

Sound and Sense:

Grammar, Poetry and Creative Language

by

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Arianna and Jill are working as partners during a writing practice in seventh-grade English. One of them is writing a detailed description of a photograph she has been given. The other, who is not looking at the photograph, has been asked to quickly write a list of active verbs, the kind that might provide unexpected energy if they were suddenly dropped into a piece of writing. Of course, that's what's going to happen next. All around the room, partners go on to try out the new verbs in the descriptions of photographs. Many verbs won't work at all. They might be too silly or even too predictable. But within minutes, with a little nudging and bending, a few minor miracles begin to happen.

Arianna and Jill's piece is one such miracle:

The chic lady lounges casually on a plush couch. Cigarette in her left hand black gloves and a silver sequined purse in her right she wears a carefree look on her made up face. Her hat saunters over her glowing eyes and her red lipstick shines in the light. Her black and red blouse falls loosely over her toned arms, and her shoulders smile out from underneath it. Her thick ring antagonizes her thin fingers, red nails floating to a perfect point.

When Arianna and Jill inject into their paragraph surprising verbs like "saunters" and "antagonizes," they begin to sound less like seventh-graders and more like John Updike. Arianna likes this writing practice, noting,

It shows how I incorporated words that are not expected to fit in and made them work. I particularly liked where I wrote 'Her hat saunters over her glowing eyes' because you can imagine a hat strutting and showing off, even though it really isn't possible.

I incorporate a generous dose of grammar into the writing portion of my seventh-grade English classes at Marin Country Day School, but not grammar in the traditional sense. Students do not learn to diagram someone else's writing. Instead, students use grammatical and syntactical principles in their own writing to construct more effective sentences, paragraphs, and poems. We also study phonology, the sounds language makes, listening as we read for overlapping sounds and repeating rhythms. By combining the study of the structure and the sound of language with creative writing, we practice skills and discover infinite writing possibilities all in the same pen stroke.

Then what about "saunter?" Arianna and Jill knew it was an active verb, a surprising one that made a new kind of sense in relation to its context. But this word is full of listening as well as seeing. Listen more closely to the repeating "er" sounds in their sentence: "Her hat saunters over her glowing eyes." Are the girls conscious of the rolling r's in their sentence? I hope so. I want to train them to hear these patterns. I give examples, we practice, we read aloud, we listen and learn from each other. Then listening, as well as seeing, becomes habit.

One way I begin to train their ears is by asking students to make lists of wonderful-sounding words.

This is strictly a listening game; they shouldn't write "lunch" just because they're hungry. Students usually fly into this sort of thing, and a few minutes later, when I ask for words, almost everyone (including me) wants to contribute. I rapidly write these words all over the blackboard. There are lumpy words, silly words, long, flowing vowel-filled words and short, hard lumps of consonants. Students have fun saying them aloud and generally some words elicit laughs. I then tell them to use their own words, borrow from other contributors if they wish, add other words as necessary, change forms when logical and put together a good line or good lines, or a poem or a serious thought or whatever else might happen, this time making use of sense and ideas but concentrating on the sound possibilities in the original words.

***Unexpected words can go together,
creating amazing images — like
syllables creeping through teeth —
and unique sound relationships can
provide a poetic energy.***

Lisa wrote this list: cauliflower, syllable, sifted, chickadee, volcano, sloth and detergent. Then she quickly assembled this piece:

She stumbles home carrying groceries with the cauliflower peeking out.

On the other side of the street a man loads his laundry into the tumbling washer and his detergent sifts into the bubbling water.

Outside, the homeless dog spots a chickadee. Leaving his master he darts through the traffic like a determined sloth.

Just as the syllables creep through her teeth the fog erupts like a volcano in the dust.

She was surprised by what she had written, but she was beginning to see that the possibilities of writing are much larger than what she'd imagined. Unexpected words can go together, creating amazing images — like syllables creeping through teeth

— and unique sound relationships can provide a poetic energy.

A mixing of sounds, syllables and parts of speech suggests a wide set of possible mix-and-match writing practices. On one occasion we made separate adjective-noun lists and blended them together. They first made random lists of nouns and adjectives, and then paired the nouns and adjectives on the basis of various vowel sounds: "i" as in "thin," "eh" as in "rent," "ou" as in "loud," "oo" as in "moose," "e" as in "key." The phrases they came up with appeal to the ear:

*depressed bed
messy letter
jittery clip
eccentric ticket
idiotic pillow
dumbfounded empress dowager.*

Then I had them practice matching a particular adjective suffix ending, such as "ous," "ing," "able," "ible," and "ful," with any noun that sounds good, resulting in:

*vicious pillow
victorious lipstick
faithful eraser
rentable desert
tiring eyeball
plentiful mildew.*

Writing models are easy to find. If I ask for nouns, I can show them Mona Van Duyn's "A Small Excursion," which is full of the physical weight of names and places as she takes us on a journey through America. The opening reads:

*Take a trip with me
through the towns in Missouri.
Feel naming in all its joy
as we go through Braggadocio, Barks, Kidder, Fair
Play,
Bourbon, Bean Lake
and Loose Creek.
If we should get lost
we could spend the night at
Lutesville, Brinktown, Excello, Nodaway,
Humansville, or Kinderpost.*

Claire wrote a noun poem after looking at a forestry service poster:

What strange names we come up with

Trees called

Ginkgo,

Ash,

Magnolia,

Pine.

Come sit with me under a Sycamore tree.

Come walk with me under American Elms

Hickory,

Oak,

Dogwood,

Holly,

Maple,

Spruce,

Juniper,

Fir.

Come stand with me in the shade of a Tulip tree

Come walk in a grove of Redwood.

Come rest on the trunk of a Cottonwood.

Come enter the forest with me.

If I ask them to exploit prepositional phrases, I can show them James Wright's "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" to demonstrate the particular creative and grammatical force of prepositions. It is a wonderful poem and often used by writing and poetry teachers, and his observations — "Over my head," "Down the ravine," "Into the distances," "In a field of sunlight between two pines," — not only show how he is seeing, but how language works. Student practices grow easily from the language concepts in this poem and I often have students write prepositional phrase observations as they quietly sit outside and write about what they see in specific locations. Ben's poem is an observation full of the rhythm of prepositional phrases:

Below me the brown sugar sand clumps in the indentation of my foot.

Up the hill I hear the sound of a jackhammer smashing the smooth, gray concrete.

The trees down by the creek are mostly leafless, After years of constantly taking the burden of watching six year old children.

Off in the distance the bay is throwing itself up on to the shore

as it has always done.

In the trees by the office a few lingering leaves struggle to cling to their branches.

Silently a gray seagull swoops by from overhead.

The once orange pole which holds the basketball hoop is now gray

from many years of missed shots.

Across the creek, behind the rings,

a lonely sweater waits patiently for its owner to come and get it.

If I ask for writing that emphasizes one syllable words, I often present Gary Snyder's "Yase: September" which begins:

Old Mrs. Kawabata

cuts down the tall spike weeds-

more in two hours

than I can get done in a day.

Of course there is much to say about the "how" or "why" of this poem, but the force, perhaps even the dignity of the characterization comes from the simplicity of sound, especially in contrast to the long, flowing sound of "Kawabata." The practices and possibilities seem obvious. Nick was inspired by a Galway Kinnell poem about blackberries and tried his own, with an emphasis one-syllable words:

The bushes grow thick around the swings,

curving up the red, rusted metal,

the forest green, punctuated with the punctual growth of black, blackberries

every winter, with the frost, they come.

My hands reach for the fruit,

and grab hold of a black one,

red juice spurts out and it leaks down my hand,

down my arm, to my shirt

where every year a new stain shows,

marking the beginning of the time,

when black nights,

lead to bright, red days.

Verb practices are easy. If I ask students how they entered the room and they say, "We walked," I can always say, "Well, that's one way. Now let's think about other possibilities, some other actions. How else could a person get into this room? Maybe the room is locked up tight. Or perhaps someone is trying to stop you. You'll notice yourself expanding your verb choices, expanding the action of your sentence." Then, to make it a little more fun, we pick someone

from the class to be the one trying to get into the room. The class takes a few minutes to write verb possibilities, they read them aloud and I gather the choices together to make a composite action sentence.

Leanne pounded, dissolved, seeped, threw herself, butted the wall with her head, chopped her way with a hacksaw, smashed, rocketed, chainsawed, oozed, bit through the lock, shrank into an atom...

Michael hammered, sifted, waltzed, screamed and the building caved in, bashed, vaporized, used a can opener, dug his way, morphed into, used a library pass, clicked the heels of his red slippers three times...

Not every practice leads to “serious” writing, but when the habits are established, I think serious writing comes more easily. Last year we had some success with an infinitive-prepositional phrase exercise that seemed to stimulate some solid writing and thinking. Every student had learned the infinitive verb form and we considered infinitives and imperatives in writing, and the general force of beginning lines with verbs. We looked at the use of verbs in Gary Snyder’s poem, “Things to Do Around a Lookout,” which begins:

*Wrap up in a blanket in cold weather and just read.
Practise writing Chinese characters with a brush
Paint pictures of the mountains
Put out salt for deer*

Students also discovered that in contrast to the potentially short, blunt impact of opening verbs, prepositional phrases were long, flowing and visual, like rocks skipping across water. They all wrote separate infinitive-preposition lists and we made random connections. I called one student to supply an infinitive, then another to produce a prepositional phrase, then an infinitive, then a prepositional phrase, and short lines of grammar and poetry took shape in the air.

Helena looked at the process carefully, took the concept and fashioned this poem:

Things To Do

*To saunter through anger
And laugh out loud
To swim through fear
And still breathe under water
To flip over hate*

Seventh-Grade Poets

*If you hang on every word
you may forget to breathe.
Stay awhile;
Underneath what you say
the earth follows
its own wide field
and rivers correct themselves.
Tomorrow your mistakes
will still be here,
but you can always revise
places where you listened,
or remember how water was cold.
All the signals you need
are in front of you
if you only look for
what you are finding.
—Kailyn*

*Your words give a shove
and your vowels follow each other
in a reckless tangle
like people suddenly pushed
onto an icy surface,
hanging together, irregular
full of weight and force
until you feel the rhythm
and a single clear line curves away
cool and balanced.
—Ryan*

*Even when you cross them out
one word leads to another
if they trust you.
Sound has no ego
and offers everything.
Just choose, and lean in.
—Erica*

*And land on my feet
To sing through despair
And hear my voice echo
To gasp close to sickness
And breathe in sweet air
To dance through chaos
And find my own rhythm
To ignore disaster
And find someone to celebrate with*

Although this poem is based simply on connecting infinitives with prepositional phrases, the central connecting theme takes it far beyond simple formula writing. Using ordinary parts, Helena made unforeseen discoveries.

The results of practicing language play are cumulative. Once young writers learn to manipulate language, they keep using the techniques because the effects are powerful.

The use of clauses in teaching syntax is particularly exciting, since dependent clauses, especially adjective clauses (linked by relative pronouns) and adverb clauses (linked by subordinating conjunctions) not only connect at least two ideas in an instant, but also give a rhythmic “shove” to any idea that spins out from a writer’s mind. Whitman’s “When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom’d” is not great poetry just because he begins with “when” (subordinating conjunction), but the extension of this idea is made possible because of the grammatical “shove.” Emily Dickinson can allow an abstract idea to unfold when she writes “Because I could not stop for Death.” Galway Kinnell even wrote a three-page, one-sentence fishing poem (“Angling, a Day”) that hangs together by his use of “though,” until he jars to a halt with his independent clause: “...we have caught nothing.” And, naturally, Shakespeare’s sonnets are full of opening “whens.”

A couple of years ago, I bumped into a William Stafford notebook entry where he wrote something like this, “If goats liked my poetry I would have to start over again,” and I thought what a wonderful

opportunity for students to see how abstraction works and at the same time exploit the power of the dependent clause. I proposed that everyone write “if” poems that would consider what might happen if certain kinds of animals liked a student’s writing. The blending of the abstract and the concrete and the grammatical force of the construction created a strong set of poems that had enough in common that our class was able to give a poetry reading and present the whole thing as if it were a single poem.

Here are some that demonstrate the process and can easily be read together as a single idea:

*If birds liked my poetry
the words would soar through the air
and glide onto the page, flapping their vowels.*
—Toby

*If condors liked my poetry they
Would live in the comfort
Of my words shredded for their nest
They would tie my poetry together
So when their baby birds
Learned how to fly
They would
Have
A
Parachute
To help them*
—Arianna

*If fish liked my poetry
they would share it in all their schools
And if they really liked my poetry,
they would propel across the writing,
keeping their eyes open at all times.*
—Oliver

*If lions liked my poetry
They might stalk it
And kill it
And guard it all the time
And I would have to start over
Another little rhyme*
—Joe S.

*If squids liked my poetry,
they would leave what is good bare,*

*but they would black out the bad parts,
leaving nothing there.*

—Spencer C.

Listen to Spencer's use of one-syllable words, his natural, comfortable use of rhyme, and his overlapping sounds, even though the exercise was specifically about "if"-generated dependent clauses. The results of practicing language play are cumulative. Once young writers learn to manipulate language, they keep using the techniques because the effects are powerful.

How do I measure the success of this kind of approach to language? Well, if ideas and grammar and accents and syllables and so on, all exist together, I can observe and discover success by seeing these elements mixed in the overall writing of students, and if their responses to this process are generally strong and positive, I feel we are on the right track. Of course, I can test skills too. For example, I often give individual photographs to every student (*Arizona Highways* is my favorite source), then I ask them to observe well and try out certain practices. In one instance, I asked them to begin with a subordinating conjunction, then told them to focus on accurate adjectives that give small, specific, seeing details, and to use active verbs that give life to the descriptions and sentences whenever possible. This is what I believe is a grammar test and here are some samples.

Danika wrote:

Although the large and jagged rocks are gray, when the sun shines upon them a golden color seems to appear. On these rocks a messy type of plant grows, covering and protecting the rock's skin. Far off in the distance, through a crevice in the rocks, a desolate town can be seen.

Perry leaned on "when" to lead him in:

When the sun glimmers off the craggy rock, the sunlight makes a reflection and part of the lake turns a golden color. The shadow line is bumpy as is the hill that shadows it. The moon shines dimly above the age old rock. In the water lay rocks with their heads poking out as if to get a first glimpse of the world.

Jesse looked hard, chose "although" and felt the rhythm of one-syllable words:

Although this cliff is hard, solid rock, it also looks like soft clay about to lose its structure and collapse, making the small houses crumble. The houses are almost snuck into the only opening on the plateau.

Remember, this is seventh-grade writing. They had about 30 minutes and they didn't know in advance what they would be called upon to say. They did well, but they were practiced in the craft.

Creativity and basics grow together. Grammar rules are useless if we don't know how language functions. Knowing that one word is better than another in a specific situation is important. Knowing a vocabulary of grammar and talking thoughtfully about ideas and sentence possibilities is important. We should not have to make a choice between the wild poem and the subordinating conjunction. They know each other.

During this last year, Jonathan had success with poetry that grew from an adjective-noun combining process where he came up with "empty/chair" and "grim-faced/optimism" and in response to his work he wrote,

Was this practice useful? Definitely. Randomly combining types of words always creates something interesting. With this random combining, unlikely phrases can be thought up, leading to original ideas that one could never come up with in consciousness. That is what makes a good poem: an idea so different that one could never see it coming.

Jonathan, Arianna and the others have discovered new approaches to writing that mix ideas, sounds, grammar and rhythm to create texts that surprise the reader and even the author. If the goal of grammar instruction is better student writing, then these kinds of grammar lessons really work.

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