

SENTENCE COMBINING FOR ADVANCED WRITERS

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At the University of Tennessee, advanced composition is a popular course for students from all majors who have goals of writing for publication at their law, accounting, or architecture offices. To allow these students to develop their ideas and improve on weak points, I give general assignments such as induction, deduction, process writing, and book reviewing, and I ask them to pick their own subjects and audiences. In small groups on a four day sequence, they review each other's prewriting, drafts, and final papers by making comments on drafts and filling out review sheets, and then they read the finished products. For additional writing practice, students also keep journals covering topics like past life, social issues, and dreams (Dawe and Dornan 1981, pp. 191-247).

Although this combination of activities does help students improve through its exclusive focus on their own work, it does not sufficiently influence their style. These writers make few grammar errors, but they tend to overuse simple sentences, a stylistic habit shared by their counterparts at other universities: "students who were dealing with sophisticated and syntactically complex material but who, in written interpretation of this material, reverted to a very elementary (S-V, S-V-O) style of discourse, characterized by a lack of sentence variety and by inadequate transitions" (Harris and Brannon 1979, p. 171). When reviewing each other's finished papers and editing their own, such students can correct grammar and spelling but usually lack the skill to suggest or make stylistic changes.

To broaden their options as reviewers and writers, I decided to incorporate sentence combining work into the workshop curriculum, planning to emphasize it in revision sessions so students would learn to forcefully express ideas developed in prewriting and rough drafts.

Although early sentence combining studies involved younger writers (Hunt 1965, Mellon 1969, O'Hare 1973), later research has dealt with college students, especially freshmen. When Janet Ross (1971) worked with passages from essays reduced to simple sentences, her classes wrote longer themes and decreased their grammatical inaccuracy, although they also began to overuse longer sentences. Strong (1976) recommended open exercises as an addition to regular composition work, while Stewart (1978) and Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg (1978, 1980) achieved positive results by structuring the entire course around combining work. Following Strong's lead, Maimon and Nodine (1978) with freshmen, Swan (1978) and Olson (1981) with advanced students, and Mulder, Braun, and Holiday (1978) with adults successfully incorporated short exercise sessions with instruction in free writing, narration and exposition, and literary analysis. (See Tables 1 and 2.) Such impressive results from varied curricula and classes contradict Ney's (1976) assertion that combining will not help the college student.

These studies supported the addition of sentence combining to the advanced classes, but I did not want to interrupt our continuing workshop or make the exercises a basis for discussion of rhetorical principals as in the Miami of Ohio study (Kinneavy 1979). Thus I assigned out-of-class work — two units per week from Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg's *The Writer's Options* (1979) — and never made *this work* the focus of in-class activity.

In the text's first units, students practice appositives, subordination, infinitives, and other sentence-level options, using thirty minutes to read instructions, to complete a few basic pattern exercises in a modified cued form ("combine each sequence of sentences below into a single sentence with at least one participial phrase" (p. 48)) and then to work on longer selections that encourage open additions and substitutions. During the second half of the quarter, students cover units on paragraph and essay structure from the text. The combination of cued and open exercises is excellent for advanced classes because it first teaches an option and then allows students to try it creatively (Mellon 1979).

In class, the combining work altered final copy workshops, giving students specific vocabulary and options for discussing and editing each other's papers. This use of sentence combining as out-of-class assignments to facilitate revision differs from the structure of other studies with

college students (Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg 1978; Swan 1978; Stewart 1978) in which combining was discussed in class and emphasis placed on exercises and drafts. The alteration seemed appropriate for advanced students, however, since they should spend class time on their ongoing projects yet need revision options.

As a result, students enjoyed the exercises and completed them successfully, expanding open exercises variously. Thirty minutes seemed adequate to review structures and practice their uses, an approach which accorded with Mellon's belief that for older students such choices could become "optional, conscious, and governable" after one-time learning (1979, p. 27). As the quarter proceeded, the practice clearly began to affect writing style in finished papers: here one student's work may clarify stages experienced by many.

At the beginning, students tended to write correctly with clear organization and some detail, but in a plodding style, as in this paper about the morning opening of a bank:

One teller goes to open the door, while another teller opens the drive-in drawer. The bell on the drive-in immediately rings signifying [sic] a customer has pulled up. I can hear the drawer as it is being sent out and brought in. It makes a rattling noise similar to that of a silverware drawer in a kitchen when it is pulled out.

By the end of the term, this writer could control many more sentence structures and could thus add detail and explanations, as in his review of the movie *Gandhi*:

Opening with Gandhi's assassination by a Hindu who feared Gandhi's tolerance for all creeds and religions, the movie quickly whirls the audience back more than fifty years to South Africa where Gandhi makes his first stand against discrimination. In South Africa, Gandhi develops and experiments with his new method of non-violent action and civil disobedience. He returns to India 21 years later a legend and a hero, quickly rising to control India's struggle for independence. Attenborough meticulously brings Gandhi to life, creating on the screen a man who led India to greatness.

These first and last papers are both grammatically correct. But during the quarter, the student's work often contained long confused sentences and structural errors, seemingly related to sentence combining units recently studied:

The Super Now and MMDA Accounts provide the customer with more liquidity of their funds; whereas, the Money Market ties up money from six to thirty-six months.

After dating the same girl for over a year, Beverly and I had come to the same point.

If this education includes controversy, it is even better because controversy makes people think about their convictions, but it should never include censorship.

When compared to the usual crafts and local arts which are usually displayed in the University Center, the acquisition of this great collection was an accomplishment to be applauded.

Such an increase in awkwardness and error also emerged in other studies: Ross (1971) reported long and clumsy structures; Swan (1978) an early overuse of new techniques; and Maimon and Nodine (1978) an increase in pronoun reference errors.

Maimon and Nodine suggest that, as Mina Shaughnessy recommends, teachers should allow students to learn by their mistakes without punishment, to get worse before improving. Thus I marked their errors but did not reduce grades for them, and I encouraged students to keep trying new structures; certainly a teacher should not suggest something new and then penalize a student for trying it. This attitude seemed successful: by the end of the term, as with the student discussed here, error and awkwardness had been greatly reduced. Similarly, Bateman and Zidonis (1966) and Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg (1978) showed that extended practice led to fewer errors.

Writing quality, then, seemed to improve as the quarter progressed and revision sessions certainly became more focused. This change was also reflected in higher grades and an ability to tackle more complicated projects.

To substantiate these subjective judgments, I tested students for improvement in words per T-unit and words per clause, using four sections of about twenty students from two quarters. After a ten week term, students wrote T-units in their free writing journals that were 2.55 words longer and clauses 1.25 words longer; their finished papers improved by 2.65 words per T-unit and 1.14 words per clause. (See Table 3). Thus, in finished papers, these students bridged

almost half the distance between Hunt's (1970) twelfth graders and his skilled adults in both T-unit and clause length. These results resembled Swan's for clause length and Mulder et. al.'s for T-unit length, even though no class time was given to the exercises. With the older student, then, regular out-of-class practice and in-class application to revision can significantly affect writing style. This improvement was anticipated, but the comparison of journals and papers seemed surprising. Even with our primary focus placed on editing, students improved at an equal rate in both journals and finished papers (2.55 versus 2.65 words per T-unit). Perhaps this outcome shows a more stable effect on writing than short exercise sessions were expected to produce.

In contrast, at the University of Rhode Island, Beverley Swan used exercises and instructions *in class* for sixteen weeks and tested first drafts and edited work of thirty-two sophomores, juniors, and seniors. (See Table 4.) Her students' edited work improved dramatically in words per clause (1.51) and less in T-unit length (.87). In the current study, however, students improve less in words per clause (1.14), but three times more (2.65) in words per T-unit. Perhaps these results were influenced by *The Writer's Options*, in which three of the nine units on sentences concern full clauses. They also follow Frank O'Hare's explanation of a 5.9 word per T-unit difference between twelfth graders and superior adults in Kellogg Hunt's (1970) study: "The older writers not only wrote more subordinate clauses per main clause, especially adjective clauses, they also wrote longer clauses, which, of course, combined with the greater number of clauses, accounted for their writing longer T-units" (1973, p.23).

Another contrast between these studies concerns the two writing types, free writing and edited papers. Throughout the term, Swan found no significant difference in clause and T-unit lengths between free writing and edited versions, whereas in this study, journals and finished papers differed significantly (10.89 to 15.08 words per T-unit at the beginning; 13.29 to 17.07 at midterm; 13.40 to 17.73 at the end) and at constant amounts (4.19, 3.78, 4.33). Perhaps dissimilar free writing assignments caused this contrast: Swan's students, writing a first draft of a soon-to-be-completed paper, may have attempted to write and polish in one sitting; this study's journals, however, were out-of-class free

writing never made into papers and graded only for completion. These data thus point to a distinct variation between free writing and edited versions of papers.

Midterm results provide another distinction between the two studies. In the first eight weeks, Swan's students made their greatest gain in words per clause in edited work, which she attributed to the students' ability to use each technique in edited work before applying it automatically. Then in the second eight weeks, their free writing showed the larger gain. In the first part of the term (five weeks), however, students in this study experienced their greatest gain in T-unit length and clause length for both free writing and edited work. Perhaps the sentence combining text influenced these results: by midterm these students had completed ten units of *The Writer's Options*, a first part of the book containing the exercises on sentence structure. As they worked through Parts Two and Three, on paragraphs and essay strategies, their clause and T-unit lengths continued to improve and their errors went down, but the gains were not at the earlier high rate. With a thorough set of exercises, advanced students can improve dramatically in just five weeks, although a longer period is needed to begin using the structures correctly and skillfully.

Students improved their free and edited writing through this program, then, but was this work really responsible for their improvement? James Kinneavy (1979) felt that the increased writing activity of experimental groups in O'Hare's design and the Miami of Ohio study might be the "important unexamined variable" (p. 68). My impression was that a daily free writing journal gave students confidence and that edited assignments improved their organization and thinking, but that sentence combining was largely responsible for their change of style. Looking back at papers from earlier quarters, I found students had averaged 14.97 words per T-unit on their first papers and 15.46 on their last, a change of .49 words per T-unit from a quarter of paper writing and journal work as opposed to a 2.65 change when sentence combining was added. The sentence combining did seem to be the cause of improvement.

Although Ney (1976) felt that sentence combining would not help college students, later studies have shown its effectiveness with this older group. Since advanced students need class time to work on their own ideas, these exercises should not dominate class work. Students can complete

combining at home and then employ the new options as they revise their papers, thus improving both finished products and free writing. Regardless of the course structure or curriculum, sentence combining practice can be a profitable component of the advanced class.

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Table 1
 Studies with College Freshmen
 Changes in Words per T-unit and Words per Clause in Writing Samples

| | Before | | After | | Change | |
|-------------------|--------|------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| | w/t | w/c | w/t | w/c | w/t | w/c |
| Ross (1971) | | 9.2 | | 11.9 | | +2.7 |
| Daiker (1978) | 15.31 | 8.75 | 16.05 | 9.64 | + .74 | + .89 |
| Stewart (1978) | 14.60 | 8.76 | 18.14 | 11.29 | +3.54 | +2.53 |
| Maimon (1979) | 17.68 | | 22.98 | | +5.30 | |

Table 2
 Studies with Advanced College Students and Adults
 Changes in Words per T-unit and Words per Clause in Writing Samples

| | Before | | After | | Change | |
|------------------|--------|------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| | w/t | w/c | w/t | w/c | w/t | w/c |
| Swan (1978) | 15.61 | 8.97 | 16.48 | 10.48 | + .87 | +1.51 |
| Mulder (1979) | | | | | +2.04 | |
| | | | | | 3.07 | |
| Olson (1981) | | | | | | +5.5 |

Table 3

Results in Words per T-unit and Words per Clause
Adams' Study of Advanced College Students

| | w/t | w/c | Change | |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| | | | w/t | w/c |
| Beginning | | | | |
| Journal | 10.89 | 8.77 | | |
| Edited Work | 15.08 | 11.27 | | |
| Midterm (5 wks) | | | | |
| Journal | 13.29 | 9.81 | + 2.40 | + 1.04 |
| Edited Work | 17.07 | 12.21 | + 1.99 | + .94 |
| End of Term (10 wks) | | | | |
| Journal | 13.40 | 10.02 | + .11 | + .21 |
| Edited Work | 17.73 | 12.41 | + .66 | + .20 |
| Total Change | | | | |
| Journal | | | + 2.55 | + 1.25 |
| Edited Work | | | + 2.65 | + 1.14 |

Table 4

Results in Words per T-unit and Words per Clause
Swan's Study of Advanced College Students

| | w/t | w/c | Change | |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| | | | w/t | w/c |
| Beginning | | | | |
| Timed Free | 15.79 | 9.07 | | |
| Edited Work | 15.61 | 8.97 | | |
| Midterm (8 wks) | | | | |
| Timed Free | 15.89 | 9.53 | + .10 | + .46 |
| Edited Work | 16.20 | 10.00 | + .59 | + 1.03 |
| End of Term (16 wks) | | | | |
| Timed Free | 16.44 | 10.59 | + .55 | + 1.06 |
| Edited Work | 16.48 | 10.48 | + .28 | + .48 |
| Total Change | | | | |
| Timed Free | | | + .65 | + 1.52 |
| Edited Work | | | + .87 | + 1.51 |

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