective:

My last name says a lot about who I am. Without my last name, I would not be the person that I am today. My first name does not say much about me. Smith tells all about the person that I am. For example, it tells my personality. I have a good sense of humor and I learned that from my family. I am also a very nice and caring person. Smith shows that I am a hard worker because all of the Smith's have been known for their hard work and dedication. I have learned that if you work hard for something it will pay off in the end. One thing I really enjoy is helping others and it has become a big part of my life. It has taught me many wonderful things and I have become a great person because of my name. Smith says everything about me.

A writing teacher can quickly see that this paragraph says little: it doesn't make a strong point (that a person's last name says a lot about him or her doesn't sound striking or argumentative) and provides no concrete descriptions or thorough examples. The paragraph, despite grammatical and syntactical clarity, is stalled, weak, and overly

simplified. Yet a student may see it as acceptable, even convincing, because it has the form and mannerism (in post-structuralist terms, the *langue*) of explanation: a topic sentence ("My last name says a lot about the person that I am"), transitions ("for example," "one thing I really enjoy doing"), justification ("if you work hard for something it will pay off in the end," which many students will not see as a cliché), and a concluding sentence ("Smith says everything about me"). Students and teachers read this paragraph differently, so the "show don't tell" mantra will not work—this student thinks that she *is* showing.

Approaching the paragraph in terms of style, though, gives students more concrete revision tactics. If they circle (here, in **boldface**) every repeated word, then the adherence to format alone seems obviously insufficient:

> **My last name says** a lot **about** who **I am**. Without **my last name**, **I** would not be the **person that I am** today. My first **name** does not **say** much **about me**. Smith **tells** all **about the person that I am**. For example, it **tells** my **person**ality. **I have** a good

sense of humor and **I learned** that from my family. **I a m** also a very nice and caring **person**. Smith shows that **I am** a **hard worker** because all of the Smith's have been known for their **hard work** and dedication. **I have learned** that if you **work hard** for some**thing** it will pay off in the end. One **thing I** really enjoy is helping others and **it has** become a big part of my life. **It has** taught me many wonderful **things** and **I have** become a great **person** because of my **name**. Smith **says** every**thing about me**.

Students can now see how little the paragraph says, without being instructed that it is vague or imprecise, comments that, to students, themselves seem vague and imprecise. They can then analyze the nature of the repetition, and this discussion can encompass grammar, logic, and rhetoric—the whole trivium. Grammatically, we can discuss parts of speech, since the primary nouns are "I," "person," and "thing," none of which here are specified or explored beyond "family"; the primary verbs are near synonyms: "say," "tell," and

"teach"; and none of these verbs have fully articulated objects beyond "me." We can discuss parallelism, since the constructions, not just the words, repeat, often in similar places. The paragraph, then, seems logically weak: what sense of humor"? How "caring"? How is she "a hard worker"? Why should "Smith" suggest these attributes? Rhetorically, the examples are not clear or descriptive, and so the writer repeats. By beginning with repetition, we can discuss, easily and naturally, the more substantial problems of vagueness and generality. In this way, we may discuss "grammar" not as a series of binary rules, class snobbery, or arbitrary etiquette, and instead apply a descriptive rather than pedagogical sense of definition of the word. While the paragraph adheres to the rules of prescriptive grammar, its very correctness stymies the writer's sense of personality and specificity, ironically producing the problems like those associated Pinker's "ungrammatical" sentences: fragments (here, referring not to a missing part of speech as much as a missing piece of support), hemming and hawing, and slips.

One could question the logic of revising such a paragraph at all. Why focus on style and language if this student seems not to have a point worth making? Why not just tell the student to provide detail or a stronger argument, and then work on refining or cleaning up the repetition later? My response is that style-oriented revision, when used as a constructive activity, is consistent with process-model pedagogy: when students try to eliminate the repetition, then they will discover that replacing words with synonyms or pronouns doesn't solve the problem of vagueness. They must provide detail, and carefully combine sentences, and assign specific subjects, and choose strong verbs. And when they do, they will find that they have much more to say then perhaps they realized, and more then they would be able to say otherwise.

This approach works well when beginning with comma splices and repetition, but discussion of repetition can encompass aspects of writing that take a long time to cover. Students can often see repetition of nouns, but they seldom spot repeated verbs, especially when

they are forms of "to be," and they don't notice syntactical repetition (subject-verb-object or subject-linking verb) until later. But the same exercise can be modified and advanced: after students circle repeated nouns, they can move on to verbs, then clauses or phrases, and once they see shortcomings related to vagueness and repetition, then they can speculate upon how to improve their sentences. And that is when students can begin to enjoy writing, because the specific changes will differ with each student's examples, choices, and opinions. What begins as single sentence-level syntax becomes style, and by improving their style they ultimately develop content. If style really were like clothing, then changing into a tighter outfit would make us thinner; a more expensive suit would make us richer. But tight clothes may not flatter, and expensive clothes only lighten wallets. Style, more like personality than clothing, may be developed, even improved—which is where teachers come in—but it ultimately depends on who we are.

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