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National Writing Project

BETWEEN *the* COMMAS

Sentence Instruction That Builds
Confident Writers (and Writing Teachers)

Martin Brandt Foreword by
Thomas Newkirk

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

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by Thomas Newkirk

In the mid 1960s high school students across Ohio (and I suspect the country at large) took what were called English Achievement tests and were ranked statewide. This was my moment to shine. The test was mostly grammar—the identification of parts of speech—and, at the risk of seeming immodest, I was good at it. Even as a sophomore I was the best young grammarian in my county, edging out a kid from Loudonville, and honorable mention in the state—I still have the certificate.

Grammar—the old-fashioned, Latinate Warriner’s grammar, sentence diagramming—method made sense to me. I liked the fact the sentences had nameable units that could be combined in an infinite number of ways. I even found the diagrams beautiful, like chemical molecules.

But I was a nerdish freak. My classmates—some of whom, I am sure, look back nostalgically at the rigor of the good old days—hated grammar. And they didn’t get it. Their sentence diagrams would falter on the difference between a direct and an indirect object. They were way out of their depth with absolute constructions. Like most other human beings, they found the difference between *restrictive* and *nonrestrictive* clauses confusing. What’s more, we spent so much time generally *not learning* grammar that we didn’t do much writing.

So all my professional life, I have campaigned against the kind of instruction I received, all the while secretly glad that I was taught to pay attention to sentences. I have no wish to return to the imbalanced and unsuccessful methods of my own day, but sentences *are* the medium we use as writers. I recall the award-winning novelist Tom Williams, being asked what he taught. His answer: “I teach the subject-verb-object sentence.” And I can’t count the times when I have clarified a garbled sentence by getting the subject of the sentence up front. As writers, and teachers of writing, we are all, at the very least, intuitive grammarians.

Whatever our vocabulary to describe the units of a sentence, we can all marvel at what Virginia Woolf can do with this image of two blind men walking in London at night:

Two bearded men, brothers, apparently, stone-blind, supporting themselves by resting a hand on the head of a small boy between them, marched down the street.

Woolf introduces the subject of her sentence, the two bearded men, then bit by bit fills out the image of them walking with the aid of the small boy between them. The artful elaboration takes place “between the commas” and can serve as an introduction to this book by that name.

Marty Brandt offers us a way to explore the possibilities of the sentence, but without the confusing Latinate terminology and the focus on avoiding mistakes, as in “watch your grammar.” When he must use terminology, well, he makes it up. The “absolute” construction that so resembles a sentence is a *sentence wannabe*. When you add extra identifying information (as Woolf does) you are employing the *-ingbomb* (he’ll explain that one). And all of this sentence instruction is done *in a writing course*. This is a writing book.

It is set up around three pillars of sentence use:

- **Focus:** *Does the true subject begin the sentence?* Often, particularly in more academic writing, a student might start, “One point that the author makes about prison reform is that. . . .” Here the true subject is probably “the author” and not “One point.” How many of us have had this problem in our own writing?
- **Elaboration:** *How can a sentence be opened up “between the commas” to add clarifying information, commentary, and detail?* In the Woolf sentence we get the unforgettable visual image of the blind men with their hands on the boy’s head.

- **Coherence:** *How does one sentence logically follow the previous sentence?* One of my wise colleagues once said that you knew writers were in trouble when they used “And another thing” to connect sentences—revealing that they were just adding on a sentence rather than connecting it.

For each of these pillars, Brandt takes you inside his classroom to show how he uses exercises like sentence combining and sentence scrambles to have students play with the construction of more complex sentences. And he shows how this work carries over (often but not always) into their writing.

As I’ve described it, *Between the Commas* might seem like an updated, more accessible version of the grammar books from our past. But it isn’t. Believe it or not this is an engaging, often very funny book. Marty embeds his descriptions of teaching these pillars with his own story as a writing teacher who had plateaued at mid-career. Not that he wasn’t viewed by peers and administrators as an excellent teacher—but he wasn’t getting better.

Rather than settling, he challenged himself to learn something new, to dive into research on sentence pedagogy from the 1970s and 1980s, to reinvent these methods for his classroom and, by trial and error, to reinvent himself as a writing teacher. He tells this story with humility and grace, recognizing partial successes and frequent frustrations. High school teachers (who can smell a phony a mile away) will recognize him as a compatriot. After having read so many inspirational teacher stories—many of which left me cold—I thought I was immune from that feeling of being inspired. But his last chapter, inviting readers to take their own journeys, did it for me.

When I think back to my own imperfect education, those diagrams, and that fusty terminology, I realize that I was lucky enough to sense the possibility of sentences, their infinite variability, the way they can open up and pause for clarification or contradiction or an aside, and the rhythm of these interruptions. I felt it but couldn’t describe it. I knew something I couldn’t articulate at the time: that making sentences is a profound human capacity, one that defines us as a species. Every intellectual move could happen within them. I understood that grammar is not about making mistakes, but exploring and expanding perception and thought.

In this engaging, honest, and innovative book, Marty Brandt makes all that clear. So welcome with me a new and original voice in writing instruction.



Introduction



Three Questions I Could Not Answer

One day in the spring of 1997, I sat at a desk in my school's computer lab, staring intently at the screen in front of me, trying to figure out what I was going to do with my next class. In those early days of my career, I often found myself barely ahead of my classes—not for any lack of conscientiousness, but because whenever I did plan ahead, everything would fall apart anyway. Since I did not yet have Internet service at home, I would often spend my prep period in what was then the relatively new activity of “surfing the Net,” frantically searching for some gift from the virtual world that I could use in class. On the computer screen before me this morning was the website for *Outside* magazine, a publication I had long enjoyed for its excellent writing on outdoor adventure.

I was always on the lookout for interesting articles that I could share with my students—anything with a strong narrative, preferably with a life or death struggle—so I had searched the *Outside Online* archive in order to read Jon Krakauer's (1996) magazine account of the 1996 Mt. Everest disaster, “Into Thin Air.” Krakauer's story, published the previous September, had just been expanded and republished as a massive best-selling book of the same name, a compelling narrative that I had recently devoured in about three days. And although I could never expect to get a class set of Krakauer's book, I thought that I might be able to cut and paste an abridged version of the article to share with my Language Arts 3 classes.

Oh, yeah. Language Arts 3. Even now, all these years later, the very mention of that class triggers a flood of memories from the early years of my career, most of them traumatic. Then as now, a good rule for understanding high school course offerings is, “The longer the title, the lower the class.” If as a freshman you find yourself in a class with an unimaginative title like, say, English 1, you’re probably doing all right, working toward college and surrounded by classmates doing the same. But if your class is Language Arts, instead of English, that’s probably the first clue that your school considers you below grade level or in need of remediation. Add another modifier to the class name, like *Correlated*, and you know, whether you’re a student or a teacher, that you’re doomed. In those days before the convulsive reform efforts of the past two decades, a class like Language Arts 3 was essentially a place to concentrate and control those students most frequently dismissed as “knuckleheads.” And although the school system has always employed high-minded rhetoric about every child deserving a chance, all the students of Language Arts 3 had to do was to look around at the familiar faces of their classmates to see that nobody was expecting very much from them here.

Understanding that they had been shunted off the main line, these students, always smarter than we adults ever gave them credit for, accepted their prescribed role with great relish. Their outlook, attitude, and submitted work all suggested they were content with their status as “academically deficient,” leaving me almost no way to teach them. They didn’t really want my help anyway. To them, I was just some guy, another boring adult promising to lead them on an exciting journey to some place—call it “Bookland” or “Essayville”—they had never really wanted to visit in the first place.

More than anything, these students just wanted to be left alone. They drifted into class late and barely acknowledged me, pretending on good days to read or write as I tried earnestly to “remediate” them. In every sentence they uttered, they would use the f-word as a kind of verbal placeholder. They savored any event that interrupted the monotony of school—a fight, a pregnancy—laughing in delight whenever I lost my temper. And their work, torn carelessly from spiral notebooks, was hastily completed, written in such a way as to suggest a desire to apply pencil to paper for the absolute minimal amount of time measurable by science. Each grim day, this ancient contest—the hopeful young teacher struggling to “enlighten” his indifferent-to-hostile students—played itself out, with the same results as everywhere else the game is played: the teacher loses.

And, to be honest, if the school was not exactly wrong in identifying these students as below grade level, the students were not wrong in identifying me as deficient, either.

Turnabout is fair play: *Yeah, we're lousy students. Why do you think they gave us a scrub like you as our teacher?* In fact, I did suffer from obvious deficiencies, something I understood but had no idea how to fix. Simply put, I did not know how to teach. I had no real idea where to begin to address the needs of these students, nor did I fully appreciate the complexity of what I was asking them to do. I still conceived of “teaching English” as a simple matter of explaining and assigning: “This is how to write a compound sentence; now you need never write another run-on. This is how to write a complex sentence; now you need never write another fragment.” I flattered myself, after such lessons, to think that I had really taught my students something, that in my lecture style I had achieved some form of deeply engaging performance art. Then their next hastily scrawled submissions would come in, replete with the very run-ons and fragments I had just inveighed against, and I would think to myself, as generations of English teachers had thought before me, *What's wrong with these kids?*

I have now come to see that early on, I had arrived at a crucial point in my development as a teacher: that moment when I could have either written the kids off and joined in the bitter repartee of the teacher staffroom, there to dwell until retirement, or when I could have instead asked myself something like, *How do I go about teaching these students in a way that does as little damage possible to everyone involved?* Given the state of things in Language Arts 3, it would take a potent combination of stubbornness, guilt, and hope for me to choose the latter.

So there I was on that spring morning, staring at that screen in the school's computer lab, unaware that I was about to ask myself the most important questions of my career. Those questions would be prompted by Krakauer's opening paragraph, which I had read and reread several times, and which I now type from memory:

Straddling the top of the world, one foot in Tibet and one in Nepal, I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind, and stared absently at the vast sweep of earth below. I understood on some dim, detached level, that it was a spectacular sight. I had been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, standing on the summit of Mt. Everest, I just couldn't summon the energy to care.
(1996, 46)

“Damn, that’s good,” I thought. No wonder it had taken me only three days to read the book. Those sentences read easily, carrying me along on a current that required very little effort to navigate. They seemed to be made of some verbal elastic that stretched and twisted, as in a game of cat’s cradle, guiding me first through complexity and resolving with a simplicity that made them not simply a grammatically sound mode of communication, but a pleasure to read. As I read and reread those opening lines, it occurred to me that there was a reason I always enjoyed the stories in *Outside* magazine: it was the sentences.

That’s when the first question hit me: *What’s going on in those sentences that makes them flow like that?*

This was followed naturally by the second question: *Why can’t my students write sentences like that?*

And, finally, inevitably, the most important question of all, directed to myself: *Well, why can’t you teach them to write sentences like that?*

Unfortunately, I didn’t have any answers. In the case of the first question—*What’s going on in those sentences?*—I simply didn’t know. I was at the moment a victim of the great, unacknowledged dirty secret of writing instruction: that English teachers are not significantly better prepared to teach writing than their colleagues in other disciplines—a problem that led to the creation of the National Writing Project (Gray 2000, 49). I hope this doesn’t sound bitter or nihilistic; it’s a statement I make more in sorrow than in anger. But it’s true. The job of teaching writing has fallen accidentally into the laps of English teachers, many of whom mistakenly consider themselves qualified, by dint of their undergraduate diet of Shakespeare and Chaucer, to teach writing. But although our college study—augmented perhaps by the occasional course in grammar or linguistics—may have made us *connoisseurs* of fine writing, it did very little to help us become *teachers* of writing, any more than taking a class in music appreciation would qualify us to teach the tenor saxophone.

To answer that first question, I would need a functioning understanding of the role of grammar, that most feared and justly hated aspect of English classes. I’m not talking about being able to diagram a sentence or identify the parts of speech. I hated doing things like that when I was in school, and I wasn’t wrong: Such activities have long been exposed as the useless time wasters that they are. But grammar presents us with a professional dilemma: although we must not *teach* grammar in the traditional sense, we must *understand* it if we are to help our students grow. As a teacher of writing, I needed

the ability to look at a sentence like Krakauer's opener and identify what was happening between the commas and find ways to encourage my students to make use of such structures, without destroying their desire to grow and develop as writers. Conversely, I also needed to acquire the knowledge that would allow me to look at a student's sentence and determine more accurately and humanely what made it go wrong.

Answering the second question—*Why can't my students write like this?*—would require a greater understanding of student development, particularly as it applies to the problem of writing. In fact, the question itself is based on a faulty premise. I do in fact have students capable of writing such sentences. These are the students who have an active reading life, who have spent their childhood in the company of great books, and who as a result need very little direct support in the area of sentence development. These students have a lot to say, and it's no accident that they have at their disposal a wide range not only of vocabulary, but of sentence moves to accommodate their ideas.

Unfortunately, they constitute a small minority. For the great majority, those who have not enjoyed the benefits of an active reading life, their sentences were deeply uninteresting affairs. The best of them relied heavily on coordinating conjunctions and occasional subordinating conjunctions (primarily *because*) to string together hesitant, tentative ideas; the sentences of these students were generally correct, but did little to make me want to keep reading their work. The most needy would either write very little, their ideas dying in a sentence or two for lack of invention, or write rambling, unpunctuated, and incoherent pages that resembled Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. (I did not yet see this as one of those "good problems.") Between these two extremes, I stood bewildered, unable to make sense of what I was seeing. Just as I needed to comprehend what I was seeing, so also did I need to anticipate the tendencies, habits, and struggles of my students, long before I could presume to say to them, "You need to improve as a writer."

Finally, the third question: *Why can't you teach them to write sentences like this?* At the risk of flattering myself, I'm glad I had the guts to ask myself that question. Too many teachers, I fear, would be content to ask only the first two and be done with it. You can hear their fatalistic commiseration in the staff room: "Yeah, those are great sentences; what a pity kids these days can't write like that." But by asking myself the third question, I had unknowingly set myself on a process of inquiry and discovery that has led to

the most satisfying years of my career. In fact, our students are better equipped to “write sentences like that” than we give them credit for, and they can be taught to do so—if we root our instruction in inquiry, exploration, and growth rather than the usual lists of proscriptions that seem to dominate whatever sentence-level instruction they get.

These problems would be resolved in time. In the meantime, I had a class to teach. In a moment of shot-in-the-dark desperation, I typed up Krakauer’s first four sentences, breaking them up into phrases, so that the paragraph resembled stanzas of verse:

Straddling the top of the world,
one foot in Tibet and one in Nepal,
I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask,
hunched a shoulder against the wind,
and stared absently
at the vast sweep of earth below.
I understood
on some dim, detached level,
that it was a spectacular sight.
I had been fantasizing about this moment,
and the release of emotion that would accompany it,
for many months.
But now that I was finally here,
standing on the summit of Mt. Everest,
I just couldn’t summon the energy to care.

I double-spaced between the lines, creating room for the students to write their own words underneath. Then I made photocopies and an overhead transparency and took them to the students of Language Arts 3.

When they saw what I was handing out, they thought it was a poem.

“Hey Brandt, you gonna try an’ make us read a poem today?”

“No. This is actually a paragraph by a writer named Jon Krakauer.”

For at least two reasons I can think of, they found the name “Krakauer” hilarious. When I restored some form of order several minutes later, I told them, “We’re going to see if we can write sentences like this by imitating them, one line at a time. Where Krakauer starts a line with an *-ing* verb, we’re going to start a line with an *-ing* verb. Where he has a comma ending a line, we’re going to have a comma ending a line.”

Working on an overhead projector, beads of sweat falling from my eyebrows, I slowly piled phrase upon phrase, added the necessary punctuation, and finally produced a reasonable imitation of Krakauer's paragraph. It was an account of my first bicycle ride to the top of a venerable local peak:

Leaning over the handlebars,
my legs aching and my lungs ready to burst,
I dropped into my lowest gear,
rose out of the saddle,
and groaned my way up the last 100 yards of asphalt.
I realized,
in some satisfied but exhausted way,
that I had made it to the top.
I had been anticipating this moment,
and the feeling of relief that would come with it,
for many miles.
But now that I was finally here,
coasting onto the parking lot of the Lick Observatory,
all I wanted to do was barf.

The students were politely impressed with my work, but muted in their praise, knowing that now they would have to create their own versions. I tried to sweeten the deal—and extend the assignment to the end of the week—by having them create a poster illustrating their sentences, but they struggled through the sentence writing for the rest of that period and much of the next day. To them, as to most people, one phrase looks pretty much the same as another, and it was hard for them to mimic Krakauer very closely. Finally one of the students came up to me with a completed version.

“Whaddya think of this, Brandt?”

For his opening sentence he had written something like the following:

**Sitting on my bed,
one hand on the bong and the other on a cold 40-ounce Old
English,
I took a deep hit,
leaned back against the wall,
and waited to get high.**

The rest of the paragraph only got worse from there, presenting me with an ethical problem. On one hand, I felt obliged to tell him, “You should say no to drugs.” On the other hand, I had to admit that this was probably the most interesting and enjoyable student-written paragraph I had read in six years as an English teacher. The young man looked at me, hoping for some teacher indignation; I looked at him, knowing how much he would relish it. Yet these sentences *were* good. I thought for a moment that if I could find the right, obscure corner of the classroom, I just might be able to place his poster out of view of any roving administrators.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” I said. “Go make me a poster of that!”

I didn’t know it at that moment, but I had just begun the rest of my career.

Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Sentence

More than any other aspect of writing, it is the quality of the sentences that determines whether a text is readable or not. Content counts, sure, but how many times have you found yourself struggling through some important work, some tome that you *should* have read, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, say, finding yourself weighted down by dense and plodding sentences? Part of what makes academic work so difficult to read is the fact that the sentences are often written with only content in mind, with little heed given to the needs of the reader, who is simply expected to bear the weighty occasion. It’s what made coffee drinkers out of us in college.

My coffee addiction would prove necessary as a teacher, too. I have read many hundreds of essays over the years that were perfectly organized, complete with all of the conventions so frequently taught by me and generations of earnest writing teachers—an introductory paragraph ending with a thesis (preferably of the “three-prong” variety), body paragraphs beginning with topic sentences that refer explicitly to specific portions of the thesis, supporting statements (preferably three, which somehow equals a “fully developed” paragraph) with evidence (preferably in the form of quotations from the text in question), a concluding paragraph, and, more recently, MLA-style citations. Such papers are perfectly organized and clear after a fashion, but they remain essentially unreadable because of what happens—or does not happen—at the sentence level. In fact, I have

come to believe that we teach these other things because they give us the satisfaction of having taught something *associated* with writing that the students can do right. Unfortunately, after reading such work, it becomes clear that we've taught our students everything *about* writing except how to write well.

I maintain that the ability to manipulate phrase and clause structures to form such sentences as the Krakauer example I've shared is the very essence of what makes a skilled, confident writer, and that understanding these phrase and clause structures is essential to becoming a skilled and confident teacher of writing. But this cannot happen by osmosis. If writing teachers don't know what these structures are, then we are in a poor position to help our students grow as writers. We are, as Francis Christensen so memorably put it, not *teaching* students to write better, but simply *expecting* them to (1963, 156). It's not enough simply to know comma splices and sentence fragments when we see them. A deeper understanding of the sentence requires us to understand the nature of our students' sentence-level errors, encourage them to acquire the phrase and clause moves that will accommodate the emerging maturity of their insights (Shaughnessy 1977, 66), and help them understand how sentences work together to create meaning.

This book is my attempt to share the principles I have learned and the materials I have created in my professional quest to help my students embrace the challenge of crafting fine sentences. The English sentence, even when it's mangled, remains a source of fascination and delight to me, and I now believe, as I approach my third decade in the classroom, that it is the sentence, more so than the paragraph or the essay, which deserves the greatest portion of our direct instruction. The paragraph, as an object of study, can benefit from a little simplification: a group of sentences working together to address an issue. The essay, though certainly difficult to master, is also a simple enough concept to understand: a series of paragraphs working together to explore an idea. But the sentence, with its seemingly endless variations and intricate moving parts, often so subtly distinct from one another as to puzzle educated adults, presents significant challenges for both the student and the teacher of writing, for reasons that are easy to overlook.

In the first place, for far too many teachers sentence instruction still means inflicting upon their students such odious practices as workbook exercises ("Circle the adjectives") or sentence diagramming. One of my favorite treatments of this practice can be found in Robert Newton Peck's novel *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, where young Rob, who has just gotten a D in English, finds himself roped into a grammar lesson from his Aunt Matty,

who blames his grade, predictably, on ignorance of grammar. “Trouble with teachers today is, they don’t diagram,” she says. “All they think of is the Bunny Hug” (1972, 57). She then writes the sentence “Jack hit the ball hard with Joe’s yellow bat,” and absurdly commands young Rob to diagram it. Of course he can’t, so she shows him how it’s done:

Picking up the pencil, Aunt Matty started to draw some lines and circles (and a few other gee-gaws that I’d never seen before and never seen since) on the sentence about Jack. She put a zig-zag here, and a crazy elbow-joint there. There was ovals and squiggles all over the paper. It was the fanciest thing I ever saw. The part about Jack was still in sight, but now it had arms and legs that thrashed out in six different directions. It looked to me like a hill of barb wire. And the worse it got, the prouder Aunt Matty was of it. (1972, 59)

Significantly, both teacher and pupil are left unsatisfied by the lesson, Rob describing “the unholy touch” of Aunt Matty’s handiwork as he takes it upstairs to pin to his bedroom wall—as Aunt Matty had instructed—and Aunt Matty telling his mother, “Next time, I’ll teach the pig.”

Peck has captured here not only the futility of traditional grammar instruction, but also the alienation and delusion that it creates: teachers viewing their students as uneducable, and students mistakenly viewing themselves as deficient in a subject they have actually mastered. We all acquire an entire sophisticated system of grammar by the time we’re about four years old, without the aid of a single diagram or worksheet. Yet, where grammar and writing are concerned, we often treat our students as if they don’t know anything. I remember a teacher demanding that our class memorize an alphabetical list of prepositions. I don’t know what written offenses provoked this obviously punitive assignment, nor whether the list contained all of the English prepositions, and I haven’t bothered to find out because I don’t care. I already knew how to use prepositions, and “memorizing” them in list form seemed utterly pointless. When I pointed this out, my teacher was not grateful for the insight. “Do *not* contradict an *adult!*” she decreed, confirming my belief that the exercise was unjustifiable: whenever adults are losing an argument to a kid, they claim rank. After enduring situations like these, it’s small wonder that by the time our students reach middle and high school, neither they nor their teachers have much of an appetite for sentence instruction.

Compounding this situation is the fact that few of us are truly prepared to respond professionally to even the most common problem in our students' writing. It's not that all we think of is the bunny hug (a scandalous ragtime dance style, for those of you who are still wondering); it's the fact that specialized knowledge of teaching writing is largely missing from the professional preparation of most English teachers and almost nonexistent for teachers in other subject areas. Most of us spend a preservice semester or two preparing to teach literature, with only perfunctory consideration given to the crucial issue of writing. Sometimes, in my more cynical moments, I suspect that this is because any exposure to the kind of work we'll actually be reading in the classroom would send us running like hell for some easier line of work—a variation on a wise line from the movie *The Milagro Beanfield War*: “Nobody would do anything if they knew what they were in for.”

"Just a Guy": Independence High School to San Francisco State

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San Jose's Independence High School, where I have spent almost my entire career, is a special place that emerged from the spirit of experimentation that suffused American education during the late sixties and early seventies. Conceived as an “educational park” that would combat segregation by serving students from all around the district, it's a huge campus, offering a combination of high school and adult education (Klitgaard 2015, 36–40). It is also a place of astounding linguistic variety. At one point it counted among its students forty-seven different spoken languages. Today, walking among the students at lunch, I like to think of Independence as a place that Walt Whitman would approve of: a microcosm of all that is great about America, and the immigrant culture that made her great—a place where the children of H1-Visa Silicon Valley computer science engineers attend class with the children of service employees who clean offices and cubicles at night; where students who live in the “luxury” condominiums that have recently sprung up in the area mix with tenants from the Section 8 housing in the apartment complexes on the other side of Jackson Avenue and McKee Road; a place where you can expect more than half the students in any class to at one point have been designated as English learners, but are now redesignated as “English proficient”; and

where many of the rest, though not so classified, will still speak a language other than English at home.

Small wonder that when I first began teaching there, I felt utterly overwhelmed. I soon came to accept the idea that I would never become the teacher I had once hoped I would, that I would be “just a guy.” But as the years went by, something remarkable began to happen—some dislodging, some incremental movement as slow but as inexorable as the movement of tectonic plates. You could say that a funny thing happened to me on my way to the staff room: I began to delight in my students’ language, slowly fell in love with their voices, and found myself wanting to hear their stories. Feeling that I had to crack this nut of teaching writing, I enrolled at last in a master’s degree program in composition at San Francisco State University.

I think it safe to say that I came to San Francisco State at the right time. The aim of the program was to prepare teachers of college composition courses, but that was close enough for me. Here I began to attach names and theories to many of my own classroom practices, things I had been doing with that strange blind hope that informs the work of so many writing teachers. The first text I read for the program was a pamphlet published by the Bay Area Writing Project, *Sentence and Paragraph Modeling* (Gray and Benson 1982), which advocates the use of the same kind of sentence modeling activity that I’d been doing since that day in Language Arts 3 so many years before. I read Mike Rose’s powerful memoir, *Lives on the Boundary* (1989), in which he defends the intellectual ability of the kind of kids most likely to be dismissed as “knuckleheads.” And I read the brilliant work of Mina Shaughnessy (1976, 1977), the heroic composition instructor who gave serious professional consideration to the struggles her students faced as beneficiaries of the City University of New York’s Open Admissions program. The more I studied and read, the more I found myself writing notes in the margins like “So *that’s* what my students are doing!”

At San Francisco State I first encountered the names, ideas, and theories that form the basis of this book, in a class called English 657: Grammar and Rhetoric of the Sentence. The class was largely the brainchild of Professor William Robinson, a legendary figure, retired by the time I enrolled, and whom I would never have the opportunity to meet. Robinson, a disciple of Francis Christensen, the University of Southern California professor who proposed a theory of “Generative Rhetoric,” recognized the futility of the common approach to teaching composition, dismissing the approach of most grammar books as “irrelevant, misguided, even wrong” (Gray and Benson 1982, 3). Echoing Chris-

tensen, he argued that a writing class that helped students actually grow in confidence and ability would help them to stretch beyond their self-imposed sentence boundaries and begin to employ the same phrase and clause structures used by confident, mature writers.

Among my classmates, English 657 was a controversial course. People whom I liked and respected loathed it, dismissing it as a kind of weird cult-linguistics. Others hated the fact that it was a drill-and-kill experience that we had to pass with a B or higher to pursue further coursework. Perhaps that controversy was not limited to the students. English 657, which had been taught for more than two decades, did not survive the retirement of our professor, Deborah Swanson (a Christensen/Robinson advocate)—perhaps as a result of a generational shift taking place in the field of composition studies, which has moved on from the sentence-study heyday of the 1960s and '70s.

But for a high school English teacher struggling to respond to the needs of 150 students a day, English 657 was nothing short of a revelation. Driving south on Highway 101 after each class, my head swimming with the possibilities of what I had just been exposed to, I felt not exhausted—as I should have after a long day of teaching, commuting, and learning—but thrilled. I could not get over the feeling that I was experiencing that most powerful form of education anyone can hope for: the liberation from my prejudices. Here at last I began to see and understand what was really happening in my students' writing, in a way that gave me hope, not only for their capacity for growth, but for mine as a teacher.

The Three Pillars of Sentence Instruction

At the heart of this book are three pillars that have become the foundation of my practice, each focused on a different sentence-level issue, and aimed in some way at helping students grow as writers—in their confidence, their ability, and their awareness of audience. These pillars are not comprehensive—I'm sure there are other great pillars out there that serve other instructors equally as well as mine. But these have emerged from both my studies and my experience, and it is my hope that by sharing them with you, whether you are a preservice, middle school, high school, or even a college composition instructor, I can relieve you of some of the confusion, anxiety, and frustration that is so much a part of teaching writing. I am offering here a pedagogy not of further proscript-

tions—I think students and teachers have all had enough of that—but of possibilities. And if at times the horse I rode in on seems a little high, then in the spirit of reconciliation, let me be candid: I have been, at various times in my career, guilty of every practice I criticize in this book.

The first pillar is *Sentence Focus*. In Chapter 1, I will examine the crucial role played by the choice of the grammatical subject, both for our students as writers and for teachers in our response to student error. Usually, the most horrible sentences that we read from our students—the ones most likely to make us lose faith in their abilities—can be understood as the result of faulty focus. Understanding this fact, and the reasons why and when students are most likely to lapse into faulty focus, has the potential to greatly improve our practice as writing teachers.

The second pillar is *Sentence Development*. In Chapter 2, I will present ways for you to help your students break through their own self-imposed sentence limits, focusing on five structures that can go a long way toward helping students stretch their abilities. As William Robinson put it, “No one can teach imagination, but one can encourage students to use what they have, or at least to begin thinking in terms of communicating the visions in their minds” (1987, 73). In light of such a mission, I hope also to reimagine a couple of common sentence-level errors as evidence of the development students are undergoing.

The third pillar is *Sentence Coherence*. In Chapter 3, I will show how sentences must work together to create meaningful texts, and how such an understanding can liberate our students from the restrictive methods of invention that dominate writing instruction and that often prevent their development as writers.

This book is not revolutionary. It is instead my attempt to share some of what is already known about sentence instruction, knowledge that was once revolutionary but that seems to have been left behind in our eagerness to do everything else in the name of college and career readiness. This knowledge has helped me immeasurably, so much that I have felt the need to share it with my colleagues over the years in workshops with the San Jose Area Writing Project. They have invariably responded with a combination of relief and gratitude, and I think I understand why. For the great majority of us, writing instruction is largely carried out in that no-man’s-land between our professional preparation, which is mostly poor, and our students’ needs, which are great. Neither our expertise as students of literature nor our own abilities as writers is enough to help us advance beyond this middle ground. We must *learn* how to teach writing, and when we get the reinforcement we need, the relief is almost palpable. By understanding the three

pillars of sentence focus, development, and coherence, we position ourselves to develop a healthy respect for our students' facility with language, ridding ourselves of those harmful superstitions that so often prevent us from seeing the excellence they bring to our classrooms. Now we can get on with the joyful experience of teaching writing, not as grim "missionaries of culture to an untaught people," to borrow from DuBois (1986, 421), but as learners ourselves, committed to powerful growth that we can experience in solidarity with our students.



SENTENCE FOCUS

*Get the "Awk"
Outta Here*

Positioning Our Students for Growth

At the beginning of each school year, I ask the juniors and seniors in my American Lit class to write a response to the following statement, attributed to the linguist S. I. Hayakawa:

It is not true that we have only one life to live. If we can read, we can live as many lives, and as many kinds of lives as we wish.
(1986, 5)

To adults who read, this seems a fairly obvious sentiment: that reading offers us lasting and meaningful glimpses into the experiences of others, creating for us, in a way, “many lives” to live. Anybody who has grown up to become an active reader, who understands the profound and almost incommunicable ways that reading enriches our lives, can appreciate this lovely idea. But for my students, most of whom identify as nonreaders, responding to it presents a number of challenges, starting with my request to explain what they think Hayakawa means. Last year, Julie, an earnest young woman who wants very much to succeed in her studies, responded with the following opening sentence:

From the quote I read by Hayakawa, I think is reading gives you more personalities.

I sighed when I read this, the first sentence of the first comp book in the first assignment of the school year. *Summer's really over, pal*. This is a perfect example of one of those “Where do I begin?” sentences that makes teaching writing such a particular challenge. It seems as if the student is doing some kind of written variation of thinking out loud, producing something that defies any kind of effective response. In the early part of my career, I might have descended upon that sentence like Jonathan Edwards’ wrathful god, scrawling some indignant missive in the margin. “Oh, sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in!” (Edwards 2005, 178). In later years, after my consistent failures to get my students to write any better, I might have greeted it with a kind of obdurate paralysis, no longer surprised or offended, but resigned to my inability to do anything about it. I remember once saying to a student teacher who had been traumatized by her first foray into our students’ writing something like “Yeah, they’ll do that,” my half-closed eyes and deliberate monotone confirming Thoreau’s contention that “After the first blush of sin comes its indifference” (2017, 278). Now, in the latter third of my career, I have come to see my job as understanding the error and responding to the sentence in a way that not only *does no harm*—that clause of the Hippocratic oath should apply every bit as much to teachers as to doctors—but that also puts that student in a position to grow as a writer.

But where *do* you begin? There appears to be so much wrong with the sentence—and it is certainly representative of the kinds of opening sentences I often get from many of Julie’s classmates—that it seems impossible to decide where to start. “The sentence” is easy to underestimate as an object of instruction—think of the facile *simple, compound, complex, compound-complex* sequence of most grammar books—but it can also be maddeningly difficult to respond to when it goes awry. For too many of us, the only response we can muster is an angry, inflamed “awk” for *awkward* (or something worse) in red ink in the margin, or a despairing sigh as we reach for the nearest grammar workbook (or bottle of Jameson), or make a private, guilty decision to ignore it.

Each of these common responses, which I have myself resorted to at various stages of my career, represents a kind of educational malpractice. The old copy editor’s standby “awk” points out the error but does nothing to help the student understand it, likely because the teacher doesn’t know how to help anyway; traditional grammar instruction will just waste time and make everybody miserable; and simply ignoring the sentence is a little like walking past a person in need: *Too bad about that broken ankle. You should get that looked at. OK, gotta go*. Responding to that sentence in a professional manner—that is, in a way that promotes growth for the student—requires something else, some deeper aware-

ness of what's going on. Mina Shaughnessy put it well: "Somewhere between the folly of pretending that errors don't matter and the rigidity of insisting that they matter more than anything, the teacher must find his answer, searching always under pressure for short cuts that will not ultimately restrict the intellectual power of his students" (1976, 237).

This delicate balancing act requires us to address error in a way that encourages our students to renew their confidence in their own linguistic powers. The first step toward achieving this renewal is *understanding the importance of the choice of the grammatical subject*. This is Sentence Focus: that crucial starting point that determines the direction and destination of every sentence. William Robinson put it this way: "Well-chosen subjects do not ensure good writing, but poorly chosen subjects do ensure poor writing" (1987, 22).

In speech, we choose our subjects naturally, and even when we struggle over the choice ("What I'm trying to say is . . ."), we can make up for any lack of clarity in the course of conversation. But in writing, particularly writing for school assignments, the choice of the grammatical subject, which appears to be such a simple matter, turns out to be fraught with hidden dangers. Students, in their attempt to take on the authoritative voice that we encourage them to, or to adhere to various rules that we have taught them, or to inflate their sentences for the purpose of fulfilling the length requirements we've assigned, will often choose their subjects poorly, with results like that of our example. If we keep this in mind when we look again at the sentence in question, we can see that what first appeared so tangled, so hopeless, is primarily a matter of choosing the wrong grammatical subject—Sentence Focus.

Even locating the subject of a sentence can present challenges. We could just look to the opening, since in English the subject almost always precedes the verb. But most sentences we write are longer than the Dick and Jane examples of the old primary basal readers, because we necessarily add modifying phrases, some to the left of the subject-verb core and others to the right. When executed clearly, left-branching phrasing should do the job of situating the reader, as in those two opening phrases of the Krakauer sentence, which establish the setting as the top of Mt. Everest. But poorly executed left-branching phrasing has the effect of blurring the focus, of leaving the reader traipsing over slippery ground. Right-branching phrasing, which *follows* the subject or the subject-verb core, does the job of commenting on the point made in the core. Confident writers can execute both left- and right-branching phrasing with ease. Here's an example from Timothy Egan's *The Immortal Irishman* (2016, 73):

SENTENCE FOCUS

Left-Branching (situates the reader)	Subject-Verb Core (contains main point)	Right-Branching (comments on s-v core)
For more than a week,	Meagher slept in haylofts and roadside ditches,	an invisible man by day, a phantom on the run at night.

Most of my students are anything but “confident writers.” Sentences like “From the quote I read by Hayakawa, I think is reading gives you more personalities” are scary enough to induce despair in the writing teacher. But this young writer is not hopeless or “far below basic,” to cite an odious designation our district once used. She’s writing in fits and starts, struggling to decide where to focus her sentence. She begins by blurring the focus with an attempt at a left-branching phrase: “From the quote I read by Hayakawa.” My students tend to struggle with left-branching phrases, often because they’re unfamiliar with such academic commonplaces as “According to Hayakawa.” Such problems are often the direct result of trying to sound academic and sophisticated, as we’ve encouraged them to do. But in this case, we will see that once she sharpens her focus, no left-branching phrase will even be necessary. This one should go. Once we’ve trimmed the fat, we can more easily locate the grammatical subject: in this case, *I*. Not bad, but since the question was to first explain what *Hayakawa* means, wouldn’t that be the better choice? If we get rid of that superfluous *is*—probably the result of the student getting lost in her grammatical wanderings and not rereading what she had written before submitting her assignment—we might end up with something like this:

Hayakawa says that reading gives you more personalities.

Now I understand that this sentence is still far from perfect. It unwittingly implies that reading leads to multiple personality disorder, but still it’s much closer to her intended meaning. She might be able to clarify it in the subsequent sentences: “What do you mean? You’re not suggesting that reading literally gives you multiple personalities, are you?” In a brief conference the day after I read her submission, I asked her to read the original sentence aloud to me, insisting that she read it as is. (Students will sometimes correct as they go when reading aloud, but I insist that they read the sentence as *I* had to read it.) She slipped and stumbled through it as much as I had, blushing as she began to understand that it had serious problems. I cautioned her not to be embarrassed, assuring

her that these kinds of sentences are frequent in my line of work. Then I explained the issue of Sentence Focus to her, not entertaining any illusions that she would now avoid the error forever—teaching writing doesn’t work that way, however much the latest standards encourage us to believe it does—but confident that she would start thinking about it, and that we could continue to discuss the issue together whenever it came up.

Alexis de Tocqueville and the Subject A Test

Here’s another example. Every year, in preparation for a common reading of *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald 2018), I have my American Lit students read the following passage from Alexis de Tocqueville:

It is odd to watch with what feverish ardor Americans pursue prosperity, ever tormented by the shadowy suspicion that they may not have chosen the shortest route to get it. They cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die, yet rush to snatch any that comes within their reach, as if they expected to stop living before having relished them. Death steps in, in the end, and stops them, before they have grown tired of this futile pursuit of that complete felicity which always escapes them. (1969, 536)

It’s a difficult passage for a number of reasons: its diction, the length of its sentences—which require a level of sustained concentration that challenges students who identify as nonreaders—and the fact that Monsieur de Tocqueville appears to be saying that Americans are incapable of achieving the very happiness that our students have been taught is their birthright. They are not used to reading counterarguments to the prevailing values of the society they live in.

Once we’ve dealt with vocabulary (*cleave, felicity*) and interpreted lines like “things of this world,” I’ll have the students paraphrase the passage and then rewrite it for different audiences: How might they express this idea if they were talking to an Independence freshman? A Southern California Valley Girl? The kids on *Barney and Friends*? It’s a test of Jerome Bruner’s claim that “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually

honest form to any child at any stage of development” (1977, 33). Usually, the results of this assignment are delightful—full of all the wit, humor, and rich language choices that my students commonly demonstrate beyond the classroom. Here’s one of my all-time favorites, from the early 2000s, of the hip-hop variety:

Its frickin’ wack to watch Americans running around like chickens with their heads cut off, punked by the thought that they bought their platinum chain instead of gettin’ a five-finger discount. They punk out from the real world like Tupac claiming “Thug Life,” but then act like Biggie Smalls all over an all-you-can-eat buffet. Then somebody takes out an AK-47 and they’re dead far b4 they get bummed out from not ever makin’ the perfect mix.

I enjoy this assignment because it confirms my faith in the linguistic powers of my students. Each time I read these submissions, I am struck by the rich and unprompted imagery they choose as a way to convey de Tocqueville’s idea to their chosen audience, and by the fact that this is some of the most vibrant writing I will read all year, even though it would not pass a standardized test or enjoy the approval of the College Board. Such writing exposes in stark relief the fatuous nature of the assumptions at the heart of the panic pedagogies that we inflict on our students—that they are language deficient, that they don’t know what to say or how to say it, and that for them to write anything meaningful we must carefully plot out each move they need, as if guiding an infirm person down a spiral staircase. Here instead is evidence that in fact their facility with language is deep and powerful, and worthy of our greatest respect.

Then I ask them to write an essay about the passage, and everything goes straight to hell.

I should explain here that my essay prompts usually follow the traditional model of the University of California Analytical Writing Placement Exam, an essay test given to incoming freshmen to determine their writing competency. In U.C. vernacular, the test was long known as “The Subject A,” named for the course you were stuck with if you failed it. Several years ago, thanks to my association with the California Writing Project, I was invited to participate in the grading of the tests, an annual event then known as “The Big Read.” I considered it a real honor for a blindly struggling high school teacher like me to grade essays alongside big shot U.C. English professors, so I called my dad, a Cal Berkeley graduate, to boast about it. I was surprised when he shuddered with audible revulsion at the other end of the line. “Subject A! Ugh!” he groaned.

“Dad, what have you got against the Subject A test?”

“I *failed* that test! I had to take that class!”

I was flabbergasted. My father is one of the most literate people I know, a man whose idea of a good time is a couch and an 800-page tome on the history of Papal authority. And this rampant reader had somehow failed the Subject A test? Surely that voice on the other end of the line was not the great Larry Brandt, logophile extraordinaire, but some imposter.

Trying not to betray my shock and resisting the urge to shout, “What did you do with my dad?” I instead managed to ask, “Dad, how did that happen?”

His response will stay with me as long as I roam the classroom: “Well, the good brothers at St. Anthony’s High School did not teach us writing. They taught us literature. So when I got to Cal, and the first thing they asked me to do was to write an essay, I had no idea what to do. So I ended up taking Subject A.”

My dad went to high school in the 1950s. It appears that writing instruction has been problematic for a very long time.

In the Analytical Writing Placement Exam, students are invariably asked to write an essay in response to a reading of 700 to 1,000 words. These days, the U.C. gives one of two possible topics. At the time I was grading them, they used one prompt, in which students were asked to (1) demonstrate their understanding of the passage by recapitulating its central argument; (2) explain the extent to which they agree with the author’s argument; (3) support the position they’ve taken with some example from their own observation, experience, or reading. I like these prompts, because I consider them a fair approximation of the kind of thinking students will be doing in college. They will be asked to read challenging texts autonomously and make valid interpretations of their meaning; they will be invited to introduce their own perspective to the discussion that the writer has initiated; and they will have to show that their perspective is grounded in reality, that it’s drawn not simply from their own superstitions and prejudices but from the world they have experienced, observed, or studied. It was the Subject A test that James Gray, founder of what would become the National Writing Project, first made use of as he began to explore the professional problem of teaching writing (Gray 2000, 37). Perhaps, among other things, giving our students frequent exposure to this kind of thinking and writing assignment will help them prepare not only for the college writing placement tests, but for the intellectual demands of college itself, as well as helping them to avoid the humiliation of being told that, where their writing is concerned, they are not yet “college ready.”

For my de Tocqueville essay assignment, the prompt, which I break up into bullet points for clarity, reads like this:

- In your own words, explain what you think Alexis de Tocqueville is saying about Americans.
- Explain the extent to which you think his point is fair.
- Support your position with examples from your observation, experience, or reading.

Once the students have been given this essay assignment, they try very hard to fulfill the requirements of the prompt, which is precisely when, and why, their sentences begin to fall apart. They will write things like this:

What I think de Tocqueville is saying is de Tocqueville thinks that Americans act like they can have everything.

The extent I think de Tocqueville is being unfair is wrong because my uncle is very generous.

In my own observations and experience of reading de Tocqueville's quote is being fair.

I've made these sentences up, but they're neither exaggerations nor outliers. They're mangled enough to make us wonder whatever happened to those confident and brilliant manipulators of language I encountered in that earlier hip-hop translation assignment. Well, simply put, an essay assignment happened, a situation in which my students are most likely to undercut themselves, ironically, by trying to fulfill the specific requirements of the prompt.

Specifically, the sentence in each of these examples has faltered over *the choice of the grammatical subject*—Sentence Focus. The subject of the first response is the noun clause “what I think de Tocqueville is saying,” when all we need for a halfway decent sentence is *de Tocqueville*. It's the same issue with the second example, which attempts to address the second part of the prompt, the invitation to explain the extent to which the student agrees with the writer. *De Tocqueville* again would do just fine, but wanting to make use of the explicit terms of the prompt—a common feature in the work of struggling writers—and not knowing how to use a garden variety qualifying phrase like “the extent to which,” this writer offers a garbled noun clause as a subject (“the extent I think de Tocqueville is being unfair”), with poor results. In the third example, the writer, again eager to address the

specifics of the prompt, has rushed it, collapsing a left-branching phrase onto the subject and verb, mangling the sentence beyond grammatical recognition.

Now my purpose here is not to mock my students' errors. It is instead to suggest what they could achieve if they were to worry less about what the prompt asks and rely more on what they already know about language. Each of my students is already capable of writing—without the aid of a teacher—something as perfectly clear as “de Tocqueville is being unfair,” and none of them speak like those awful sentences, so there's no reason to expect such sentences in their writing.

Robinson (1987) suggests two rules for establishing strong Sentence Focus:

1. Whenever possible, choose concrete, personal nouns over vague, abstract ones.
2. Try to ensure that the subject you are writing about serves as the grammatical subject of your sentences. (25)

With regard to the first rule, notice how in each of the example sentences, the sentences focus on *abstractions*—“What I think,” “The extent,” and (maybe) “de Tocqueville's quote”—when the preferable alternative is concrete and personal: either *Alexis de Tocqueville* or *I*. Each sentence improves once we change the subject to the concrete alternative that is, as is often the case, already lurking somewhere in its flawed original form.

The second rule is a little more problematic, since it seems inadvisable to make de Tocqueville the subject of *every* sentence. After all, we have all learned rightly that sentence variety is a crucial part of writing readable prose. Surely repeating *de Tocqueville* as the subject over and over is a bad idea, right? But when we talk about sentence variety, we are actually referring to surface features like phrasing, not the subject–verb core; if the surface features vary, no one will notice the repetition of the subject at their core. And if we remind ourselves that a paragraph is simply a series of sentences addressing one main subject or topic, then it doesn't seem so far-fetched to try to maintain the same subject throughout. Let's test that hypothesis on a decent paragraph addressing the first requirement of the prompt, the request to recapitulate de Tocqueville's argument:

Alexis de Tocqueville seems to think that **Americans** are among the most materialistic people on earth. **We** are apparently obsessed with shortcuts—lottery players, stock speculators, and “Black Friday” shoppers, take note—and **we'll** do anything we can to attain material success. **We** acquire our wealth on one hand as

if we'll live forever, and on the other hand as if we'll die tomorrow. In either case, **it's** just an excuse for more consumption. When death finally does show up, **we** still haven't learned anything, pining away instead for the next big thing, even though **we** never took the chance to enjoy the many blessings we already have.

It turns out that the real subject here isn't Alexis de Tocqueville anyway—or his quote, argument, or main idea: it's *Americans*, and the paragraph doesn't suffer at all for the repetition of *we* as the most frequent subject. Obviously I have nothing against first-person pronouns, either, since in this case, it enhances the writer's credibility to include himself or herself as an American, rather than conveniently passing these flawed behaviors on to some conveniently distant *they*.

Robinson's second rule is also helpful when it comes to addressing the second part of the prompt, the invitation to explain the extent to which you agree or disagree with the writer. When asked to explain whether they agree or disagree with a text, my students—along with nine-tenths of the human population—will understandably respond with a sentence that places themselves as the subject: “I agree with de Tocqueville” or “I disagree with de Tocqueville.” Now again, I have no problem with students using the personal pronoun *I* in their essays, especially when it seems perfectly reasonable, as it does when you've explicitly asked them to share their opinion. But in this case, “I agree with de Tocqueville” sounds a bit puerile, a bit unlike the response of a confident and mature writer, who would more likely explain the extent of their agreement while maintaining focus on *de Tocqueville* as the subject, as in “De Tocqueville makes an important point,” or “While de Tocqueville makes an important point, he ignores a significant part of the issue.” Moreover, the problem with *I* as the subject in this case is not that it's broken with some fictional convention that English teachers always seem to be enforcing, but that it makes more difficult the possibility of thoughtful further comment. Instead, it will usually lead to tautological responses like “I agree with de Tocqueville because he's right,” a paragraph-killer that leads the student into an agonizing cycle of repetition, closing off the possibility of authentic exploration.

Let's also consider the significance of the phrasing of that part of the prompt: “the extent to which you agree or disagree.” The very presence of the word *extent* implies that no thoughtful, considered response would express 100 percent agreement or disagreement on this or any argument. There would be little need to write anything beyond

“true dat” or “bullshit” if this were the case. By keeping the focus on de Tocqueville, the student is more likely to explore the extent of their agreement: “While de Tocqueville makes an important point, he seems to be generalizing unfairly about Americans,” or, to reverse the clauses for rhetorical effect, “While de Tocqueville seems to be generalizing unfairly about Americans, he makes an important point.” These sentences are better not simply because they are longer (as my students would mistakenly believe) but because they are more careful expressions of an idea, creating the need for further, thoughtful explanation. They are, in a word, *generative*—an important issue that we will examine in greater depth later.

Sources of Sentence Focus Errors

Somebody asked me at a recent workshop if all this talk of Sentence Focus was just a labored version of Strunk and White’s pithy rule to “Omit needless words” (2014, 23). I think it runs much deeper than that. Understanding Sentence Focus allows us to see what is happening when our students do not, in fact, “omit needless words.” Good teaching, especially good teaching of writing, requires much more than simply offering sound advice. If it were that easy, we could just have the students read *The Elements of Style* and be done with it: *Go, and sin no more*. But if a student can’t tell which words are needless or harmful to the cause of communication, then all the wise advice in the world won’t help that student grow. To make authentic growth a real possibility, both the student and teacher need to understand that effective written communication starts with strong Sentence Focus. It’s also important to understand, to the greatest degree possible, *why* Sentence Focus errors come up. Here are some sources of Sentence Focus errors that I’ve noticed.

Soft Spots: The Seamy Underside of the Transform Sentence

Ever since their days in primary school, our students have been taught to answer questions in complete sentences:

Q: *What is the circumference of the earth?*

A: *The circumference of the earth is 24,901 miles.*

I've heard this kind of answer identified as a *Transform Sentence*, because the student has *transformed* the question into the answer. Undoubtedly the Transform Sentence was created to reinforce student learning. Teachers understand that simply writing down a figure (24,901) doesn't necessarily mean that the student will associate that number with anything. It's just a number. But if the student writes that figure as part of a sentence, he or she is more likely to associate it with the actual fact. But perhaps the reason the Transform Sentence rule had to be created in the first place—as an explicit *requirement* rather than as a safe *assumption* that students would automatically answer in complete sentences—is not that students are lazy, but that answering in complete sentences is actually kind of unnatural, especially in speech:

Q: *Why was the math book so sad?*

A: *Because it had so many problems.*

Strictly speaking, that answer is not a complete sentence, but who cares, right? Nobody on earth (except perhaps some exceptionally strict and unhappy teachers) would expect you to respond, “The math book was sad because it had so many problems,” or, even worse, “Because it had so many problems, the math book was sad.” It would disrupt the rhythm necessary for the punch line.

So although the Transform Sentence rule has its uses, it has its limits, too. Our students are likely to run up against these limits by the time they get to middle or high school, after they've integrated the transform rule into their subconscious enough to do it automatically—even in situations when it is not such a good idea, like responding to essay prompts.

Let's imagine our students taking that Subject A test, fully aware that what they are about to write will determine whether they will start college taking freshman composition or languishing in some remedial course that offers all of the work, stress, and expense of college, but no credit toward graduation. It's a big deal, time to bring out the big guns and show how well they've learned to write from their elementary, middle, and high school teachers. They read the text, and face that three-part prompt: “What do you think the writer is saying about this topic? To what extent do you agree or disagree with the writer? Support the position you've taken with examples from your own observation, experience, or reading.”

Our students, well-educated young adults that they are, dutifully address each of these portions of the prompt with a series of transform sentences:

What I think the writer is saying about this topic is that . . .

The extent that I agree or disagree with the writer is . . .

My position is that in my observation and experience . . .

Do you see what’s just happened here? Our students, so eager to do what they have been taught, may have just gotten their tickets punched to a semester of remedial English. By attempting to answer the prompt questions in Transform Sentences, they have written “squishy sentences,” sentences that leave readers uncertain of their ability to write clearly, forcing them to advance cautiously, as if walking down a steep, wet hillside, anticipating the next slip with every step. It’s enough to make you realize one of the great, hidden, and horrifying truths of teaching: that the greatest challenge is not our students’ resistance, but their cooperation.

Why did this happen? Sentence Focus. When a prompt asks something like “What do you think the writer is saying?” the subject of our students’ response should not be “What I think the writer is saying,” but “The writer” (or, more specifically, that writer’s name). Everything about “the writer” is better than the alternative: It’s direct and clear, concrete instead of abstract, and it doesn’t undercut their credibility by mangling their sentences. It’s also more likely to result in strong *predication*—the choice of the verb—since it’s easier to make people act more so than ideas. In fact, I’ve noticed a phenomenon that I call “The First Is the Worst” rule: My students’ *worst* sentences, those early retirement monstrosities, are very often the *first* ones, in which they are trying most explicitly to address some aspect of the prompt. Afterward, once they stop worrying about the requirements of the prompt, their sentences often recover.

In other words, our prompts present “soft spots,” danger zones where the students, in their eagerness to fulfill our expectations, slip on the issue of Sentence Focus. We as writing teachers must anticipate this. Figure 1.1 is a worksheet I created to address the problem of soft spots in Sentence Focus that come about when responding to writing prompts. In it, you can see that students are given portions of writing prompts, some from the U.C. Subject A test or the California State University’s English Placement Test (which I’ve gotten from my wonderful colleagues at the California Writing Project) and a few college essay prompts from *Teaching Analytical Writing* (Gadda and Walsh 1988). In this assignment, students are asked to write only *partial responses*—not a whole sentence, but only the subject–verb core plus enough following information to see where they would take the sentence next—to

practice focusing on the right subject. I don't expect that this worksheet will immediately rid my students of their bad habits, but it does achieve something meaningful and lasting: making them aware of those soft spots, getting them to think about the seamy underside of their transform sentence habit, and, most importantly, initiating a conversation about focus that will last all year.

For Lack of the Right Word: Focus Problems Arising from Vocabulary Issues

This is a rule I got from my colleague Liz Daniell. Oftentimes students will, for lack of the right vocabulary word, insert as their subject some broad phrase or clause that destroys the meaning of the sentence, as in this example:

Depending on what is being fought for in a war greatly impacts those who are fighting it.

Once upon a time, I might have read a sentence like this and concluded that the student was just intellectually incorrigible, or at least occupying a level of triage that far outstripped my ability to administer aid. Upon first reading, it seems so nonsensical that it's unlikely to merit even a *wordy* as a response. But really, the sentence *is* wordy; perhaps we should take a moment to consider why. The student has written the phrase "Depending on what is being fought for in a war" as the subject, ten words where one or two will do, most likely because he or she couldn't think of the word *reasons* when it counted: "The reasons for fighting a war greatly impact those who are fighting it." Now I'm not sure that I agree with this idea—I'm inclined to think that the events of a war have far greater impact on its participants than the reasons do—and I'm not sure the student believes it, either. But at least now the sentence communicates an understandable, if debatable, point.

In situations like this, I'll encourage students to use a nonsense placeholder word like *gliff* (a word I borrowed from the multiple-choice section of the California State University's English Placement test), so that they can continue writing and avoid having the search for the right word disrupt the flow of their work: "*Gliff* in a war greatly impacts those who are fighting it." Later on they can come back to that sentence and ask themselves, "What do I mean by that? Events? Battles? Violence?" Hopefully they can find a subject that doesn't harm the meaning of the sentence.

But my little *gliff* trick can only get us so far. Students are particularly prone to fall into the focus trap whenever they are writing about abstractions. But strong Sentence Focus doesn't mean that they should avoid abstract subjects at all costs. Remember, Robinson's rule about choosing concrete subjects is qualified by the verb *try*. It's not that we must *always* choose concrete subjects. Sometimes, we *are* writing about an abstract subject, whether it's love, or power, or freedom. In fact, it's the great abstractions that are most worth talking about, that made our most memorable college discussions so wonderful, from the big picture of politics (What are the limits to the power of government, or to the liberty of individuals?), to the more intimate issues of our relationships (What constitutes a healthy form of love?). But as powerful as an abstraction might be—*salvation, forgiveness, transcendence*—grammatically speaking it's still just a noun. *Transcendence*, as deep and challenging an idea as it is, has all the same grammatical properties as *tomato*. So part of our discussion about Sentence Focus requires us to give equal time to the abstraction to demystify it, by pointing out that it's used no differently than any concrete noun.

"The Vocabulary of Faith" and "The Vocabulary of Doubt" (Figures 1.2a–b) are lists I hand out for a common reading of Arthur Miller's tragedy *The Crucible*. (They also work nicely with Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.) Notice that instead of choosing the traditional route of drawing words *from* the play, I've chosen words that help us to *talk about* the play, for we need abstractions to talk in depth about anything. It's one thing for a student to be able to write that "John Proctor's farm is big." That sentence could spring right out of any primary-grade basal reader. But it's another thing altogether for that student to have the confidence and available vocabulary to write "John Proctor's repentance is authentic," even though these two sentences share an identical grammatical structure:

Subject	"Be" Verb	Adjective
John Proctor's farm John Proctor's repentance	is is	big authentic

If the word *repentance* isn't available to that student, then you'll likely end up reading instead something like "*John Proctor being sorry that he cheated on Elizabeth with Abigail* is real." My wife Linda, ever eager to help, says, "Maybe the students will just write, 'John Proctor is sorry that he cheated on Elizabeth'"—a perfect move from an abstract to a concrete subject—to which I responded with a cynical, "Oh, I *wish*!" But my cynicism

The Vocabulary of Faith

Noun	Adjective	Verb	Adverb
charity	charitable	NA	charitably
creed	NA	NA	NA
deity	NA	deify	NA
devotion	devout	devote	devoutly
divinity	divine	NA	divinely
doctrine	doctrinaire	indoctrinate	doctrinally
dogma	dogmatic	dogmatize	dogmatically
faith	faithful	NA	faithfully
godliness	godly	NA	NA
holiness	holy	NA	NA
justness	just	NA	justly
mysticism	mystical	NA	mystically
orthodoxy	orthodox	NA	NA
penitence	penitent	NA	penitently
piety	pious	NA	piously
Puritan	Puritanical	NA	Puritanically
religion	religious	NA	religiously
repentance	repentant	repent	repentantly
reverence	reverent	revere	reverently
righteousness	righteous	NA	righteously
sacredness	sacred	sanctify	sacredly
saint	saintly	NA	NA
salvation	NA	save	NA
sect	NA	NA	NA
spirit	spiritual	NA	spiritually
staunchness	staunch	NA	staunchly
steadfastness	steadfast	NA	steadfastly
theocracy	theocratic	NA	theocratically
theology	theological	theologize	theologically
virtue	virtuous	NA	virtuously

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Figure 1.2a The Vocabulary of Faith

The Vocabulary of Doubt

Noun	Adjective	Verb	Adverb
doubt	doubtful	doubt	doubtfully
agnosticism	agnostic	NA	agnostically
anathema	NA	anathematize	NA
apostate, apostasy	NA	apostacize	NA
atheism, atheist	atheistic	NA	atheistically
blasphemy	blasphemous	blaspheme	blasphemously
damnation	damning	damn	damningly
dubiousness	dubious	NA	dubiously
excommunication	excommunicative	excommunicate	NA
godlessness	godless	NA	godlessly
heresy, heretic	heretical	NA	heretically
impiety	impious	NA	impiously
infidel	NA	NA	NA
irreverence	irreverent	NA	irreverently
profanity	profane	profane	profanely
reprobate	reprobate	NA	NA
sacrilege	sacrilegious	NA	sacrilegiously
skeptic	skeptical	NA	skeptically
unholiness	unholy	NA	NA
unorthodoxy	unorthodox	NA	NA

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Figure 1.2b The Vocabulary of Doubt

is misguided if I remind myself that the issue is Proctor's repentance: if we're discussing John Proctor's repentance, then *repentance* is a perfectly acceptable subject. We've now moved from a question of the best *choice* to a matter of *execution*. Figure 1.3 is a worksheet that uses words from the "Vocabulary of Faith" and "Vocabulary of Doubt" lists for an exercise in Sentence Focus. In each of the twenty sentences, the Sentence Focus is some flabby phrase or clause working in place of an abstract noun. Students rewrite the sentences with the most appropriate abstract noun as the subject, or—if they are feeling especially confident—finding the concrete noun already available and focusing on it, saving the abstract noun for a later point in the sentence:

Original: Going to hell for all of eternity is the one thing Puritans fear the most.

Improved: Damnation is the one thing Puritans fear most.

Concrete: Puritans fear damnation more than anything else.

This is not the kind of worksheet I can expect students to complete independently while I get some grading done. With twenty problems, challenging vocabulary, and numerous synonyms to draw from, it's something we best discuss together, over a period of several days, which is why I've divided the work into four sections of five sentences each. We'll do the first four together, and I'll assign only number 5 as homework. The next day, after going over the best solution for the homework sentence, we'll do another two or three together. Only on the third day will I have them complete an entire section of five on their own, then the last five as homework. The greater purpose here is not simply correct answers, but a broad, multiday discussion on the relationship between focus and vocabulary. Besides improving the sentences, this discussion offers students some introductory practice in the arts of editing and revision—broad terms for discrete skills few of them possess. Now, before they submit their papers, I can give them something specific to look for: "Read your first sentence for *focus*. If it seems a little flabby, that's a clue that you may want to change it. Everybody OK? Now go through the rest of your work sentence by sentence."

Faulty Signal Words

"Signal words" is the term I use to describe what grammar books call such things as "subordinating conjunctions" or "conjunctive adverbs," words like *although* or *while*, which reduce independent clauses to dependent clauses. But these are terms created by and for

SENTENCE FOCUS: One Word Can Make the Difference

Vocabulary is sometimes the difference-maker for sentence focus, especially when dealing with idea words (abstractions). The writer who knows the right word can communicate more clearly. Student writers who can't think of the right abstract word will often substitute a vague phrase or clause of description, resulting in an unclear, wordy sentence—poor

sentence focus. Improve the focus of the sentences below by replacing the underlined portion with the most appropriate idea word from the list below. Some of the words are synonymous and can work for more than one sentence; use each word only once. If you see a concrete alternative available in the sentence, feel free to change the focus.

E X A M P L E :

Original: Going to hell for all of eternity is the one thing Puritans fear the most.

Improved: Damnation is the one thing Puritans fear most.

Concrete: Puritans fear damnation more than anything else.

<i>damnation</i>	<i>piety</i>	<i>salvation</i>	<i>sacrifice</i>	<i>orthodoxy</i>
<i>theocracy</i>	<i>reverence</i>	<i>repentance</i>	<i>irreverence</i>	<i>apostasy</i>
<i>blasphemy</i>	<i>virtue</i>	<i>heresy</i>	<i>reprobate</i>	<i>dogma</i>
<i>skepticism</i>	<i>impiety</i>	<i>doubt</i>	<i>charity</i>	<i>sacrilege</i>

1. Going to hell for all of eternity is the thing that the Puritans fear the most.
2. Not believing in their religion anymore is what Parris believes Proctor is guilty of.
3. Abigail's fake putting on a big act where she makes everyone think she's all holy fools the authorities.
4. Although the judges are blind to it, Abigail's not being respectful enough to God is obvious to everyone else.
5. Getting into heaven after they die is the reason for a Puritan's life.
6. In Salem, Parris' demanding everyone to follow his interpretation is a big part of the problem.
7. John and Elizabeth's not believing what Mary Warren is saying irritates her.
8. Elizabeth Proctor's lifetime of good behavior is not enough to prevent her from being accused.
9. Puritan belief that you have to give up the pleasures of life makes their life difficult.
10. Proctor's being sorry that he cheated on Elizabeth with Abigail is authentic.
11. John Proctor's not showing enough respect to the authority of the church causes conflict between him and Parris.
12. The government being the same as the religion is the reason for the witch trials.
13. The way Puritans have hella respect for God is what gives their lives meaning.
14. Saying "God is dead!" makes Proctor look like he's with the Devil.
15. Although he is confident in his beliefs, having second thoughts about the witch trials comes into Hale's mind.
16. Elizabeth's mistake in claiming that there is no such thing as witches shocks Reverend Hale.
17. Doing nice things for people who are less fortunate than you is something that a Puritan woman like Rebecca Nurse believes in.
18. A going to hell person like Abigail should not get the support of the Christian authorities.
19. Abigail disrespecting the laws of God even though she knows better leads to the death of innocent people.
20. Puritans totally being into certain religious beliefs tells them how to behave in the right way.

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Figure 1.3 One Word Can Make the Difference

grammarians, and they mean nothing to the vast, unwashed, nongrammarian populace. The moment you drop a term like “conjunctive adverb” into a conversation is the precise moment that most people stop listening to you.

This is not because people are grammatically or intellectually deprived. It’s just that grammatical terms do almost nothing to address *function*—the one aspect that might help the average person or student make sense of them. Terms like “conjunctive adverb” and “subordinating conjunction” may sound impressive, and they do offer English teachers a specialized vocabulary that they can use to assert their professionalism—after all, these are the kinds of words employed only by persons of great learning (Pinker 1994, 387)—but the fact that they are so specialized suggests that they communicate nothing to the rest of us, a significant problem for those of us whose job is to teach people things.

So I use the term “signal words,” which attempts to address function in a way that my students can understand. Take a word like *although* as an example. When placed at the beginning of a sentence, *although* signals to your reader that while you are starting the sentence in one direction, you intend to perform a U-turn midway through:

Although I still love teaching, I sometimes get tired and discouraged.

Or, for a different rhetorical effect:

Although I sometimes get tired and discouraged, I still love teaching.

The function of the word *although*—the only reason it’s even there in that sentence—is to signal to the reader your intention to change directions. You start one way, appearing to make one point, but then make a U-turn, completing the sentence with a point significantly different than the one you started with. In fact, I call this kind of sentence a “U-turn sentence,” again because the term “U-turn” addresses function in a way that the grammatical term “complex sentence” does not.

It’s important for students to start using words like *although* in their writing, because it facilitates an emerging maturation in their thinking habits. We want them to develop from the all-or-nothing habits of youth to the nuanced habits that characterize not just adult writing, but the kind of mature thinking that produces it—what Aristotle calls the ability “to entertain an idea without accepting it.” In other words, part of our job is to

help our students become comfortable with complexity, and to share with them various ways to express and explore it. When we think about it this way, the complex sentence is so designated not because it's a more complex operation than a compound sentence, but because it serves as an appropriate tool for complex thinking.

That's why I'm always punched-in-the-gut disappointed when (and this is most of the time) my students execute the *although* U-turn sentence poorly. Once, I looked optimistically upon sentences that began with *although*. "Could this be it?" I would think, "Is this student about to add an important qualifying statement before making a point? Is this a student who is comfortable with complexity and patient enough to explore it?" *Not this time, pal*. Nowadays I know better: when I see *although*, I prepare for the worst. But I do not despair, because I have come to see the faulty U-turn sentence as a Sentence Focus problem arising from the struggle to execute a common speech move into writing. Think about it this way: when you write "although" (or "while," or "even though," or "while it may be true that . . .") at the beginning of a sentence, you are creating a grammatical expectation for your reader that a subject will appear at the beginning of the following clause: in other words, Sentence Focus. However, this is seldom what actually happens. Instead, I quite often get sentences like this:

At first those guys on that team pissed me off. Although, now I respect them they are our rivals.

For the longest time, this kind of thing just drove me crazy. That *although*, at the beginning of that second quasi-sentence, with its strangely misplaced comma, set me on a course of student-writer mind reading that I just couldn't navigate, because I was expecting something so different from that *although*, something far different than what the student intended. I was thinking, as someone who has mastered the use of such signal words, that the *although* was there to provide additional commentary in the second sentence, something along the lines of, "Although now I respect them, back then I just hated their guts." Such a sentence would complement the first sentence nicely.

But the student in this case—and it took me years to figure this out—is using the *although* clause as an *afterthought*, as it is commonly used in speech, when we qualify a statement we've just made, as in "I saw a McDonald's about a block back. Although, that's not necessarily the best option." And when we say things like this, the hesitant nature of our thoughts, of thinking out loud, produces an actual pause after the

although—a pause that the student signifies quite rightly with a comma. In other words, where I was expecting a U-turn sentence, the student has written a Yield Sentence: something that stops in its tracks and then proceeds with caution. So what looked at first like a hopeless case of student-writing malfeasance may actually be a simple misunderstanding between the student and teacher over the use of that signal word.

There are multiple solutions to this problem, and you probably already know them: the student could simply combine the *although* clause with the opening sentence (“At first those guys on that team pissed me off, although now I respect them as rivals”); the student could replace *although* with *however*—another signal word, but with different grammatical powers than its cousin *although*—to open the second sentence (in which case that irritating comma would be perfectly appropriate: “At first those guys on that team pissed me off. However, now I respect them as our rivals”); or the student could begin the whole thing with *although* and execute a legal U-turn (“Although at first those guys on that team pissed me off, I respect them now as rivals”).

I use the following scaffold for teaching the U-turn sentence when I find it necessary to go back to the basic problem of execution:

Signal: Although, While	Going one direction	U-turn!
Although	my teacher gets pretty cranky sometimes,	he generally keeps his good humor.

When presenting this scaffold, I’ve found it most effective to work inside out, writing the central, “going-one-direction” portion first before adding the left-branching signal word and asking the students if they recognize its effect on the clause. Once I get the answer I’m looking for—that it creates an expectation for something to follow—I’ll add the comma to the end of the clause and then complete the U-turn.

But the real point here is not what the student should do; it’s what the teacher should do. It turns out that sentences like this one, so often of the pull-your-hair-out variety, are just not worth that kind of anguish. We should understand instead that this is a problem that starts with Sentence Focus. Simply put, the student has created an expectation for a subject that he or she did not fulfill. If we identify it as such for our students, we place ourselves in a situation to have a discussion with them rooted not in seemingly arbitrary errors (*fragment*, for example) but in the far more crucial understanding of reader expectation.

At this point, you might accuse me of overthinking the matter: *Just call it a fragment and move on, Brandt!* I think that's a fair criticism. It might indeed be "just a fragment," so if that is your impulse, then yeah, just call it a fragment and move on. But if our students keep making these kinds of errors, perhaps this is a clue that we should reconsider the nature of our response. If writing "Frag" or "Awk" or "Wait, what?" in the margin hasn't worked yet (and I'm guessing it hasn't), then maybe it's time to try a different approach. Perhaps both student and teacher would benefit from a reimagining of the traditional errors.

This is also the case with other errors that to us seem so alien, so lacking in understanding of the various effects of the printed word that they may tempt us to hasty judgments against our students as writers. Sometimes a student will execute the U-turn sentence well, but will then add a wholly unnecessary coordinating conjunction to the comma:

Although I was feeling sick, but my mom made me go to school anyway.

In this case, it's safe to say that the student either doesn't understand the purpose of the signal word *although* or doesn't fully appreciate its power, believing that, having traveled on the page some distance from the signal word, he or she must now bolster the sentence with another one, in case the reader has forgotten the first. One of the most salient qualities of young, immature writers is their hesitance, their feeling (which must be overcome) that their sentences must not be too long. In this case, the sentence is no longer a 180-degree U-turn; it's a 360. We're doing donuts in the parking lot. When the writer has you spinning around like this, it's hard to focus on the right subject.

Sometimes the signal takes the form of an introductory phrase, often prepositional, which throws the focus off:

- In the book *And Still We Rise* by Miles Corwin shares the life stories of these talented students at Crenshaw.
- In the book *Friday Night Lights* captures nuances of racism, favoritism, and bias.

In each of these examples, the students are trying to execute left-branching phrasing—they just don't know it yet. By adding the preposition *in*, they've unwittingly created introductory prepositional phrases—a move we should be encouraging. But they're treating

that left-branching phrase as if it's the subject, ignoring the expectation that such phrases create for a subject to follow. Unfortunately, because of that *in*, neither sentence yet contains a subject. Perhaps, in spite of that preposition, the students consider the subject to be “Miles Corwin” or “the book.” Whatever the case, their focus is off. You could, while grading such sentences, simply cross out the offending preposition: getting rid of the *by* in the first sentence will yield you “Miles Corwin” as the subject; deleting the *In* of the second will give you “the book *Friday Night Lights*”—both alternatives presenting nice, concrete subjects. But our job as writing teachers is not to show how well *we* can edit for clarity, but to help *our students* achieve clarity themselves. In cases like these, I think it's far better to talk to the students about Sentence Focus. Ask them if they understand the expectation they've created with those opening phrases, or whether they can find a concrete alternative, something that's already there, lurking in the attempted sentence. Once they've located it, see if they can find a way to make it work as the subject. This is the kind of grammatical awareness we should be teaching—something that might help them escape the fate of remedial English classes in college.

Sentence Focus and the Passive Voice

In all sentences, subjects perform actions:

- Mr. Brandt smacked his fist against the wall.
- Alexis de Tocqueville argues that Americans are materialistic.

The previous sentences are written in the active voice, so-called because the subject is also the agent (or performer) of the action. However, there is another way to express the same ideas:

- The wall was struck by Mr. Brandt.
- The argument that Americans are materialistic is made by Alexis de Tocqueville.

These sentences are written in the passive voice, so called because the subject is no longer the agent of the action. The agent remains the same as in the active voice, but is no longer doing anything. In fact, it's possible to delete the agent altogether:

- The wall was struck. (No mention of the agent, Mr. Brandt.)
- The argument that Americans are materialistic was made. (No mention of the agent, Alexis de Tocqueville.)

The passive voice follows this pattern:

Subject	Be Verb + Past Participle	By Agent (optional)
Mistakes	were made	(by someone else I'm going to blame).

Most of us can remember our professors' admonitions against the passive voice as one of the big lessons of our first-year composition course in college. It's one of George Orwell's rules for strong writing in his important essay "Politics and the English Language"—a common text in first-year comp—and it's from Orwell that most of us understand the passive as a device for evasion used by politicians when they don't want to come out and say clearly what they actually mean. It's the stuff of that old reliable Washington, D.C., refrain, "Mistakes were made," which William Safire described as "a passive-evasive way of acknowledging error while distancing the speaker from responsibility for it" (1993, 431).

Whenever possible, the active voice is preferable to the passive, since it's clearer and more direct. Most people naturally speak and write in the active voice anyway. Even in mea culpa moments, we think in terms of subjects as agents enacting verbs: *I didn't see your email till just now*. So let's remind ourselves that our middle and high school students—who are not often in a position to combine inflated language, euphemism, and passive constructions to evade responsibility for some odious policy—seldom use the kind of passive that Orwell denounces. Our interactions with the passive are a little more prosaic. For our purposes, the real problem with the passive voice (aside from its wordiness and vagueness) is its effect on Sentence Focus.

Take that de Tocqueville example from above: "The argument that Americans are materialistic is made by Alexis de Tocqueville." This may be a case of a student trying to sound more academic, making an unnatural subject choice, and getting twisted around because of it. Notice that the subject, *argument*, is abstract, even though there is a concrete alternative available in the form of Alexis de Tocqueville. The focus of the sentence is off. Notice also that the point of the sentence—that Americans are materialistic—is now tucked into the folds of its flabby middle, a direct result of the student's choice to express the sentence in the passive.

Here is a specific example, written by one of my AP students at the beginning of last school year:

In H. G. Bissinger’s book *Friday Night Lights*, a story not of a high school football team’s trials and tribulations is told, but rather a gritty telling of what really goes on in a small town.

Now before we jump into a staff room “kids these days” feeding frenzy, let’s understand that this student has largely succeeded in his mission: he has wrestled with his thoughts and pinned them to the page, establishing an important distinction between the kind of story you might expect *Friday Night Lights* to be and the kind of story it actually tells. In my *although* ruminations, I wrote of my wistful yearning for students who are willing to embrace and explore complexity. Well, here he is. Before I say or write anything to this student, I must first remind myself to be grateful, for here is someone who is clearly willing to *think*. What’s wrong with this sentence then? Not as much as may first appear, actually—just a little matter of Sentence Focus, in this case a result of his choice to express himself in the passive. Once he chooses “a story” as the focus of his sentence, he commits himself to a passive construction; there is no other way to make the sentence work with that subject, because “the story” can’t act as the agent and tell itself. He then adds to the confusion by moving (commendably, I must add) into a “Not–But” correlative (which we’ll discuss next chapter). That Not–But would work beautifully if our writer had made use of the active voice by focusing on the concrete alternative H. G. Bissinger, so that he might have (and easily could have) written something like this:

In the book *Friday Night Lights*, H. G. Bissinger tells the story not of a high school football team’s trials and tribulations, but of the gritty reality of small-town life.

You may notice that I have fudged a little by substituting some of my own diction (“reality,” “small-town life”) to the revised version, but I have enough faith in this student’s ability to have come up with something similar on his own. (He would go on to pass the AP Language exam; a little knowledge of Sentence Focus can take you a long way.) Still there are times when, discussing such a sentence with a student, I will take the same kind of liberties, especially if the student struggles to come up with a variation of their own. I say no harm, no foul. If a student needs a little support on the execution to see what kind of alternative forms of expression are available, then we should offer it.

But just as the abstract is sometimes the right focus for a sentence, so also should we understand that the passive is not always wrong. One of the problems with so many of

the grammar books is the fact that they treat the passive as if it's an automatic *error*—as if it's invariably wrong to use it. But Robinson (2000, 440) points out that there are times when the passive is a perfectly acceptable—indeed necessary—mode of communication. In fact, there are passive constructions we use all the time that are barely noticeable:

- It's supposed to rain. (Supposed by whom?)
- This book was given to me by my grandfather.

To use the active voice, we could say “The weatherman supposes that it will rain,” but nobody talks like that. And if *this book* in the second sentence is the subject of your discussion (“That book looks really old. Where did you get it?”), then nobody could reasonably begrudge you the use of the passive. In this case, it actually has kind of a nice ring to it. I call examples like these Natural Passives, because they come to us with the same natural ease as the active.

Robinson (2000, 440) identifies three situations in which the passive voice is a perfectly natural mode of communication:

When you wish to focus on a noun that would have been the object in the active form of the sentence. This relates directly to Robinson's second rule of focus, of keeping the subject you are talking about as the focus for your sentences. When I began this section, I used the passive to describe my own example sentences: “The previous sentences are written in the active voice” and “These sentences are written in the passive voice.” These sentences omit the agent of the action because my focus was justifiably on the sentences themselves.

When the agent of the action is a universal one. The “universal agent” is a little bit like saying that the agent can be anyone at any time. It's common when we drop into the explanatory mode for things like, “A legal U-turn can be safely executed under the following conditions.” Who is the agent in this case? It's everybody, from the president's chauffeur to that student driver creeping along in front of you.

When including the agent would involve a lot of unnecessary effort that would ultimately harm the sentence. When we say things like, “He was caught, tried, and convicted,” we are using a natural passive. Nobody cares who did the catching, the trying, and the convicting, because we know the answer already. If we were to insist on the active voice, we'd end up with a clumsy, flat-footed stiff of a

sentence—“The police caught him, the judge tried him, and the jury convicted him”—that has none of the spring of the original.

In other words, if it's a natural passive, let it alone—chances are you won't even notice it, anyway. We should restrict our discussion of the passive voice to those times when the writer, perhaps straining to take on an academic tone, does actual harm to the focus of the sentence. Again, this is the kind of thing that is better discussed than taught. Figure 1.4 is an example of the kind of discussion that I think will lead to a better understanding of the passive voice than the usual “Change each sentence from the passive to the active” exercises so common to the issue. Instead of automatically changing each passive sentence to the active, students are encouraged to decide whether the passive is a natural one, in which case the answer is to let it be. What this worksheet produces is not right and wrong answers, but a discussion on Sentence Focus that should deepen the students' understanding of the issue.

The Beauty of Understanding Sentence Focus

Around the time that I began to feel secure enough to start asking myself a few pointed questions about my practice as an English teacher, I started by asking, *Why is it that my students write so easily and comfortably about their own lives, but their writing falls apart whenever I ask them to write any kind of analysis?* The answer should have been obvious, but it wasn't at the time. They know their own lives really well. Most of us enjoy telling stories from our lives. In California, whenever there's an earthquake, everybody has to share their earthquake story, even though they all pretty much boil down to “I was minding my own business, and suddenly the earth started shaking, and then I was like, ‘Uh-oh!’ But I survived.” But asking students to write about something that they have only just started to think about—“How does Jay Gatsby symbolize the American Dream?” for example, or “What does *The Crucible* suggest about the relationship between the individual and authority?”—complicates the task of writing. In such assignments, I am asking my students to master content while they write, an expectation that often leaves them flailing for the right words and phrases. Lacking both confidence and experience, they resort to habits that lead directly to poor Sentence Focus, which I once misinterpreted as a lack of linguistic ability.

Passive Voice Conversions

The following sentences contain passive constructions. For each sentence, identify the passive construction and decide whether it's natural or faulty. If you think it's natural, just

write "natural" as your answer, but be prepared to explain why. For faulty passives, rewrite the sentence by identifying an *agent* and turning it into the grammatical subject.

SET 1: THE TICKET

1. The driver was stopped by the motorcycle officer on Jackson Ave.
2. He tried to explain that he had been distracted by his cell phone.
3. He had been texted to by his wife for the third time.
4. It was important that the text had been answered.
5. Still, the ticket was written anyway.

SET 2: THE PENALTY

1. As the wide receiver approached the end zone, he was interfered with by the defensive back.
2. A flag was thrown by the referee.
3. A call of pass interference was made against the defender.
4. The ball was placed at the spot of the foul.
5. A touchdown was scored on the next play.

SET 3: THE SCANDAL

1. The congressman admitted that mistakes were made.
2. Things that are not true have been said under oath.
3. His marriage vow has been broken.
4. His oath to uphold the Constitution is now being questioned in the press.
5. Apparently, the oath was made with no seriousness.

Figure 1.4 Passive Voice Conversion

The truth is much more liberating. If you are a veteran teacher who has been struggling with the best way to respond to your students' most challenging sentences, then understanding the importance of Sentence Focus can free you from some of your greatest anxieties, both about your students' abilities and your own. Neither you nor they are hopeless. If you are a preservice teacher, perhaps reading this book in preparation for your career, understanding Sentence Focus can help you to avoid some of the injustices that you might someday be tempted to commit in the name of rigor.

We must always remember that our students are skilled practitioners of language. When something falls apart in their writing, it's not because they have forgotten or never learned how to communicate properly on the page. It's not the specter of hip-hop, texting, or video games. It's more likely a result of the struggle produced by their good-faith attempt to fulfill the many demands that we have asked them to balance. Understanding the importance of Sentence Focus allows us to address this struggle in a way that honors their linguistic ability, so that we work not to "remediate" them, but instead to remind them what they already know how to do: make nouns perform actions. It's just a question of finding the right noun.