TOOLS, NOT RULES: RHETORICAL GRAMMAR AS A MEANING-MAKING TOOL IN THE CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP

Joseph Salvatore

The roots of this paper are in linguistics. That sentence is a slight modification of William Vande Kopple's opening line from his book *Clear and Coherent Prose: A Functional Approach* (1989). However, instead of a single paper, as is the case here, what Vande Kopple says has its roots in linguistics is his *entire text*. That is to say, it is his entire text that has its roots in linguistics. Or to put it another way, it is in linguistics that his text has its roots. Or, *What has its roots in linguistics is his text*. Or, *Where the roots of his text are is in linguistics*.

My intention in this "playful" (Myhill et al. 2012; Crystal 1996; Lim 2015; Morrison 1983; Udelson 2021; Waite 2011) allusion to Vande Kopple's own set of sample sentences opening Chapter 2 of his book (discussed ahead) is to demonstrate the syntactic flexibility, grammatical choices, and rhetorical effects available to writers for finding focus, controlling emphasis, and making meaning in their sentences. I teach such grammatical moves explicitly in my creative writing classroom. Teaching grammar in this way—that is, *rhetorically*—alongside the many narrative techniques we cover in the workshop, helps my students become aware of the dynamic relationship between each. In other words, they understand how grammatical choices *create* narrative effects. Moreover, they learn that by deliberately manipulating those grammatical choices, however subtly, they are able to alter those narrative effects.

Such an approach keeps the pedagogical focus on making informed choices rather than on avoiding error. Students can decide for themselves which structures to choose for which context. Rather than prescribing isolated grammatical forms for particular narrative techniques ("avoid the passive," "use concrete verbs," "show, don't tell," "vary your sentence length"), rhetorical grammar is a descriptive approach that enlarges students' language awareness and equips them with agency and the power to make critical and creative choices for themselves. Moreover, rhetorical grammar is a coherent theoretical framework that teaches students not merely to identify and select syntactic forms, but to understand what those forms can contribute to the intended meaning of their writing. Students learn that their grammatical choices can be informed by their own critical and creative thinking, and further, that those choices can support what best serves their writing, rather than what serves solely grammatical correctness. Thus rhetorical grammar helps my creative writing students become aware of grammar and syntax as a set of tools, rather than as a set of rules; it emphasizes the individual sentence as much as the completed story. I have found that by developing such linguistic awareness my students become better writers, better readers, and better workshop respondents.

As demonstrated above, I agree with Shirley Geok-lin Lim (2015) that creative writing pedagogy should strive "to encourage a playful, innovative attitude to the language's forms and conventions"…including "forms of bilingual mixings, nonstandardized English usage, and experimental stylistics, features that mark texts as 'creative' in being innovative, new and challenging." Similarly, poet and compositionist Stacey Waite (2011) refers to queering grammar: "And it is something queer indeed to *play* with grammar…to imitate a style that obscures meaning or reflects a meaning already and always obscured…We might also look at sentences differently—as having more possibilities than we initially imagined" (Waite, 180, emphasis in original). And when asked in an interview what she thinks is "distinctive" about her fiction, what makes it "good," Toni Morrison

said "The language, only the language. … It is the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them" (Morrison interviewed in Le Claire and McCaffery 1983, 256). For Geok-lin Lim, Waite, and Morrison, the emphasis is as much on creative language play and discovery as it is on the finished edited product. Bruce Horner (2018) argues that such an approach shifts the work of the creative writing workshop from "producing commodities identified as 'creative'" to "being occasions in which writers work actively and deliberately on producing and reproducing and revising language," whether or not that language be playful or "ordinary" (126). By bringing rhetorical grammar into the creative writing classroom, I invite students to explore the possibilities of their own language.

Yet for many creative writing teachers who are unaware of rhetorical grammar but who wish to expand their students' critical language awareness, the field of creative writing has not sufficiently articulated a coherent pedagogy; and when it has put forth an approach to grammar, the discussions have tended to be prescriptive, conservative, elitist and exclusionary. For example, in *Gotham Writers' Workshop: Writing Fiction: The Practical Guide From New York's Acclaimed Creative Writing School* (2003), the topic of grammar comes at the end of the book, in a chapter having to do with revision—the end-stage of the writing process—and it takes up less than one full page. Yet in that short space, the writer firmly positions grammar as an exclusionary gatekeeper whose power should be uncritically accepted. He twice equates using good grammar with being *civilized*: "Grammar is … something civilized people agree upon… (it) is one of the few things, maybe the only thing, that keeps us civilized…Use it….with due respect to the powerful minds that have brought it to bear over the ages. … buy a copy of *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk and E.B. White. …Whatever you need to know about (grammar) is in there." He concludes by advising the reader to "master" (grammar), or else "people may just think you're dumb" (Selgin 228).

Less strident but as inadequate as Gotham's pedagogy is the statement on grammar offered by the Association for Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), the largest national creative writing organization. In its "Recommendations on the Teaching of Creative Writing to Undergraduates," the AWP advises that students should have a "strong command of grammar: Creative writing classes require that students broaden and deepen skills they may have first developed in their classes of composition, grammar, and rhetoric." Reducing grammar to a skill, the statement's authors miss an opportunity to illuminate and advocate for the vast affordances that conscious metalinguistic knowledge and critical language awareness can bring to the practice and profession of creative writing. Furthermore, by not defining what kind of grammar is being referred to, they make tacit the assumption that there is only one monolingual standardized grammar. Rather than to reveal, these assumptions make invisible the power and privilege of language in the writing classroom and reinforce a deficit discourse (Shapiro, 2014) of student learning—those who do not "master" it are "uncivilized" and "dumb."

Helping my undergraduate L1 and L2 creative writers (who come from diverse cultural and geopolitical backgrounds, working together in the same New York City multilingual classroom) become aware that there are many different English grammars (Kolln, et al 2016, 3) and world Englishes (Kolln et al 2016, 4; Lim 2015) provides my students with an enlarged global perspective on "creative" writing and gives them a broad set of tools for analyzing the range of linguistic encounters they will have with a text; it reveals the power that language carries into the classroom; it supports critical-reading skills; supplies a shared vocabulary for offering explicit feedback rather than impressionistic commentary; encourages the intentional manipulation of grammar and syntax for making meaning rather than avoiding error; presents grammar in an equitable, inclusive and descriptive way, and promotes linguistic justice and anti-racist workshop pedagogies.

In this paper, I consider the role of grammar both in writing studies and in the craft books of well-regarded creative writers,

discussing the advantages and limitations of the latter. From there I give an overview of rhetorical grammar and describe how I have incorporated it in explicit and inclusive ways into my creative writing workshops. To demonstrate the method, I discuss the concepts of *focus* and *emphasis*, suggest linguistic approaches for controlling them in our sentences, and share a lesson for teaching such concepts to creative writing students by introducing a tool called the *it*-cleft, a linguistic structure that allows writers to control focus by manipulating syntax and shifting emphasis within a sentence. I offer a detailed explanation of its use in the hopes of making the lesson accessible for teachers and students of varying backgrounds. From my own experience of working with authentic *it*-cleft examples, I also include a summarized model of productive in-class prompts and responses. A large selection of my *it*-cleft examples are drawn from our class mentor text, Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973).[1] I chose *Sula* both for its literary meaning—the way Morrison interrogates and dramatizes issues of race, gender, identity, and social inequality in the United States—and for her prose style—what it can teach my students about *how* Morrison achieves her literary meaning specifically on the level of her language choices. Finally, I provide in-class activities, as well as an additional exercise in the Appendix; and I conclude with some questions for further research.

Grammar in the Writing Classroom and Creative Writing Craft Books

Laura R. Micciche, a composition scholar who has argued in support of teaching rhetorical grammar in the composition classroom, admits that in the field of rhetoric and composition teaching grammar is "unquestionably unfashionable…frequently associated with 'low skills' courses that stigmatize and alienate poor writers while reproducing their status as disenfranchised" (2004, 716). She argues that ousting grammar from the writing curriculum has damaged students' ability to understand "the tight weave between what we say and how we say it." Furthermore, she notes that if and when grammar

is taught, it "often gets short shrift as we reserve (grammar) for the very final stage of drafting" (716). While naming no names, Micciche could be describing writing scholar Peter Elbow's grammar pedagogy. In *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), Elbow advises reserving grammar for only the final stage of revision. He says "treat grammar as a matter of very late editorial editing: never think about it *while you are writing*" (137, Elbow's emphasis). This comes from a section called "What About Grammar?" wherein each mention of grammar is negative. In a little over two pages he uses the word "mistakes" seven times with a variety of modifiers like "*any* mistakes," "*all* mistakes," "*different* mistakes," "*grammatical* mistakes," "*lurking* mistakes," "*serious and extreme* mistakes." He refers to "errors," "blunders," "correctness," "competency," "standard /non-standard" (136), all punitive in tone. While I agree with Elbow that critiquing ourselves in the act of composing closes down rather than opens up the possibilities of creation—a form of self-sabotage the poet Mary Oliver, in her book *Blue Pastures* (1995), calls our "intimate interrupter"—I nonetheless disagree with Elbow's claim that "creativity is strong only if critical thinking is weak" (1981, 9). Rather, I concur with Myhill et al. (2012) that "teaching writing is as much about teaching thinking as it is about teaching writing" (4-5). The rhetorical grammar pedagogy that I am proposing here not only encourages but also provides the tools for the kind of critical thinking that Elbow says is at odds with creativity, since it is in and through language that critical—and creative—thinking happens.

In contrast to this negative view of the role grammar plays in writing instruction, several well-regarded creative writers such as Janet Burroway, Octavia E. Butler, Samuel R. Delaney, John Gardner, Ursula K. Le Guin, Stephen King, and Francine Prose have offered their own positive opinions and experiential advice. For instance, Stephen King, in *On Writing* (2000), concludes his discussion of grammar by saying: "Grammar is…the pole you grab to get your thoughts up on their feet and walking" (121). Octavia E. Butler, in *Bloodchild* (2005), says: "Vocabulary and grammar are your primary tools. They're most effectively used, even most effectively abused, by people who understand them. No computer program, no friend or

employee can take the place of a sound knowledge of your tools." Ursula K. Le Guin, in *Steering the Craft* (1998), has chapter titles such as "Punctuation" (31), "Sentence Length and Complex Syntax" (39), "Repetition" (53), "Adjectives and Adverbs" (61) "Subject Pronoun and Verb" (67). John Gardner, in his influential book *The Art of Fiction* (1983), discusses how certain grammatical choices can either interrupt or enhance the reader's full immersion in what he calls the "fictional dream" (97). In the following example, Gardner offers advice to improve a sample sentence, which opens with a non-finite verb phrase:

> 'Turning, she noticed two snakes fighting in among the rocks.' Compare: 'She turned. In among the rocks, two snakes were fighting.' (The improvement can of course be further improved. The phrase 'two snakes were fighting' is more abstract than, say, 'two snakes whipped and lashed, striking at each other'; and verbs with auxiliaries ['were fighting'] are never as sharp in focus as verbs without auxiliaries, since the former indicate indefinite time, whereas the latter [e.g., 'fought'] suggest a given instant.)
>
> From *The Art of Fiction* by John Gardner

Note that both of his sample sentences are "correct" grammatically; it is the *meaning* of the scene that Gardener is most interested in, not eradicating error. Janet Burroway, in her often-assigned textbook *Writing Fiction* (1992), also promotes grammar as a way to improve craft, not avoid error. Consider her advice in the following example: "The river moved slowly. It seemed sluggish. The surface lay flat. Birds circled lazily overhead" (36).

She discusses the writer's grammatical choices explicitly: "(T)he short clipped sentences and their parallel structures—subject, verb, modifier—work against the sense of a slow, flowing movement" (36). Like Gardener's, Burroway's advice has nothing to do with error-eradication; rather, she places importance on the mimetic effect a grammatical rearrangement can produce, the flow of the sentence mirroring the flow of the river. Here is her suggested revision: "The surface lay flat on the sluggish, slow-moving river, and the birds circled

lazily overhead as Jon's boat slipped forward" (36). Indeed, the pedagogical focus regarding grammar in many of these craft books is the promotion of a kind of conscious crafting of sentences influenced by the formalist aesthetics of New Criticism and the tenets of literary realism. Certainly, for creative writing teachers of any theoretical leaning to employ this pedagogical approach would require a strong level of grammatical knowledge. Burroway says this about the role of grammar and punctuation for creative writers: (They) work a "kind of magic; their purpose is to be invisible. If the sleight of hand works, we will not notice a comma or a quotation mark but will translate each instantly into a pause or an awareness of voice; we will not focus on the individual letters of a word but extract its sense whole" (39). (However, not all writers want an "invisible" style, as will be discussed ahead.)

Yet for all their experience and expertise (as well as their considerable publishing records), much of the grammar and craft advice these celebrity writers offer has emerged not from any theoretical linguistic framework backed by empirically grounded research, but instead from their own "self-reports," which Wendy Bishop (1990) describes as a "highly engaging, but fallible, source of information about the creative writing process" (16). Creative writing scholar Stephanie Vanderslice refers to such advice as "lore" (2007). Like the word "grammar," terms such as "craft" and "workshop" occupy complicated and often problematic places in creative writing studies (see for example Adsit 2017; Chavez 2021; Dawson 2008; Donnelly 2012; Harper 2018; Leahy 2005; Salesses 2021; Sandick 2017; Staples 2012; Udelson 2021; Vanderslice 2017). Considering the term "workshop" itself, Heidi Lynn Staples (2012) calls it a "reductive, mechanistic, industry-oriented word" (33). Phil Sandick (2017) tracks the development of lore in craft and creative writing methodologies as having emerged from "the canon of creative writing craft books" (109) which exists within a larger continuum he refers to as "the archive of writers on writing" (109). Despite its methodological "fallibility" (Bishop 1990), Sandick acknowledges its continued ubiquity: "This seemingly haphazard method of instruction has proven to be steadily persistent, even as writing theorists continue to note

both its drawbacks and the field's overdependence on [it]" (109). I am arguing for a pedagogy of grammar in the creative writing classroom that is less lore-based, a grammar that is more comprehensive, more rhetorically focused.

As discussed, grammar maintains a complicated place both in writing studies and in creative writing craft books. When creative writers set out to write, they often don't know what the full meaning of the finished piece will be until they have completed at least a first draft, given how often narrative elements can shift when further creative discoveries are made. And even after a completed first draft, the work's full meaning may not yet be fully realized. Creative writing teachers can help students meet this challenge by offering them ways to think critically beyond the lore of craft advice and the prescriptive rules of standard English, and begin instead to focus on, as Morrison says "the language." Learning how to make meaningful grammatical choices can give students a creative agency that so often is denied beginning writers looking for advice, especially as they embark on the anxiety-producing early stages of a draft. Clearly, those early grammatical choices may change along the way through successive drafts—what seemed perfectly fine when cast as a simple declarative sentence in the first draft may require a syntactical rearrangement for focus and emphasis in a later draft once the writer understands the meaning of a story or a scene. Having access to their own internalized inventory of grammatical tools—with experiential knowledge of what each one can do—helps students not only navigate the process of composing and revising their own language to serve the meaning-making activity of their own creative writing, but also makes them better able to offer more precise feedback to other students in their creative writing workshop.

In the remainder of this paper, I build on linguistic research showing a positive relationship between grammar and writing instruction, offer an overview of rhetorical grammar and other functional linguistic theories, and discuss ways that I apply those theories in the creative writing classroom.

Rhetorical Grammar and the Creative Writing Classroom

While research of the mid- to late-twentieth century found no relationship between the teaching of formal grammar in isolation and the improvement of writing (Braddock et al. 1963; Hillocks 1986; Kolln 1996; Kolln and Hancock 2005; Myhill and Watson 2014), serious recent research has demonstrated that teaching concepts of grammar in the *context* of teaching writing, in meaningfully connected ways, does in fact produce positive results in the writing classroom (Schleppegrell 2007; Jones et al. 2012). Inspired by William Vande Kopple's functional-linguistics-informed approach, my own approach is meaningfully informed by Martha Kolln's theory of rhetorical grammar. Rhetorical grammar is not traditional school grammar—all those prescriptive "do's and don't's of usage" (Kolln 2016, 5). Rather, Kolln defines it by focusing on the modifier *rhetorical*: "A common definition of rhetoric is 'the purposeful use of language.' By extension, rhetorical grammar is 'the purposeful use of grammar.'… (Rhetorical grammar) can help you make effective grammatical choices—choices about sentence structure and vocabulary, even about punctuation" (Kolln et all, 2016, 299). While traditional grammar lessons in creative writing classes have often been limited to end-stage mechanics and error corrections, rhetorical grammar, instead, invites writers to see grammar as a set of language choices, which "attends not just to arrangement, style, or the rules of correct usage, but also and always to a kind of discovery that occurs during the composing process" (Kirsch 2008, 293). The process of composing meaningful writing involves making grammatical choices; rhetorical grammar helps students learn how to make those choices consciously and critically.

Additionally, following Vande Kopple (vii), I, too, draw from the theoretical framework of M.A.K. Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG), which, like Kolln's rhetorical grammar, is interested in writers' language choices in their effort to make meaning. SFG theorizes grammar not as a set of rules, but as a "set of options" (Halliday 1971 19). SFG interprets language as a network of interrelated meaningful choices; it is "a resource for making meaning,

and meaning resides in systemic patterns of choice" (23). SFG explores grammar "in functional terms: that is, from the standpoint of how it creates and expresses meaning" (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004, 19).

Rhetorical grammar helps students to, as Vande Kopple says, "become more sensitive to the stylistic options available to [them] in the English language at the same time that [they] develop a richer vocabulary for talking about these options" (4). The importance of metalinguistic awareness for writers has been well researched and persuasively argued for (see Christensen 1967, Myhill 2012, Schleppegrell 2020). By offering my students and me a shared metalinguistic vocabulary for describing how language-level choices create narrative effects, rhetorical grammar illuminates the ways we use and discuss language in (and outside) the creative writing classroom. My goal is not to teach metalinguistic terminology for its own sake, but rather to use it to discuss meaning-making in my students' own creative writing and to equip them with the tools for discussing how meaning is made in their workshopmates' writing, as well. Indeed, as Schleppegrell (2020) has argued: "Metalanguage does not have to be highly technical; the point is to be explicit with learners about how an author infuses particular meanings into a text by making choices from what the grammar offers, and to offer learners options for making choices themselves as they speak and write" (22-23). Furthermore, when I refer to "metalinguistic awareness," I am referring to it both as an explicit *terminology* and as the *process* of discussing language with students, of raising their critical language awareness. (Schleppegrell 2013, 156; Gere et al. 2021).[2]

At this point, before I discuss incorporating rhetorical grammar into the creative writing workshop, I must note that, at the start of the semester, our entire workshop agrees as a creative community to respect the writer's own language choices (for detailed discussion on this topic, see Suresh Canagarajah; Felicia Rose Chavez; Rachelle Cruz; Fred D'Aguiar; bell hooks; June Jordan; Anna Leahy; Rosina Lippi-Green; Shirley Geok-lin Lim; Min-zhan Lu; Lu and Bruce Horner; David Mura; Namrata Poddar; Paisley Rekdal; Claudia Rankine; Matthew Salesses; James Sledd, Geneva Smitherman; "Students' Right To Their Own Language" [NCTE/CCCC 1974]). By

community agreement, our ultimate workshop goal is to foster a safe creative space for the different grammars and Englishes that students bring with them from their home communities, families of origin, personal and professional contexts. Moreover, rather than to privilege grammatical correctness over a writer's intended rhetorical strategies, the workshop's goal is for writers to describe and discuss their language choices and narrative strategies as exactly that—*choices and strategies*, not grammatical errors. We discuss the effects those choices have on the creative writing; rhetorical grammar enables us to more effectively have those workshop conversations.

A primary goal in using rhetorical grammar in the creative writing workshop is to help my students become aware of language, of the relationship between grammatical choices and narrative effects, of the "tight weave between what we say and how we say it" (Micciche 2004), and of the power language has in the classroom. Language is the subject matter of every writing course, yet in the creative writing workshop, grammar is brought up often in the prescriptive, corrective context of standardized written English generally for typos and/or punctuation concerns, often including comma splices and run-ons where none actually exist on the page. It is true, of course, that a long sentence may be constructed in a confusing way, but that does not necessarily make it a run-on. One way I address this in my classroom is to incorporate Martha Kolln's (2016) chapters on "Sentence Patterns" and "Coordination." Because Kolln's pedagogy is focused more on critical language awareness rather than error correction, I am able to bring language into the workshop as a tool and explicitly connect it to the writer's narrative strategies. I find this approach makes the workshop conversations more productive for the entire class—but especially for the writer whose work is under discussion. A further benefit of presenting the "truth" about language is that we get to discuss and contextualize half-truths, misunderstandings, and other prescriptive lore, rather than to uniformly prohibit their use.

There is yet another benefit to incorporating rhetorical grammar into the creative writing workshop. Students tend to discuss other students' writing often in imprecise, highly intuitive ways, which, when questioned, are often backed up by the aforementioned half-

truths, misunderstandings, and prescriptive lore. In fact, my creative writing students have reported feeling disappointed with some of the peer feedback they receive in workshops, which can be impressionistic, vague, and abstract. Consider for instance comments such as *This scene feels flat;* or *This part is low energy;* or *This paragraph doesn't flow*; or *I can't really see this character*; or *I'm not sure what I'm supposed to feel in this part*; or *It seemed really confusing*. The comments may be fair, but it is hard for the writer who receives such feedback to know what to do with it: *Where should I begin to revise? What should I write instead? Am I a bad writer? What exactly is wrong with my writing and how do I fix it?* These are difficult if not crippling questions for all writers, but particularly for student writers. Teaching rhetorical grammar offers students a linguistic terminology for thinking about and discussing language in ways that are neither vague nor evaluative, but instead specific and descriptive.

To introduce this method of combining rhetorical grammar and creative writing analysis, I start the semester by assigning short samples of a diverse selection of published creative writing, along with one longer mentor text. I choose these texts not only for their literary value but also for what their prose styles can teach students about writing sentences; we analyze *how* published writers achieve narrative effects on the language level, zeroing in on a writer's grammatical choices, and how those choices enhance and deepen the work's narrative effects. Analyzing narrative techniques at the sentence level with explicit use of metalanguage not only expands my students' awareness of their own linguistic repertoire as writers; it also expands their linguistic repertoire as readers and workshop participants. Students learn how to notice and describe their classmates' writing explicitly on the level of language.

I have found it effective when teaching such approaches to center a workshop's discussion on how a writer effectively controls (or fails to control) *focus* and *emphasis* in a sentence—perhaps it may be the one crucial sentence in a fully realized scene. One of the ways I have productively incorporated such an approach is to share Vande Kopple's syntactic-variation example that opened this paper. Vande Kopple begins his textbook with a series of sentence forms, each of

which conveys essentially the same information but arranges that information in slightly different ways from slightly different perspectives (offered in their entirety, for full effect).

Jim cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet.
The ball was cracked by Jim with his new graphite racquet.
As for the ball, Jim cracked it with his new graphite racquet.
As for his new graphite racquet, Jim used it to crack the ball.
The ball Jim cracked with his new graphite racquet.
His new graphite racquet Jim used to crack the ball.
What Jim did was to crack the ball with his new graphite racquet.
What Jim cracked with his new graphite racquet was the ball.
What Jim used to crack the ball was his new graphite racquet.
The one who cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet was Jim.
The thing that Jim cracked with his new graphite racquet was the ball.
The thing that Jim used to crack the ball was his new graphite racquet.
It was Jim who cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet.
It was the ball that Jim cracked with his new graphite racquet.
It was his new graphite racquet that Jim used to crack the ball.

From *Clear and Coherent Prose: A Functional Approach* by William Vande Kopple

Asking which of the above forms a writer should choose, Vande Kopple quickly admits that he is posing an "impossible challenge" (9); no single form is the best choice. Rather, he says, the choice depends upon the needs of the rhetorical situation: audience, purpose and topic (9). However, without knowing the rhetorical situation, a writer could narrow down the choices by considering what the sentence is about, what Vande Kopple calls its "aboutness" (9), or its *focus*. By understanding the focus of the sentence, a writer can determine which form would offer the greatest emphasis to convey the intended meaning. It is the writer's ability to emphasize different elements of a sentence that Vande Kopple is interested in. He refers to the part of the sentence that tells what the sentence is about as the *topic* (9).

Consider these three examples:

1. *Jim cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet.*
2. *The ball was cracked by Jim with his new graphite racquet.*
3. *What Jim did was to crack the ball with his new graphite racquet.*

Vande Kopple notes that the first sentence is about Jim, the second about the ball, and the third about what Jim did (9). Thus, despite containing "essentially the same information" (8), all three forms have different *topics*. And, in these examples, the three topics all occupy their sentences' subject slot (yet this does not always have to be the case [see Vande Kopple 51-55; Williams 84]). Furthermore, the sentences' predicate slots are occupied by the *comment*, which generally provides new information (Vande Kopple 11). Syntactically then, as well as visually, the comments, because they appear in the predicate, come at the end of the sentence and convey something new about the topic. It is the comment, not the topic, that gets the most emphasis (11). According to Vande Kopple, readers quickly "accept the topic" (16), in this case: *Jim*. Then they read on to discover what it is being said about the topic, in this case: the fact that Jim cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet. One reason the reader pays such attention to the comment is due to its position in the sentence—it comes last. This has been called "the emphasis principle" (Noguchi 2011, 199), a concept that has become axiomatic both psychologically and linguistically. Generally stated: That which comes last receives the greatest emphasis and lingers prominently in the reader's mind. Linguists describe this emphasis principle as *end focus* (Lirola 44; Kolln 2010, 106; Rossen-Knill 2013, 46) or *end weight* (Hewings and Hewings 102).

Vande Kopple's lessons on controlling focus and emphasis by understanding where in the sentence information is best placed—beginning, middle or end (Noguchi 2011, 195)—is of great use to my creative writing students. Controlling emphasis in a work of fiction is dependent on many concerns; not only must the writer know what the focus of the sentence is, but that writer must also have an understanding of the story's demands. Many questions can be considered: *From whose point of view is a particular sentence being narrated?*

Is one character discussing another character or narrating an event or is that coming from an omniscient author? If the latter, then from what psychic distance is the omniscient author from the interiority of a character? At what level are the tone and atmospherics of the prose: formal, informal, poetic, plain, suspenseful and fast-paced, expository and slower-paced? Addressing these challenging questions—and many more—can begin by exploring the grammatical choices available to writers to identify and control the focus of a sentence or a scene. If it is true that every detail of a work of fiction must have a reason for being included in the world of the story—and such a reason could be to deliver a red herring, offer a bit of misdirection, a buried clue or big reveal—then those details, from the smallest to the largest, should be presented with the precise amount of focus the writer intends. A powerful tool for controlling focus is the *it*-cleft.

The importance of the *it*-cleft to creative writers is argued for persuasively by Vande Kopple himself in *Clear and Coherent Prose*. He devotes several pages to analyzing the use of the *it*-cleft and offers for an example the mystery writer PD James's novel *Cover Her Face*. Vande Kopple notes how James uses the *it*-cleft in her fiction to control focus, establish clear action (86) and clarify character motivation (87). Vande Kopple suggests that the

> it-cleft is perhaps the best device to illustrate how a functional approach to language leads to important insights. From a functional perspective, we examine the context of the sentence, the nature of information in parts of the sentence, what the writers are apparently assuming about their readers' knowledge, and what the writers are using that information to do. When we examine the…it-cleft in this way, we discover an elegant relationship among sentence structure, sentence meaning, sentence function, and sentence context (87).

I devote class time to teaching and analyzing the *it*-cleft as a grammatical structure because it gives writers the ability to consciously manipulate a sentence at various spots and rearrange it

syntactically to direct focus, control emphasis and, ultimately, make meaning. The *it*-cleft refers to a structure that gives the writer the ability to cleave and rearrange a sentence syntactically for intentional emphasis by adding an *it* and a form of the verb *to be* (Hewings and Hewings 2004; Jesperson 1933; Lirola 2005; Khan 2019; Kolln 2010, 2016; Vande Kopple 1989; Williams 2003). The syntactic rearrangement is up to the writer, sensitive to rhetorical context rather than based on any notions of grammatical correctness. While the typical syntactic order of a declarative sentence is subject-verb-object (S-V-O), including additional circumstantial modification, the *it*-cleft allows the writer to emphasize any single item in the sentence over any other item by rearranging the sentence and placing the intended item after the *it*-cleft, a position that receives the most rhythmic stress. Typically, in a normal S-V-O sentence, the greatest rhythmic stress falls on the last item, a concept discussed earlier as *end focus*. The subject of the sentence gets run over by the reader's eyes in an effort to get to the predicate, where the point of the sentence is usually placed. But what if you want to disrupt that typical pattern and emphasize something in a way that is stronger than end focus? The *it*-cleft allows you to move that item closer to the front of the sentence, where the cleft shines a spotlight on it (Hewings and Hewings 2004; Kolln, 2016; Lirola 2005).

Here is an example of a lesson I use to teach the *it*-cleft in my creative writing classroom as a tool to control *focus*. I begin by discussing Rossen-Knill's (2011) point that all written communication contains the possibility of a reader's misunderstanding of a writer's intended meaning. From there, we discuss ways writers might anticipate potential misunderstandings by considering concepts like reader expectation, end focus, known-new or given-new or the "information principle" (Hewings and Hewings 2004) and the emphasis principle (Kolln 2016; Noguchi 1991, 2011; Rossen-Knill 2013; Vande Kopple 1989). Then we discuss different techniques for achieving that control such as end focus and the use of the *it*-cleft. Here is an example of how I open the lesson to help students begin to think about and learn to operationalize the *it*-cleft in the classroom. In its explicit discussion of manipulating language, the lesson encourages

metalinguistic awareness. I ask the students to consider the following example of a typical subject-verb-indirect object-direct object (S-V-I-O) sentence, also called a *ditransitive clause* (Depraetere and Langford 2020, 55; Hancock 2005, 100-101). In the ditransitive clause, the indirect object (IO) functions as the receiver of the direct object, "the person to whom or for whom an action is performed" (Kolln 2010, 26). This is a good example to work with in part because ditransitive sentences have three participants—in this case, the emailer, the element being emailed, and the receiver of the email, along with the additional adverbial modifier ("an hour late").

Mona emailed her research paper to her history professor an hour late.

I ask my students the following questions:

How could you rearrange this sentence if you wanted to emphasize what was sent?

It was her research paper *that Mona emailed to her history professor an hour late*. (This arrangement makes clear that it wasn't an annotated bibliography or poem; it was *her research paper*.)

How could you rearrange this sentence if you wanted to emphasize the sender?

It was Mona *who emailed her research paper to her history professor an hour late.* (This arrangement makes clear who sent the message—*Mona*, not another student.)

How could you rearrange this sentence if you wanted to emphasize the recipient of the email?

It was to her history professor *that Mona emailed her research paper an hour late*. (This arrangement makes clear that it wasn't a professor in another field; it was *her history professor*.)

How could you rearrange this sentence if you wanted to emphasize the time when the email was sent?

It was an hour late *when Mona emailed to her research paper to her history professor.*

As with the Vande Kopple examples above, this lesson lets the student see that there is no one correct way to arrange the sentence;

in each case, it is the writer who decides which item should receive the most attention.

Myhill (2003) points out that the challenge of teaching a grammatical structure is not only communicating clearly the explanation of the structure but also communicating clearly *why* writers might use that structure in their writing (358). I agree with Myhill's (2003) advice that teachers think more pedagogically about the choice of examples in order to move learners from a "heavily scaffolded understanding of a concept to independent understanding" (367). Myhill's advice should be further considered in light of Hancock's (2010) argument that "the kinds of choices a writer makes are never made on the basis of isolated sentences" (15). While I do analyze sentences extracted from whole texts, it is because I often use authentic mentor texts so that those extracted sentences are understood in their larger meaning and context.

Following Myhill's (2003) research on the impact of the use of authentic examples upon student learning (361), not only do I use authentic mentor texts to teach the *it*-cleft and end focus, but I also ask my students to bring to class any examples of *it*-clefts they encounter outside of class (Bogel and Gottschalk 1988, 79, 109). The samples can be drawn from any form of media they encounter, books, podcasts, songs, films, advertisements and so on. Because I want them to share examples from their own reading encounters, I ask them not to do a search online specifically for *it*-cleft examples, but rather simply to be mindful as they go about in the world. A student brought this example from a nonfiction book on health and fitness:

> *But remember,* ***it is between workouts*** *that your body rebuilds itself.* ***It is between workouts*** *that your muscles repair themselves, growing stronger and firmer each time.* ***It is between workouts*** *that you must fuel your body with the proper nutrients to feed your muscles. And* ***it is between workouts*** *that you must allow yourself time to rest and relax to ensure proper recovery*. (Phillips, 40)

After discussing how the emphasis provided by the *it*-cleft is enhanced by the repetition of the structures, I then ask them to recast this passage without the *it*-clefts. Here's what one class arrived at:

> But remember, your body rebuilds itself between workouts. Your muscles repair themselves between workouts, growing stronger and firmer each time. You must fuel your body with the proper nutrients to feed your muscles between workouts. And you must allow yourself time to rest and relax to ensure proper recovery between workouts.

With the sentence rearranged this way, I asked the students to discuss the differences they noticed. Some noticed that although the "between workouts" was now placed at the end of the sentence the emphasis principle of end focus somehow didn't seem as pronounced as it did when cast with the *it*-cleft. We discussed how the repetition of "between workouts" appearing at the end now felt flat and redundant, while in the original version, it seemed to be calling attention to itself purposefully by way of a strong rhythmic beat that the cleft produced. I asked them how the original version seemed in light of the revision, and some said they felt that it seemed actually more natural in its effort to inspire and motivate someone to exercise despite the sentences being deliberately stylized by the writer's use of the *it*-cleft. When I asked about rhythm, some said they felt that the sentences' rhythms, with the repetitive stress falling on "between," better enacted the tone and style of a fitness coach giving a pep talk to a client.

While the goal of the conversation is to create a space for students to discuss whatever they notice in the texts and to connect that to the language lessons we covered in class, I try never to lead them toward any particular answers; the aim is to get them to understand and employ more systematic or precise descriptions—with an emphasis on choice and effect. Their ability to analyze how conscious language choices controls emphasis and builds greater meaning—and to describe that operation explicitly on the level of

language—enables them to notice such instances in their own writing and in the writing of their classmates in the workshop.

But I have found that using such structures in creative writing poses some challenges for the students and for the teacher. Questions arise. *How often should you use it? What is the effect on the fiction?* Mindful not to address such questions with the kind of craft advice akin to prescriptive lore (e.g., "You should always use an *it*-cleft whenever …"), I draw on research that analyzes imaginative literature through a linguistic lens (for such analyses see Halliday 1971; Khan 2019; Lirola 2005; MacDonald 2005; Rossen-Knill 1999). For example, Lirola (2005) notes that the *it*-cleft offers high "communicative dynamism" to a work of fiction (42), allowing the writer to highlight a character's "feelings such as sadness, hatred and love . . . at climactic stages" (77-79).

Lirola (2005, 8) points out that foremost in the explicit instruction of the *it*-cleft should be a robust discussion of how it contributes not only to the meaning of a single sentence, but to the meaning of the scene, chapter, or entire novel. An example of this was presented by a student in one of my undergraduate fiction workshops; it comes from Michael Connelly's novel *The Late Show* (2017), which the student had read independently outside of class. It appears on page 184, at almost the halfway point of the novel's 400 pages. In the view of the student, Connelly's *it*-cleft represents the single biggest plot twist in the entire story. Up to this point the protagonist, a detective named Ballard, has been investigating the murder of her ex-partner, only to discover, in a sudden moment of epiphany, while examining her ex-partner's notes, that everything she had thought was true is, in fact, false:

> **It was in those notes** that Ballard came across a sentence and a question that turned her thoughts on the case in a new direction.
>
> From *The Late Show* by Michael Connelly

Hardly an example of a flashy stylistic formulation, but, functionally, this *it*-cleft—perhaps because it is the first appearance of one up to this

point in the novel—draws precisely the right amount of attention Connelly wants it to draw at precisely the moment he wants it. My student noted that Connelly's conservative use of this attention-grabbing grammatical choice was itself a creative choice: holding off on using it until the moment it would serve precisely the right function—to signal that everything in the story is changed utterly after this moment, and thus, the student argued, it may be considered the most rhetorically effective grammatical choice in a novel that doesn't exploit many uses of this structure. The class discussion that followed was important not only because it explored and appreciated a grammatical choice in a bestselling novel but also because the class itself acknowledged that it was having this conversation. That is to say, we made note of the fact that language is not something we might often think about in a Michael Connelly novel, and yet here we were thinking about it. After discussing the reasons why it might have been chosen and what it meant to the over-all story, I asked the students to perform the same operation we did to the fitness example, transforming the Connelly *it*-cleft sentence into a simple declarative, stripped of its *it*-cleft. Here's what they came up with:

A sentence and a question in the notes turned Ballard's thoughts on the case in a new direction.

They all agreed that this uninflected version did not capture the same moment of drama that the original did.

Pedagogically, the focus is always on how grammatical structures create meanings in specific contexts, rather than privileging one grammatical form over any other. Merely identifying syntactic structures is of no more use than would be diagraming sentences. Sometimes the *it*-cleft is the right choice and sometimes it is not (as an in-class activity ahead will demonstrate). In another class session, we examined passages from our mentor text, Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973).

> Helene Wright was an impressive woman, at least in Medallion she was. Heavy hair in a bun, dark eyes arched in

> a perpetual query about other people's manners. A woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority. Since there was no Catholic church in Medallion then, she joined the most conservative black church. And held sway. **It was Helene** who never turned her head in church when latecomers arrived; **Helene** who established the practice of seasonal altar flowers; **Helene** who introduced the giving of banquets of welcome to retuning Negro veterans. She lost only one battle—the pronunciation of her name. The people in the Bottom refused to say Helene. They called her Helen and left it at that (18).
>
> From *Sula* by Toni Morrison

Because the class had read the novel, it functioned both as an authentic text and as a mentor text. The students not only understood the context for this passage, but also had begun to notice and appreciate certain outstanding features of Morrison's style throughout the course of their reading. For example, one aspect of Morrison's style—its noticeability—demonstrates the opposite of Burroway's pedagogical theory that a grammatical choice in fiction works best when it is "invisible" (39). The attention that Morrison's *it*-clefts command of the reader may be theorized using Leech's (2008) definition of "foregrounding," which says that a "typical deviation in literary language—such as "a recurrent lexical pattern carrying the symbolic theme of the work" (15)—can be considered unique to the text in which it occurs" (15) and thus that such a figure of speech may be considered "foregrounded phenomena" and will be highly noticeable in a literary text (15). Khan (2019) further describes the effect of such foregrounding in literary language, arguing that the "main motivation for the use of … (*it*-) clefts" is that "the linguistic structure gives the (placement) prominence making it cognitively the figure against the ground of the situation" (22).

Returning to the passage from *Sula* above, I asked the students to discuss any features of Morrison's language in this paragraph that interested them. We discussed how the first sentence seemed like a typical topic sentence—a claim made with the use of the *linking be-*

verb ("Helene Wright was an impressive woman")—which made the paragraph seem as if it were going to be a more traditional example of an expository character description, but by employing the deliberate fragments in the second, third, and fifth sentences, Morrison is able to manipulate rhythm and affect the tone, implying the presence of a somewhat judgmental-sounding authorial voice. We discussed this further and then noted Morrison's choice not to use the full *it*-clefts after its first instance—a move they had dubbed the "*elliptical*-cleft," in which, in sentences or clauses following the original cleft, the writer omits the *it*- and the *be*-verb, but keeps the word that is being emphasized (in this case "Helene"). By employing the more formal semi-colons to separate the syntactic units of these so-called "*elliptical*-clefts," Morrison heightens the somewhat judgmental tone fitting of the proper church setting of the passage. However, Morrison then concludes that elaborately constructed paragraph with a comparably far less stylized set of closing sentences: *The people in the Bottom refused to say Helene. They called her Helen and left it at that.* We considered how this paragraph offers a characterization of Helene that owes as much to the style of the sentences as it does to the descriptive content—a form-and-function technique, where the style itself serves to enhance the content's theme of judgment and shame. Our discussion included an analysis of point of view and the implied author, tone and rhythm, characterization and setting, all grounded in concrete language examples rather than abstract concepts and vague impressions. We were discussing the rhetorical effects of Morrison's grammatical choices. Here is another example of the *it*-cleft from our reading of *Sula*:

> **It was while he** was full of such dreams, his body already feeling the rough work clothes, his hands already curved to the pick handle, that he spoke to Nel about getting married. She seemed receptive but hardly anxious. **It was after he** stood in lines for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over, "Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow," that he got the

message. So **it was rage**, rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down (82).

From *Sula* by Toni Morrison

Here we discussed how the use of this *it*-cleft allows Morrison to present a narrative summary with a style that keeps the passage from feeling like merely a dull summary; the use of the *it*-cleft foregrounds the language while emphasizing the temporal event and in so doing creates another layer of engagement both with the character's background, desires, and suffering, as well as the tone and the voice of the narration itself. The *it*-cleft affords the writer both rhetorical effects.

After examining the passage, we discussed how Morrison's first *it*-cleft provides backstory and narrative summary by framing a syntactic space for rich details supplied in the form of absolute phrases (*his body already feeling the rough work clothes, his hands already curved to the pick handle*).[3] The length of the second *it*-cleft, we noted, balances several coordinate structures that reproduce for the reader a sense of the monotonous repetition the character was feeling waiting for work. Going further, some students claimed that Morrison accomplishes this coordination while also packing the *it*-cleft with evocative details—even including a micro-scene in that line of dialogue. Also, in terms of backstory and present action, the first two *it*-clefts set-up a cause and effect with time adverbs (*while, after*), preparing the reader for the last *it*-cleft which names the character's emotional reaction to those summarized events. This last *it*-cleft sentence contrasts the previous events with an emotional reaction that produces a change in the desires and determination of the character, an action that moves the story forward. Again, I want to stress that our analysis was grounded in observations about linguistic techniques producing literary effects. We all agreed that such literary effects would have taken another writer pages to create, but that Morrison was able to accomplish them in one paragraph.

As we continued to read the novel as a mentor text, the students noticed more instances of Morrison's use of language. I'll offer two

final examples, also from *Sula*. I will highlight several different techniques we discussed:

> But **it was the men** who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing—the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white men (112).
>
> From *Sula* by Toni Morrison

Remarking once more on the recurrent stylistic patterns in the novel, we then discussed how Morrison presents an entire narrative summary from a single *it*-cleft, packing the passage with repetition and "*elliptical*-clefts." That elliptical style is clear for the reader, we agreed, because of the precision of her topicalized sentences, which helps to channel the reader easily through the paragraph, even one containing fragments. We noticed that the paragraph had cohesion because of Morrison's use of the given-new principle (Rossen-Knill 2013; Williams, 81): The *new* use of the noun "men" in the predicate of the *it*-cleft gets repeated as the *given* pronoun "who" in the front of the next clause, which then becomes the *given* pronoun "They" in the front of the next sentence. That sentence ends with a *new* idea "thing," which gets repeated after the dash and renamed "route" in the next sentence. This string of given-new elements leads to a last declarative sentence, again a deliberately unstylized bit of indirect dialogue: *They said that Sula slept with white men*. Morrison, we discussed, built her paragraph with all of those stylistic effects to lead the reader, once more, to what we called the "hard truth" in the novel, its hardness enacted by the plain uninflected sentence, which had similarities stylistically to the final sentence in the earlier paragraph: *They called her Helen and left it at that*. In that example, another plain declarative sentence of "hard truth" concluded a paragraph that was replete with stylistic virtuosity: in this case, fragments and repetitions.

Finally, we discussed a stand-alone *it*-cleft from *Sula* that functions much like the example from the Michael Connelly novel: a sudden interior change brought on by external forces, after which a character sees herself and her goals in a new light:

> **It was on that train**, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard—always (22).
>
> From *Sula* by Toni Morrison

Giving my students practice working with these structures is important. And so, after discussing this example, I asked them again to rewrite the sentence without the *it*-cleft, after which we discussed what effects those changes brought about and which version they thought worked better for that moment in the story. One student version was this: *On the train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, she resolved to be on guard—always.* And another: *She resolved to be on guard—always—on the train, shuffling toward Cincinnati.* Again, such syntactic rearrangement for its own sake, decontextualized from an authentic text, is of no use to a student writer; rather, in the context of the mentor text and with the lesson focused on meaning-making, such an in-class activity offers students opportunities to notice, discuss, and practice making language choices, to demonstrate their ability to describe *how* and *why* something is working and *what* exactly in the language has produced that effect.

In-Class Activity for *It*-Cleft Practice:

Another *it*-cleft activity I do with my students is to ask them to tell a short-short story *entirely* in *it*-clefts. I break them up into smaller groups and ask them to choose someone to write or type the piece out, which will be shared with the whole class. I offer them a small prompt to get them started: They must supply *it*-clefts near the beginning that answers the questions who, what, when, where, why, and how. From there they work collaboratively for about 20-25 minutes on the piece. Then I tell them to take away *all but one* of the *it*-clefts, preserving the one *it*-cleft that they agree, as a group, is the most important. We all gather afterward as a full class to read the pieces aloud and then discuss

why they chose their one surviving *it*-cleft, and what effects it has on the story. An example from one creative writing class is the following:

Original:

It was once upon a time when this story took place. It was in a kingdom with a new prince where this story took place. It was a young woman named Cinderella who lived there. It was with her evil stepsisters that she lived. It was an unhappy life that she lived with them. It was by the cinders that she toiled all day and night. It was one day when she was invited to the prince's ball. It was the prince's ball she attended. It was there that she met and fell in love with the prince. It was just before she was about to leave the ball that she lost a slipper. It was the prince who found it. It was the slipper's owner whom he did not know. It was the entire kingdom that he searched for its owner. It was Cinderella's door that he knocked on at last. It was Cinderella's evil sisters who claimed the slipper was theirs. But it was only Cinderella whose foot it fit. It was a wedding that they had and happily ever after that they lived.

Revision:

Once upon a time, in a kingdom with a new prince, a young woman named Cinderella lived an unhappy life with her evil stepsisters, toiling all day and night by the cinders. One day, she was invited to the prince's ball, which she attended and where she met and fell in love with the prince. However, just before she was about to leave the ball, she lost a slipper. The prince found it, but did not know its owner. So he searched the entire kingdom. At last, he knocked on Cinderella's door. Her evil sisters claimed the slipper was theirs. But it was Cinderella whose foot it fit. Cinderella and the prince were married and lived happily ever after.

Asked how they arrived at the finished version, the students said they tried, with each *it*-cleft attempt, to provide the character and setting of the story, along with a ground situation. From there the challenge was to supply an inciting incident and build suspense toward a crisis moment followed by a denouement and a conclusion—all by using

only *it*-clefts. They reported that it was only when they had finished and discerned the story's full meaning in language and its dramatic shape that they discovered which *it*-cleft was the one to keep: *But it was Cinderella whose foot it fit*. They also described how stripping the emphasis from the other sentences helped them to consider how they could combine certain bits of information into fewer, longer sentences.

Conclusion

Matthew Sumpter (2016) describes the current pedagogical state of the composition classroom as "lacking the means to thoroughly teach writers aesthetic techniques and the tools with which to manipulate language's rhythm, pace, sound, and appearance" (340). Sumpter's description might as easily be applied to current creative writing pedagogy and the role of grammar instruction and language awareness within it. Creative writing teachers who can incorporate grammars other than Standardized English (such as rhetorical grammar and systemic functional grammar discussed above) and who can describe and identify for their students the features of language that help produce greater meaning, those teachers are better able to support student writers in the creative writing classroom. Schleppegrell (2020) puts it clearly:

> Being able to talk about these features of the language as well as model their use in other texts is an important knowledge about English for the language teacher.... This means knowledge about grammar and meaning; understanding about linguistic systems relevant to the ways different school subjects foreground particular meanings through their discursive practices and favored genres. Teachers can learn to identify and focus learners' attention on particular systems of English grammar, treating grammar not as a set of rules, but as a resource for meaning-making, and demonstrating the ways different subject areas draw on these language systems (20-21).

My goal as a creative writing teaching is to help my students create their own grammar repertoire, a toolbox from which they can draw, when needed, consciously selected linguistic tools that will not only solve creative problems, but will also transfer to other rhetorical situations and language communities that they encounter. In the discussion above I have stressed the importance of fostering metalinguistic awareness in our creative writing students as a strategy to draw their attention to the ways they make meaning in their writing (Myhill et al. 2012; Myhill 2012, 2018; Schleppegrell 2007, 2013, 2020), an effort that can "create a dialogic space which allows students to think metalinguistically about their writing" (Myhill, 2018, 16). I share Myhill's pedagogical goal of opening up "a repertoire of possibilities for constructing meanings and not [teaching] about 'correct' or formulaic ways of writing" (Myhill 2012, 254).

The ability to discuss explicitly such language-level concerns with my creative writing students has been a central method of my practice as a teacher. When creative writing students are able to analyze authentic mentor texts and articulate how language is consciously constructed to create meaning—and when those same students are able to identify and describe those meaning-making operations explicitly on the level of language—they are better prepared to notice and operationalize such language choices in their own writing and in the writing of their workshop mates, moving from offering vague, impressionistic responses to describing explicitly the specific grammatical choices writers make on the page and the effects those choices have in the work. Using a well-chosen mentor text enables teachers not only to highlight and analyze selected prose samples, but also to model and encourage high-quality dialogic talk about authentic texts, talk that can be extended to student manuscripts under discussion in the workshop. As a creative writing teacher who also teaches courses in rhetorical grammar, I am interested in and draw from functional theories of language, sharing with my students how grammar is relevant and generative in the creative writing workshop, how it supports discovery and creativity. This approach allows me to apply such methods in the context of my students' writing, where they—and we—can engage with it meaningfully.

While the subject matter of language, let alone the field of linguistics, may be beyond the scope of what a creative writing teacher has time—or is trained—to cover in one semester-long workshop, language is nonetheless the raw material at the center of every creative writing classroom. To help our students understand what it can do and, perhaps more importantly, what they as writers *can do with it* is to equip them with a set of tools they can carry with them wherever they go.

Notes

[1]I always begin the class discussion by acknowledging my positionality as a white male professor teaching Toni Morrison to a diverse group of college writing students, understanding that any reading of a text will be highly situated historically, politically, and socially. Our goal is to discuss our various readings and interpretations and then to notice and consider the language features in the text that produced those interpretive moments.

[2]At different times, I have included exercises from the sentence pedagogies of Francis Christensen (1967), whose classroom methods for teaching his generative rhetoric of the sentence involved employing a "rich vocabulary." I agree with him when he says: "I cannot conceive any useful transactions between teacher and students unless they have in common a language for talking about sentences" (Christensen, 6).

[3]I should note that I conduct these creative-writing/grammatical-structure lessons with several other syntactic tools—absolutes, gerunds, participial phrases, relative clauses, prepositional phrases. We cover the respective sections in Kolln's *Understanding English Grammar* (2016) and analyze several examples in the same manner described with regard to the *it*-cleft, examples drawn from mentor texts and other authentic texts brought to class by me and by my students. We discuss the use of the grammatical structures as matters of craft and style, devices deliberately chosen by the author.

Works Cited

Adsit, Janelle. *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing: Threshold Concepts to Guide the Literary Curriculum*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Association for Writers and Writing Programs (AWP). "Recommendations on the Teaching of Creative Writing to Undergraduates." [www.awpwriter.org/guide/directors_handbook_recommendations_on_the_teaching_of_creative_writing_to_undergraduates].

Bishop, Wendy. *Released into Language: Some Options for Teaching Creative Writing*. Carbondale, IL: NCTE, 1990.

Bogel, Fredric V., and Katherine K. Gottschalk. *Teaching Prose: A Guide for Writing Instructors*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988.

Braddock, R. R., R. Lloyd-Jones, and L. Schoer, *Research in Written Composition*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. 1963.

Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. 3rd ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

Butler, Octavia E. *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. 2nd ed. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005.

Canagarajah, Suresh. *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*. London: Routledge, 2012.

Chavez, Felicia Rose. *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Writing Classroom*. Chicago, IL, 2021.

Christensen, Francis. *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric: Six Essays for Teachers*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. "Students' Rights to Their Own Language." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 25, 1974, pp.1-18.

Connelly, Michael. *The Late Show*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017.

Cruz, Rachelle. "We Need New Metaphors: Reimagining Power in the Creative Writing Workshop." *Poets & Writers*, September/October, vol. 48, no. 5. 85-87. 2020.

Crystal, David. "Language Play and Linguistic Intervention." *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, vol. 12, no. 3,1996, pp. 328-44.

D'Aguiar, Fred. "Towards a New Creative Writing Pedagogy." *Writer's Chronicle,* October/November 2016. [www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_chronicle_view/4118/towards_a_new_creative_writing_pedagogy].

Dawson, Paul A. "Historicising 'Craft' in the Teaching of Fiction." *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2008. 211-224. DOI: 10.1080/14790720802499630.

Delany, Samuel R. *About Writing: Seven Essays, Four Letters, & Five Interviews*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

Depraetere, Ilse, and Chad Langford. *Advanced English Grammar: A Linguistic Approach*. 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

Donnelly, Dianne. *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline*, Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2012.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

---, *Writing With Power*. London: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Gere, Anne Ruggles, Anne Curzan, J W Hammond, Sarah Hughes, Ruth Li, Andrew Moos, Kendon Smith, Kathryn Van Zanen, Kelly L. Wheeler, and Crystal J. Zanders. "Communal Justicing: Writing Assessment, Disciplinary Infrastructure, and the Case for Critical Language Awareness." *College Composition and Communication*; vol. 72, no. 3, (Feb 2021), pp.384-412.

Halliday, M.A. K. "Linguistic Function and Literary Style: An Inquiry into The Language of William Golding's The Inheritors." *Literary Style: A Symposium*. Ed. Seymour Chatman. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp.330-68.

Halliday, M. A. K., and Christian M. I. M Matthiessen. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford, 2004.

Hancock, Craig. *Meaning-Centered Grammar: An Introductory Text*. London: Equinox, 2005.

Harper, Graeme, ed. *Changing Creative Writing in America: Strengths, Weaknesses, Possibilities*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2018.

Hewings, Ann, and Martin Hewings. "Impersonalizing Stance: A Study of Anticipatory 'it' in Student and Published Academic Writing." *Applying English Grammar: Functional and Corpus Approaches*. Eds. Caroline Coffin, Ann Hewings, and Kieran O'Halloran. London, UK: Hodder Arnold, 2004, pp.101–116.

Hillocks, G. "What Works in Teaching Composition: A Meta-analysis of Experimental Treatment Studies." *American Journal of Education*, vol. 93, no. 1, 1984, pp.133-70.

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge. 1994.

Horner, Bruce. "Rewriting Creative Writing." *Changing Creative Writing in America: Strengths, Weaknesses, Possibilities*. Ed. Graeme Harper. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2018, pp. 112-31.

Hunter, Evan. *Happy New Year, Herbie and Other Stories*. New York: Pocket Books, 1964.

Jespersen, Otto. *Essentials of English Grammar*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1933.

Jones, Susan, Debra Myhill, and Trevor Bailey. "Grammar for Writing? An Investigation of the Effects of Contextualised Grammar Teaching on Students' Writing." *Reading and Writing*. Online Sept 2012.

Jordan, June. "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 58, no. 3, 1988, pp. 363-75.

Khan, Geoffrey. "Copulas, Cleft Sentences and Focus Markers in Biblical Hebrew." *Ancient Texts and Modern Readers: Studies in Ancient Hebrew Linguistics and Bible Translation*. Eds. Gideon R. Kotzé, Christian S. Locatell, John A. Messarra. Netherlands, Brill, 2019.

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Kirsch, Sharon J. "'Suppose a Grammar Uses Invention': Gertrude Stein's Theory of Rhetorical Grammar." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2008, pp. 283–310.

Kolln, Martha. "Rhetorical Grammar: A Modification Lesson." *English Journal*, vol. 85 no.7 1996, pp. 25-31.

---, and Loretta Gray. *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*. 6th ed. New York: Pearson Education, 2010.

---, and Loretta Gray, and Joseph Salvatore. *Understanding English Grammar*. 10th ed. New York: Pearson Education, 2016.

---, and Craig Hancock. "The Story of English Grammar in United States Schools." *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2005 pp.11–31

Leahy, Anna. *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project*. Buffalo: Multilingual Matters, 2005.

Leech, Geoffrey. *Language in Literature: Style and Foregrounding*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2014.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew*. Portland: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1998.

Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. "Lore, Practice, and Social Identity in Creative Writing Pedagogy: Speaking with a Yellow Voice." *Pedagogy*, vol. 10, no.1,January 2010, pp. 79–93.

---,"Creative Writing Pedagogy for World Englishes Students" *World Englishes*, vol. 34, no.3, September 2015, pp. 336-54.

Lippi-Green, R. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* (2nd ed.). Routledge, 2012.

Lirola, María Martínez. "Systemic Functional Approximation to the Use of the Cleft Sentence and Reversed Pseudo-Cleft Sentence in English in a Narrative Sample of the African Writer Alan Paton." *Working Papers*, 10. Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Universidad de Alicante. 2005. [moam.info/working-papers10-core_5c196823097c47e3458b45f4.html].

Lu, Min-Zhan. "Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1999, pp. 172–194.

---, and Bruce Horner. "Translingual Literacy, Language Difference, and Matters of Agency." *College English*, vol. 75, no. 6, 2013, pp. 582–607.

MacDonald, Susan Peck. "Chandler's American Style." *Style*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2005, pp. 448–67.

McEwan, Ian. *First Love, Last Rites*. New York: Vintage, 1975.

Micciche, Laura R. "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 55, no. 4, June 2004, pp.716-37.

Morrison, Toni. Interview. *Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists*. Eds. Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1983.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Knopf, 1973.

Mura, David. *A Stranger's Journey, Race, Identity, and Narrative Craft in Writing*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2018.

Myhill, Debra. "Grammar as a Meaning-Making Resource for Language Development." Contribution to a special issue *Working on Grammar at School in L1 Education: Empirical Research Across Linguistic Regions*. L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature, 18, 2018. 1-21. [doi.org/10.17239/L1ESLL-2018.18.04.04].

---. "The Ordeal of Deliberate Choice: Metalinguistic Development in Secondary Writers." *Past, Present, and Future Contributions of Cognitive Writing Research to Cognitive Psychology*. Ed. Virginia Wise Berninger. New York: Psychology Press/Taylor Francis Group, 2012, pp. 247-74.

---. "Principled Understanding? Teaching the Active and Passive Voice." *Language and Education*, vol. 17, no. 5 2003 pp. 355-70.

---. and Susan Jones, Annabel Watson and Helen Lines. "Playful Explicitness with Grammar: A Pedagogy for Writing." *Literacy*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2012, pp. 103-11.

Noguchi, Rei R. "Focusing Transformations/Emphatic Positioning." *Including Students in Academic Conversations: Principles and Strategies for Teaching Theme-based Writing Courses Across the Disciplines*. Eds. Deborah F. Rossen-Knill and Tatyana Bakhmetyeva. New York: Hampton Press, 2011 pp.194-203.

---. *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*. Urbana: NCTE, 1991.

Oliver, Mary. *Blue Pastures*. Orlando: Harcourt, 1995.

Phillips, Bill. *Body For Life: 12 Weeks to Mental and Physical Strength*. New York: William Morrow, 1999.

Poddar, Namrata. "Return to the MFA: A Call for Systemic Change in the Literary Arts" *Poets & Writers*, September/October, vol. 48, no. 5., 2020, pp. 80-4.

Prose, Francine. *Reading Like a Writer*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007.
Rankine, Claudia. "In Our Way: Racism in Creative Writing." *Writer's Chronicle*. October/November 2016. [www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_chronicle_view/4120/].
Rekdal, Paisley. *Appropriate: A Provocation*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2021.
Ritter, Kelly and Stephanie Vanderslice. *Can It Really Be Taught? Rethinking Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*, Heinemann, 2007.
Rossen-Knill, Deborah. "Creating and Manipulating Fictional Worlds: A Taxonomy of Dialogue in Fiction." *Journal of Literary Semantics*. XXVIII/1 1999, pp.20-45.
---."Flow and the Principle of Relevance: Bringing Our Dynamic Speaking Knowledge to Writing." *Journal of Teaching Writing*, vol.26, no.1, 2011, pp. 39-67.
---."Refining the Given-New Expectation for Classroom Use: A Lesson in the Importance of Audience." *Journal of Teaching Writing*, vol. 28, no.1, 2013, pp. 21-51.
Salesses, Matthew. *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*, New York: Catapult, 2021.
Sandick, Phil. "Lore 2.0: Creative Writing as History." *Can Creative Writing Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*. Eds. Stephanie Vanderslice and Rebecca Manery. London: Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 108-122.
Schleppegrell, Mary J. "The Knowledge Base for Language Teaching: What Is the English to Be Taught as Content?" *Language Teaching Research*, vol. 24, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp.17–27.
---."The Role of Metalanguage in Supporting Academic Language Development" *Language Learning*, vol. 63, Issue s1. 2013, pp.153-170.
---. "At last: The Meaning in Grammar." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2007, pp.121–28.
Selgin, Peter. "Revision: Real Writers Revise," *Gotham Writers' Workshop: Writing Fiction: The Practical Guide From New York's Acclaimed Creative Writing School*. Ed. Gotham Writers' Workshop. London: Bloomsbury. 2003, pp. 213-36.
Shapiro, Shawna. "'Words That You Said Got Bigger': English Language Learners' Lived Experiences of Deficit Discourse." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2014, pp. 386–406.
Sledd, James. "Grammar for Social Awareness in Time of Class Warfare." *English Journal*, vol.85, no.7, 1996, pp.59-63.
Smitherman, Geneva. "Raciolinguistics, 'Mis-education,' and Language Arts Teaching in the 21st Century." *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, vol.32, no.2, 2017, pp.3–12

Staples, Heidi Lynn. "Metaphors We Teach By." *Beyond the Workshop: Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*. Ed. Paul Perry. London: Kingston University Press, pp. 31-40.

Sumpter, Matthew. "Shared Frequency: Expressivism, Social Constructionism, and the Linked Creative Writing-Composition Class." *College English*, vol. 78 no.4, 2016, pp. 340-61.

Udelson, Jon. "Bad Grades, Making Bank, and Hating Piano: The Divergent Trajectories of Two Creative Writers' Semiotic Becomings." *Journal of Creative Writing Studies*: vol. 6, no. 1, Article 15, 2021.

Vande Kopple, William. *Clear and Coherent Prose: A Functional Approach*. Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989.

Vanderslice, Stephanie, and Rebecca Manery, eds. *Can Creative Writing Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Waite, Stacey. "Teaching Queer: Possibilities for Writing, Reading, and Knowing." PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh. 2011.

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 7th ed. New York: Longman, 2003.

APPENDIX

In-Class Activity: The following two passages are from published short stories by Ian McEwen and Evan Hunter. After having read the two stories, students can describe and discuss the differences between the uses of the *it*-cleft in the two short samples below. Each author uses the *it*-cleft to introduce a new character in the story. What syntactic features are similar? What syntactic features are different? How do these choices contribute to the fiction's meaning? Have the students discuss how the meaning is produced by the use of the *it*-clefts.

> Raymond was fifteen then, a year older than I was, and though I counted myself his intellectual superior–which was why I had to pretend to understand the significance of his finger–**it was Raymond** who knew things, **it was Raymond** who conducted my education. **It was Raymond** who initiated me into the secrets of adult life which he understood himself intuitively but never totally. The world he showed me, all its fascinating detail, lore and

sin, the world for which he was a kind of standing master of ceremonies, never really suited Raymond. He knew that world well enough, but it–so to speak–did not know him. So when Raymond produced cigarettes, **it was I** who learned to inhale the smoke deeply, to blow smoke-rings and to cup my hands round the match like a film star, while Raymond choked and fumbled; and later on when Raymond first got hold of some marihuana, of which I had never heard, **it was I** who finally got stoned into euphoria while Raymond admitted–something I would never have done myself–that he felt nothing at all. And again, while **it was Raymond** with his deep voice and wisp of beard who got us into horror films, he would sit through the show with his fingers in his ears and his eyes shut.

—From "Homemade," by Ian McEwen

It was, in fact, impossible to imagine Jason in any conceivable world outside North Brother Island. The concept of him leaving the island to enter a city full of people earning their daily bread was almost laughable, and yet he did it every weekday morning, and with an earnestness that bordered on fanaticism. **It was Jason** who once leaped over the metal railing onto the deck of the ferry as it pulled away from the island. **It was Jason** who, on another morning, ran down to the dock in his pajamas, his working clothes slung over his arm, and then washed and dressed in the men's room before the boat reached the mainland. **It was Jason** who knew everyone on the island by his first name, **Jason** who first suggested we play hide-and-seek one night, **Jason** who discovered and used the outdoor barbecue near the teahouse looking out at Hell's Gate.

—From "Happy New Year, Herbie," by Evan Hunter