Designs on writing (2)

In the second of three articles on giving young learners a better understanding of the writing process, Debra Myhill considers how teachers can demonstrate the different ways of thinking about sentence design that experienced writers have at their disposal.

Every line, every phrase, may pass the ordeal of deliberation and deliberate choice. Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Perhaps it is when writing poetry that we are most conscious of making design choices at sentence level — moving a phrase here, inserting additional detail there, altering where a line break falls to achieve the effect we are striving for. And it is a striving — it is no mistake that Coleridge uses the words 'ordeal' and 'deliberate choice' to describe the process of creating poetry: some words, images and phrases bubble to the surface unconsciously and spontaneously, unbidden, but few of us are fortunate enough to experience this consistently or sustainedly. But the same process holds true for prose — the sentence is at the heart of effective writing, and if we wish to encourage young writers to think of writing as a design activity, then we need to help them acquire a repertoire of ways of thinking about sentence design.

In our recent ESRC research into young learners' writing in Years 9 and 11, we found that secondary writers were much more likely to talk about choosing a word, or about text level choices, than about choices at sentence level. I think we may be less confident in teaching developing writers about how variety in sentence shape and structure can create different effects. The Key Stage 3 *Framework for English* has drawn attention to some aspects of sentence design, such as variety or the use of complex sentences, but it is up to us as teachers to make the connection between the sentence feature and its effect. If we don't, the danger is that young people 'learn' some strange things about sentences, such as the notion that certain kinds of sentences are good sentences, or that using a certain kind of sentence has intrinsic merit. It was very noticeable how many of those interviewed for our research study spoke about complex sentences, for example, (though fewer could actually identify one!) but very few were able to articulate any design or effect reasons for using a complex sentence. One writer explained that he had tried to use complex sentences in his piece of writing because '*it's one of my targets this year*', but when probed to explain why he might want to use complex sentences, he told us 'I *know, like, that you get a better grade, but I don't actually know, like, why they're better*'. This is blind obedience, rather than creative understanding of the design possibilities of sentences.

One way of opening up thinking about sentence design is to draw attention to the different communication modes of talking and writing. When we talk, we tend to have less variety in sentence patterns because we can give our listeners strong clues about what is important or significant in our utterance through

In talk, we tend to use information, emphasis and gesture rather than varying our sentence patterns.

a host of paralinguistic devices, such as intonation, emphasis, or speed of delivery, and through non-verbal gestures such as facial expression or hand gestures. In writing, none of these expressive tools are available and so we have to use a parallel repertoire which includes both graphic and syntactic design. Invite young writers to take a fairly straightforward sentence (for example, *We got the train to London yesterday to go for some retail therapy*), and

ask them to play with different ways of saying the sentence to subtly alter where the significance or key meaning is located. This could then lead into further work which might explore any one of the three following aspects of sentence design.

Variety in sentence length

Varying the length of sentences in a text is one way to achieve the sort of effects in writing that might be achieved through intonation, emphasis or speed of delivery in speech. Sentences which are all of similar length have nothing intrinsically wrong with them but they do not help the reader 'hear' the text, and this can create texts which read rather monotonously. The most accomplished writers in our ESRC research showed considerable adeptness at varying sentence length for effect, whilst the less confident writers not only did not vary sentence length but tended to write over-long complicated sentences which were sometimes hard to follow. Some of the patterns observed in sentence variety were:

- using short sentences for emphasis
- using minor sentences for effect
- using short staccato sentences to create tension or pace
- juxtaposing short with longer sentences to create textual rhythm
- using long sentences to convey fullness, abundance, exaggeration etc
- using repeated co-ordination for effect, such as to suggest a childlike tone, or to emphasise a list of ideas.

Consider the opening three sentences of Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence*:

'The year began with lunch.

'We have always found that New Year's Eve, with its eleventh-hour excesses and doomed resolutions, is a dismal occasion for all the forced jollity and midnight toasts and kisses. And so, when we heard that over in the village of Lacoste, a few miles away, the proprietor of Le Simiane was offering a six-course lunch with pink champagne to his amiable clientele, it seemed like a much more cheerful way to start the next twelve months.'

Here the short, simple initial sentence draws attention to the idea of lunch beginning the year, including the slight dissonance of lunch as the starting-point for a new year. (Incidentally, this sentence is also a single sentence paragraph — something I will return to in the next article!) This is followed by two longer sentences which provide elaborative detail about why the year began with lunch. The first of the two sentences notes the

dislike of traditional methods of celebration, and repeats the use of 'and' to emphasise these, whilst the second sentence presents the more enticing alternative.

For experienced writers, this kind of variation in sentence length tends to happen automatically, although I still adjust over-long sentences or decide to shorten a sentence to give it greater emphasis at the revision stage. One writer in our research aptly demonstrated his facility at using sentence length variation as a tool to enhance the effectiveness of his communication. Shaping an argument about why celebrities earn too much, and using the model, Jordan, as an example, he writes:

'Is it because she makes music that truly touches millions of people? No. Is it because she writes beautiful, thought-provoking novels? No. Is it because she paints stunning pictures? No. It is purely the fact that she has huge breasts.

Here he uses short and long sentence contrasts in juxtaposition with repetition and rhetorical questions to express clearly his view of Jordan's public worth. But our study also indicated that many developing writers lack this capability or understanding and would benefit from explicit teaching about this.

Sentence openings

The majority of sentences in any written text are Subject-Verb sentences, which begin with the subject and are then followed by the main verb. This is, in part, a reflection of the way English works as a language — word order is very important as English

Compare formality and instructional features in recipes by Delia Smith, Mrs Beaton and Jamie Oliver.

When we investigated children's sentence openings in our research, we found that in weak writers there was a very strong tendency towards repetitive subject openings, sometimes with a repeated pronoun. We also found what seems to be a developmental pattern as average ability writers were more likely to vary their sentence opening by using an adverb or adverbial, whereas the most able writers had more varied sentence starts, including non-finite clauses. Encourage writers to experiment with different ways of opening their sentences — and most importantly of all encourage them to discuss what they think is the effect of the syntactical choice they have made.

Sentence expansion

One further aspect of sentence design that can be usefully explored with young writers is sentence expansion — the addition of further elaborative or explanatory detail. The less confident writers in our study used a lot of verbs, often fairly commonplace ones, and gave their readers very few details or images to contextualize the verbs. But the best writers created visual or emotional detail through appropriate expansion of noun phrases. I'd like to stress 'appropriate' at this point, as artificially inflated noun phrases with a pile-up of adjectives does not constitute effective writing! But well-chosen detail is important. Compare the difference between the two Y8 pieces of writing below: both extracts are from developing writers and both have encouraging signs of design choices being made. However, even though both pieces describe narrative action, one extract is much more dependent on main verbs, narrating action, than the other. I have emboldened the finite verbs, as this helps to illustrate how this is happening.

has relatively few inflections or agreements to signal relationships between words. But when too many sentences begin with the subject, the writing can have a flat or monotonous tone, as one of our school writers implicitly recognised:

'Sometimes, you know, the sentences, they all seem to follow the same pattern so I need to change it around to make it more interesting.'

More importantly, altering the syntactical structure of the sentence is one way to draw attention to particular elements of the sentence, just as in speech you might use a pause, a hand gesture or volume to indicate the most important idea in your utterance. Linguists generally agree that the ideas at the end of a sentence receive most emphasis (end weight), followed by those at the start. Consider the inversion which is achieved in the following sentence by a Y10 girl:

'Over one of the bedknobs hung a school tie, a hat and a fluorescent orange scarf.'

By beginning with an adverbial and delaying the subject till the end of the sentence, the emphasis of the sentence shifts: what is most important is not the bedknob, but the tie, hat and scarf.

*'As the sun **descended** and the night **grew** darker we **stayed** outside and **chatted** and **ate** — then I **became** bored and **wandered** off. I **played** around the outside of the pool while the adults **continued** there party — then I **spotted** the diving board and I **made** my way over to it.'*

*'We **started** our walk down a muddy path. I **loved** the mud, still **do**. I **slid** along it, mud covering my trouser bottoms and boots already and then onto a field. I **played** a game, trying to get as close to the sheep as I **could** before they **jumped** up and ran away. The lambs **were** a little more curious and they **stared**, their heads cocked to the side and **trotted** towards you, only to go flying off to their mothers when you **took** a step towards them.*

The photos above illustrate the camera shot concept of designing and writing — the bud, the black spot on the leaf, and the rosehip are all in the rather dull 'full frontal' of the rose bush in Picture 1: however, it requires the selective design decisions of the photographer to direct the viewer's focus.

Let's consider a somewhat more expert writer now — Jane Austen! In the extract below, we are introduced to Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy for the first time: a key moment for readers as we form our first impressions of the two men. Austen uses adjectives, prepositional phrases, nouns in apposition, and adverbs to provide finely crafted detail. I have underlined all the noun phrases, as this shows the variety in length and techniques for expansion. The description concludes with the longest noun phrase in the extract, not accidentally the one describing Darcy's financial assets.

'Mr Bingley was good-looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance and easy, unaffected manners. His sisters were fine women, with an air of decided fashion. His brother-in-law, Mr Hurst, merely looked the gentleman; but his friend, Mr Darcy, soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes of his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year.'

The sentence as camera shot

The principle of exercising design choices at sentence level is quintessentially about drawing the reader's attention to the ideas which are most significant. It is not about a hierarchy of quality in types of sentence or grammatical gymnastics. I like encouraging developing writers to think about this through an analogy with photography — designing sentences is like designing a camera shot: with a camera, you can choose to provide a fairly ordinary distance shot which simply captures the object or scene, or you can choose to zoom in on significant elements of the scene. It is no accident that in photography this is called composition. And skill in effective composition of sentences gives the writer power:

'What I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed.' (Didion, cited in Murray, 1990)

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Reference

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