AN ANATOMY OF AWKWARDNESS

LIBBY RANKIN

Consider the common AWK—that familiar handbook abbreviation for "awkward construction" that anyone raised on *Harbrace* will recognize. As students, we frequently found AWKs red-inked in the margins of our papers; as teachers, we probably scattered a few ourselves. But then we had our consciousnesses raised by Mina Shaughnessy, Nancy Sommers, and others, and we learned to think twice about dropping those AWKs in the margin.

And with good reason. For AWK, like so many of those handy handbook labels, turns out to be not so handy after all. In the first place, it's about as fuzzy as an error label can be. Those who use it (or used to use it) employ it for virtually every kind of diction and syntax problem imaginable: for misused words, inappropriate diction, unidiomatic expressions, faulty predication, dangling modifiers, unnecessary passives. You name it—somebody calls it "awkward." Furthermore, even if it named something more precise (as labels like "dangling modifier" do), its usefulness to the writer would be minimal at best. For unlike some familiar handbook rules, the injunction to "avoid awkwardness" offers no specific advice for how to do so. As a grammatical label, then, it's virtually useless—some would say worse than useless, because it reinforces a student's already negative evaluation of his or her own style.

Why, then, give any thought to awkwardness? What could be gained by investigating a concept whose very existence is so problematic? I would argue that something *is* to be gained. For although, like many teachers, I've dropped the term from my paper-marking vocabulary, I know that AWK, as a rhetorical phenomenon, still exists. And because it does, it is well worth studying for what it reveals about the complex interaction between language and rhetorical context.

It may be well to start with a definition—or at least with an attempt at a definition. When I first began this study, I naively

assumed that AWKs were definable entities: they might be hard to describe precisely but they wouldn't be hard to recognize. I was wrong. For I quickly found out that what sounds awkward to one reader may sound perfectly fine to another—or if not perfectly fine, then at least acceptable. Take the following passage, for instance:

> Another factor in Huck's decision to help Jim and act on his personal feelings is the conduct of the people he encounters on the river.

In an informal survey of my colleagues in an NEH Seminar,[1] two found this sentence unobjectionable. Another called it "OK," but said "I'd make it more agentive." Five readers regarded the sentence as awkward, but changed it in quite different ways. Two others claimed it wasn't "awkward" but objected on other grounds: one called the sentence "redundant" and deleted a word; the other felt there was a problem with pronoun reference.

The fact is that AWK is *not* a fact but a judgment, made by a particular reader in a particular set of circumstances. In this respect, it is not unlike that equally ubiquitous, equally fuzzy term "flow." No one would deny that such terms are vague, but they're also useful. "Flow," for instance, gives a name to the reader's "felt sense" of coherence, cohesion, and fluency. ("I like it. It flows".) And "awkward" works the same way, but in a negative sense. Understood not as a disease *of* language but rather as a convenient term for the reader's dis-ease *with* language, awkwardness can serve as a symptom that points toward a sensitive diagnosis of writing problems.

Another parallel might be drawn with the somewhat less "rarified" concept of error. In his 1981 essay, "The Phenomenology of Error," Joseph Williams argues (and at the same time ingeniously demonstrates) that error isn't a fact but a cognitive construct. Citing several instances in which readers disagreed on whether a particular item of usage was in error, Williams writes:

> If we think about these responses for a moment we can identify one source of the problem. We were all locating error in very different places. For all of us, obviously enough, error is in the essay, on the page, because that is where it physically exists. But of course, to be in the essay, it first has to be in the student. But before that, it has to be listed in a book

somewhere. And before that in the mind of the writer of the handbook. And finally, a form of the error has to be in the teacher who resonated—or not—to the error on the page on the basis of the error listed in the handbook. (155)

What Williams is concerned with here is grammar and usage: i.e., what constitutes "proper" and "improper" use of the English language and who decides such things. But what he says has implications for awkwardness as well. For awkwardness, like "good usage," is an interactive concept. It exists not on the page, nor in the writer, nor in the reader, but in some undefinable, constantly shifting nexus of the three. Thus, when I use the term AWK throughout this essay, I am using it not as a specific error label but as a generic, catch-all term for a number of "felt difficulties" on the part of the reader—any stylistic difficulties, actually, that can't be resolved by citing a convenient rule, a handy generalization that the writer can apply in future cases. Whether labeled "AWK," "wrong word," "diction," "syntax," or "idiom," whether underlined and queried or edited on the page, the passages I am concerned with here "don't sound right" to the reader. And my point is that whether or not they "sound right" may depend on a number of factors involved in the rhetorical situation.

I say *may* depend because, in fact, there are many constructions that would strike nearly any experienced reader, in any situation, as awkward. Where we differ most is in identifying the source of the problem. As I mentioned earlier, my NEH colleagues often gave wholly different names to the "felt difficulty" they sensed in a passage. And even when they could agree on the diagnosis, they often differed considerably on what treatment to prescribe. Consider the following sentence:

Slave codes justified slavery legally, but people still questioned validity so other answers appear to legitimize slavery.

Clearly, this sentence is more than simply awkward. There appears to be a pronoun missing before "validity," and the tense moves from past to present for no apparent reason. But even if those problems were straightened out, the sentence would still read awkwardly. Now look at some revisions of the sentence suggested by the teachers I surveyed:

Codes legally justified slavery, but people still questioned its validity, so other answers appeared to legitimate slavery.

> Slave codes justified slavery legally, but people still questioned their validity so other means were used to legitimize slavery.
>
> The legal code justified slavery, but since the people who practiced slavery questioned the validity of the laws, they must have looked to other sources to legitimize slavery.

These revisions attest to the theory nature of the awkwardness problem: even when it can be identified, awkwardness isn't easy to correct. Granted, the a-contextual nature of this informal survey accentuated the difficulties some readers had in dealing with these sentences, but such difficulties are quite familiar to the teacher of writing. Which of us has not begun to edit a freshman's errant sentence, only to realize halfway through that we can't make it work? Who has not had a student object that our suggested revision of a particular passage has distorted her intended meaning? All of us have been guilty of such sins—the kind of paper-marking behavior that Brannon and Knoblauch have described as "appropriating the students' texts" ("On Students' Rights" 157-166.)

How, then, DO we deal with these bothersome AWKs? If, as I have been arguing here, AWK is to some degree a matter of perception, then our first responsibility as teachers is to make ourselves aware of all those factors in the rhetorical situation that influence our reading of our students' prose. But beyond that, I believe we deal with AWKs best when we understand the conditions of their occurence. In this respect, we would do well to recognize that a writer's production of sentences we perceive as awkward may well be influenced by the same rhetorical factors that shape our perceptions.

One of these factors, undoubtedly, is experience with language—and not only that, but attitudes toward language as well. Consider, for example, the battle over "sexist" pronouns. Here's a situation where the rules are in flux. With conventions changing before our eyes, linguistic conservatives can no longer point to a rule that will settle the problem created in a passage like this:

> America is a nation of opportunity, and what the individual wants to do with his opportunity is up to him. For in America one has the freedom to change the quality of his own life.

Here is the way my student actually wrote this passage:

> America is a nation of opportunity and what the individual wants to do with his opportunity is up to ~~them~~ himself. For

> in America one has the freedom to change the quality of their own life.

Most of us, probably, find this construction "awkward"—and the crossout suggests that the student herself had to struggle with it. But what about this alternative:

> America is a nation of opportunity, and what the individual wants to do with that opportunity is up to him or her. For in America one has the freedom to change the quality of one's own life.

Whether this passage is regarded as AWK may depend on who's reading it and how seriously he or she regards the problem of gender bias in language. Some readers will find the "him or her" awkward and the repeated use of the impersonal pronoun "one" in the last sentence stiff. Others, pleased to encounter no generic "he's" in the passage, will not regard it as awkward in any way. In this case, linguistic *attitude* accounts for the difference in perception, but linguistic experience is clearly a factor as well. Many readers, both men and women, who found the non-sexist pronoun options terribly awkward when first introduced now read and use them easily, without a second thought. The more our reading exposes us to these structures, the more natural and "right" they begin to appear.

Linguistic experience also influences the writer's production of AWKs. Traditionally, in fact, it was usually assumed that what "awkward" writers needed was "a good course in grammar" that would give them the experience and understanding of language that they obviously lacked. And although our notions of what such a course would entail have changed radically over the years, one assumption that underlies our various approaches has not. That is, we still tend to believe that the sources and causes of awkwardness lie in the students' lack of linguistic facility, their weak command of sentence structure and mechanics. And in some cases, of course, this is true. The student who writes

> Many different scents fill the air from the food stands that face you wherever you look, conquering any person's hunger ranging from hotdogs to cotton candy.

may very well be doing so because he doesn't know how to manage complex subordinate structures. The student who writes

> My favorite things to do are laying in the sun trying to get a tan, swimming in a semi-warm lake with lots of other people crowded on the beach, also laying around, talking, laughing and having a fun time.

may need practice handling elements in a series. Whatever the reason for this inability, the fact is that some students simply have difficulty putting together certain kinds of sentence constructions. For these students, a "good course in grammar" may be just what the doctor ordered—provided that the "grammar" is what Patrick Hartwell calls a "stylistic grammar," i.e., a system in which grammatical terms are used "in the interest of teaching prose style" (110). Whether based on conscious understanding of language structures (like the approaches of Joseph Williams and Richard Lanham), or grounded in principles of "behavior modification" (like imitation exercises and sentence-combining techniques), these "stylistic grammars" do offer writers a way to deal with the awkward constructions they regularly find themselves producing.

We must beware, however, of assuming that *all* instances of awkwardness should be treated in such a manner. For in some cases grammar and syntax as such are not the problem—or rather, they are only surface manifestations of the problem. In these cases, giving students practice in sentence combining or training them in Lanham's Paramedic Method doesn't make much sense. It's like putting a person with a common cold in the hospital for a week: most likely it won't hurt the patient, and it might even be beneficial if she needs the rest; but it's not necessary, and the benefits aren't worth the costs. In fact, what the student might need is an altogether different approach—instead of focusing more intensely on style, she may need to step back and consider other aspects of the rhetorical situation.

One such aspect of the rhetorical situation is the reader/writer relationship. As Linda Flower has shown in her analysis of Writer-Based Prose, it is often the writer's failure to imagine an audience that accounts for gaps and ambiguities in style (Flower 29-34). But hyper-awareness of audience can be just as style-destructive—especially when the writer has a mistaken notion of her reader's expectations. For instance, we all know how much more difficult it is to write for an audience we perceive as superior, hostile, or in some way hypercritical. In attempting to tailor our style to meet that audience's expectations (or perhaps what we take to be their

expectations), we often abandon our "natural" style in favor of something we think might be more impressive. This is certainly true in the case of young professionals learning to adopt the jargon of their field. Joseph Williams reports that the prime abusers of legal jargon are young attorneys who overuse legal jargon when they are not entirely certain about their status, and the same thing is no doubt true of young academics. It is also true, as we know, of many freshman writers. Convinced that we all want "big words and long, flowery sentences" like the kind they think they see in their texts and anthologies, they naively attempt to produce such a style to please us. Thus, what we hear as awkward and prescribe complex treatments to correct may not in fact be our students' style at all; it may be an unconscious parody of our own style that they are willing, even eager, to drop if we're willing to let them.

The problem is, we are not always willing to let them. Or rather, we are sometimes so unsure of what we want that we give our students mixed signals that only confuse them. This is certainly true on the level of the profession, where there seems to be little consensus about what constitutes "good style." But it's also true within individual teachers, as Hake and Williams discovered when they compared what teachers *said* they wanted with what kind of style they tended to reward.

And it's not just a matter of differing personal taste. It's apparent, for instance, that the relationship between reader and writer can have a powerful effect on the reader's inclination to perceive awkwardness in the first place. In large part, as Brannon and Knoblauch have noted, this is a matter of authority. When the writer lays claim to authority, "this claim can be so powerful that we will tolerate writing from that authority which appears to be unusually difficult, even obscure or downright confusing" (Brannon and Knoblauch 157). Consider, for example, the following sentence:

> Because this course is usually intended to serve as a follow-up to an earlier course on the principles of design does not mean, however, that this course cannot be taken without first taking the first.

Is the sentence awkward? Well, that depends. If the writer is one of my freshmen, I'm likely to say that it is. But what if the writer

is a well-known rhetorician? In fact, the sentence is adapted from this one, which appears in the opening pages of a text on writing:

> Because this book is normally intended to serve as a sequel to an earlier book on the aims of discourse does not mean, however, that this book cannot be used without first going through the first.

I realize many will argue that the sentence either is or is not awkward, regardless of who may have written it. But can we deny that we're far more disposed to *see* awkwardness in a student essay than in a text by a respected figure in our field? Along those same lines, might we hear AWKs in our "D student's" paper that we're preconditioned to ignore in our "A student's" work?

And what about outside the classroom? Does the senior partner see AWK in her young clerk's memo that she'd never notice at all in a Supreme Court opinion? Or does her genuine liking for the clerk blind her to infelicities of style that she is quick to notice in a judge's adverse decision? Are editors quicker to take liberties with the style of an unknown contributor than with the hallowed prose of a big-name scholar or journalist? If so, of course, it may only mean they're reluctant to offend the "name," but I suspect there is more involved here than politics. As any good Aristotelian knows, the *ethos* of a writer can have a considerable effect on our willingness to be swayed by his argument—and it can have an equally strong effect on our response to his style.

If the perception of AWK is influenced, in part, by the reader/writer relationship, it is also influenced by other aspects of the immediate situation. Time constraints, for example, are one important variable here. When we're in a hurry, expecting a sentence to give up its meaning immediately, we may regard as awkward any structure that makes us slow down. Or conversely, a sentence that strikes us as fine on first reading will sometimes begin to sound awkward the longer we contemplate it. The appearance of the words on the page is also a factor. A typed sentence, for instance, may read more smoothly than a handwritten one; and I'd be willing to bet that cross-outs, smudges, and hasty scrawls encourage us to expect—and thus to hear—equally "messy" syntax.

Another circumstantial variable has to do with the immediate *linguistic* context—the text that precedes and follows what we are reading. To illustrate, let me use an analogy. Most of us have encountered the familiar optical illusion in which we are asked

to judge which of two lines is longer—the one with inward pointing arrows at the end or the one with outward pointing arrows. In actuality, of course, the lines are of equal length; it's the "context" created by the arrows that persuades us to see the second one as longer. A similar effect may occur when the reader encounters the identical sentence in two separate contexts—though again it could work in totally opposite ways. A given sentence read in the context of an awkward paragraph may sound awkward itself by virtue of the company it keeps. Or it may sound particularly fluent in contrast to its surroundings.

And just as these situational factors affect our perception of awkwardness, they affect a writer's production of it as well. Some examples of this are so obvious as not to need further discussion, such as pressure imposed by time and space limitations or anxiety about one's performance. These are factors most teachers are aware of and willing to make allowances for. Other aspects of the situation, however, are not so apparent at first glance.

One of these hidden factors might be the writing assignment itself. Take a look at the following passages:

> I went over to pick up the bird, but he was still alive so I had to apply the old rip-off-the-head technique to kill him. This is a process that can be easily achieved if administered properly.
>
> When you are baited up and ready to go, the fine art of casting comes into view. It is really not a process but it is like the pros say, "It is all in the wrist."

In both of these passages, the "felt difficulty" identified most often by the readers I surveyed involved the word "process." In the first instance, the readers' impulse was to change that word to "method" or "technique," or to avoid it completely by rewriting the sentence to read, "This is easy if done correctly" or "This is easily carried out if done properly." In the second example, readers tended simply to delete the "process" clause, beginning the second sentence, "As the pros say, . . ."

Of course these are not the only problems in the passages, but I think it's more than coincidence that the major difficulty in both revolved around the word "process." For in fact, both passages were taken from papers in which the students were asked to

"describe a process that you are familiar with in such a way that the reader can follow it easily and understand its rationale." Intent on making their essays conform to the assignment, both writers employed a perfectly logical strategy: To make sure they were doing what the assignment called for, they used the language of the topic itself to help focus their response. The problem is that these writers took on the language of the assignment without really seeming to own it. In this case the demands of the rhetorical context (the classroom) were complicated by the demands of the particular linguistic context (the wording of the assignment). To handle all these factors at once requires a seasoned and confident writer.

Another important factor which influences both the perception and production of awkwardness is one's knowledge of the subject matter. Most of us are probably aware by now of reading research which demonstrates how a text's "readability" is affected by the reader's familiarity with its content. E.D. Hirsch reports that his own research in this area persuaded him to abandon the search for "formal principles" and recognize that "good writing makes very little difference when the subject is unfamiliar" (163). We may be less aware, however, of the implications of such research for the way we respond to style—and especially to awkwardness. This can work in two ways. First, the reader may perceive more AWK in material he doesn't understand than in material he knows quite well. This is illustrated by our response to jargon: We are quick to condemn it in the writing of lawyers, scientists, and economists, less able to see it in our own texts and journals.

This point was brought home to me recently in my graduate composition theory class, when I asked my students to read a well-known article on the cognitive processes involved in writing. I hadn't read the article myself for three or four years, but as I recalled, its style was particularly opaque, and I rather dreaded the thought of picking my way through its thorny syntax again. But surprisingly, I found the authors' style much more readable this time through. (In fact, when I went back to it recently, to look for a sentence or two that would illustrate my notion of "marginal awkwardness," I could find none that qualified!) Syntactically, the piece's prose style was as smooth and direct as one could wish; it had only been the unfamiliar vocabulary—the jargon of cognitive psychology—that had left in my mind the impression of awkwardness. So when my students complained, as I had, that the article was "wordy" and "unnecessarily complex," I found

myself defending the authors' style. But I knew that the matter was really beyond discussion, for the style of the piece—the style as well as the meaning—could not be discussed or evaluated outside the context of the readers' knowledge of the field.

It's an interesting problem, this notion of how our perceptions of form in a piece of writing are influenced by our knowledge of its content. But one can't simply say that the more a reader knows of a subject, the less notice she takes of prose style. For in fact, in many instances, the very opposite seems to be true: We may be so familiar with the subject matter that we can tune out the semantic content and focus on finer points of diction and syntax. Consider, for example, the two sentences below:

> In his argumentative essay, Rothschild refutes the idea of capital punishment by his sarcastic tone.
>
> In the first part of the sixth inning, the Braves scored three points when the substitute batter made a home run.

In the informal survey I mentioned before, three English teachers with no interest in baseball, who found the first sentence hopelessly awkward, had no trouble at all accepting the second. Yet students who know more about baseball than argumentative discourse have told me that the second sentence sounds far more awkward to them.

Our knowledge of the subject matter influences our production of awkward constructions as well. We all know from experience how difficult it is to write about what we don't know. When we are forced to do so, in painful first drafts where we strain toward meaning in uncharted territory, our style will often reflect our insecurities.

The relationship between style and grasp of material accounts for certain phenomena we have all observed time and again in our classes: the writer who produces lovely narrative/descriptive essays at the beginning of the semester, but then runs into serious stylistic problems with expository or persuasive assignments; the student who performs well in Freshman English only to "embarrass us" by letting her writing fall apart in the literature course she takes next semester.

Situations like these can be terribly frustrating for the teacher of composition, but we are now beginning to understand them. Researchers and theorists in cognitive psychology and psycholin-

guistics show us how the limited capacity of short-term memory imposes restrictions on writers, who find that they cannot assimilate new information, structure that information, and translate it into written form all at once. I have already mentioned Linda Flower's study of Writer-Based Prose, which draws on such research. And other investigators have discovered similar connections. For instance, in a study of pre-medical students encountering new material in a biology class, Suzanne Jacobs found that formation of new concepts interfered significantly with the ability to express them, so significantly that the students' syntactic skills noticeably retrogressed in the face of this new knowledge.

In these cases, it isn't the new information *per se* that overloads the circuits, but the new ways of thinking. When our freshman comp student moves into a sophomore level literature course, she is being asked not only to write about new material and to use the implicit genre conventions of literary criticism, but to think, i.e., structure knowledge, in unfamiliar ways. It is this re-ordering, this shifting and demolishing of old structures and building of new ones, that overloads the circuits. And while that shifting and rearranging is going on, less attention can be devoted to those matters of diction and syntax that still require conscious control.

What all this suggests is that in some cases awkwardness is not so much a symptom as a sign—and a rather positive sign at that. For it indicates that the writer is grappling with complexity, is in fact using language to discover and explore that complexity in ways that should be encouraged, despite the syntactic and lexical difficulties this entails.

How, then, should writing teachers respond to awkwardness? What I've been saying here is that it all depends on the source of the problem. In some cases, work with "stylistic grammars" might be in order. In others we might save time and trouble by simply talking openly about the rhetorical situation, instilling in the writer a sense of a genuine audience. And in still others it might be enough that we reassure students that the difficulty they encounter in writing sentences and "making meaning" at the same time is natural and understandable—even desirable—for it indicates that real learning is taking place.

Whatever else we do, we must convince our students that tolerating awkwardness in the early stages of the writing process is just as necessary as dealing with it in the later stages. And perhaps most importantly, we must remind ourselves that the problem of

awkwardness is rhetorically motivated—and thus both more complex and more manageable than we have traditionally supposed.

Libby Rankin is Associate Professor of English and Director of Composition at the University of North Dakota. She teaches an array of writing courses and is involved in development of a writing across the curriculum program.

NOTE

[1]The examples I cite in this essay are intended not as empirical proof but simply as illustration and support for my argument, an argument that grew out of my work in Joseph Williams' 1985 NEH Summer Seminar on "Style and the Structure of Discourse" at the University of Chicago. I am grateful to NEH for supporting this phase of my research, and to Joe Williams and my NEH colleagues for participating in the informal survey from which many of my examples are drawn.

WORKS CITED

Brannon, Lil and C.H. Knoblauch. "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response." *College Composition and Communication* 33 (1982): 157-66.

Flower, Linda. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." *College English* 41 (1979): 19-37.

Hake, Rosemary and Joseph Williams. "Style and Its Consequences: Do As I Do, Not As I Say." *College English* 43 (1981): 433-51.

Hartwell, Patrick. "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar." *College English* 47 (1985): 105-127.

Haswell, Richard H. "Minimal Marking." *College English* 45 (1983): 600-604.

Hirsch, E.D. "Cultural Literacy." *The American Scholar* (1983): 159-69.

Jacobs, Suzanne E. *Composing and Coherence: The Writing of Eleven Pre-Medical Students*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982.

Knoblauch, C.H. and Lil Brannon, "Teacher Commentary on Student Writing: The State of the Art." *Freshman English News* 10 (1981): 1-4.

Lanham, Richard. *Revising Prose*. New York: Scribner's, 1979.

Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 33 (1982): 148-56.

Williams, Joseph. "The Phenomenology of Error." *College Composition and Communication* 32 (1981): 152-168.

Williams, Joseph. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1984.