

2020

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Recommended Citation

Laser, Michael (2020) "Helping Students Improve the Quality of Their Sentences," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 9 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol9/iss1/12>

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Helping Students Improve the Quality of Their Sentences: A Method for Addressing Awkwardness and Other Sentence-Level Issues

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Let me share with you a few samples of writing by my students, who are college freshmen:

- “Because now in today’s age if it were opposite and it was a group of males in a store shirtless and a male manager walked in he would 9 out of 10 times ignore it and say that they weren’t doing anything stupid or unnecessary, holding women to a different standard.”
- “Unity is expected and honored in the eyes of others however the harsh reality of those who experience war on the home and war front is ignored.”
- “Also being only book smart is not very great in your personal life. The fact that you won’t think outside the box just because it’s not require kinda.”
- “It started off very in directive and ended in a ponderous of what Sammy was going to do now that he has no job.”

About a third of my students write sentences like these on every page they hand in. Most of the others write awkward sentences, too, though not as problematic as these.

This may seem an antiquated concern, a throwback to outmoded ideas about Language Arts instruction, at odds with the theme of this issue of the *Journal*. But my experience in college classrooms tells me that many students lack the ability to write clearly and with stylistic competence. Even in the 21st century, even in the world of social media and multimodal communication, those who possess this skill will continue to have a huge advantage over

their peers—in school, in post-college careers, and in any situation that requires communication in writing. Helping our students improve the quality of their sentences is one of the most valuable gifts we can give them.

As every English teacher knows, though, this is hard to accomplish. I’ve been searching for years and haven’t discovered a simple method that reliably turns struggling writers into capable stylists.

A long history of research asserts (Flood et al. 591)—and my experience confirms—that straightforward grammar lessons don’t yield the improvements teachers might wish for. However, at least one study that examined non-traditional approaches found promising results (Jones et al.). I believe that showing students the difference between graceful and awkward writing, and then having them practice improving problem sentences, can make a significant difference. Conversely, I doubt that the students who wrote the sentences at the beginning of this article will achieve competence simply by writing more papers during their time in college.

In my search for effective strategies, I found a handful of excellent books aimed at middle and high school English teachers, and borrowed the ideas that seemed the most promising. From Doug Lemov, I learned the technique of having students polish one sentence to the best of their ability every time the class meets. Jeff Anderson and Kelly Gallagher both suggested using mentor sentences—examples of excellent

writing—to illustrate each skill I wanted to teach, and then having students write sentences of their own using that skill. John Maguire teaches the power of using concrete objects wherever possible (as opposed to abstractions and generalities), to give the reader a clearer idea of what the writer is talking about. I also added a few of my own inventions, based on my revision process as a novelist. Combining these strategies, I assembled a method that I’ve been using for the past few years, which has done more to improve my students’ writing than any approaches I tried in earlier semesters. (Note: This work on sentences doesn’t replace the standard freshman writing curriculum. I teach both. Admittedly, it’s not always easy, but I can usually cover these lessons in about 15 to 20 minutes per session, leaving an hour for the other work.)

In my classes, students learn to see and hear the difference between awkward sentences and better ones. They then learn a few simple ways to improve their own work. The NCTE website shared a short blog post in 2018 in which I gave an overview of my method (Laser, “An Argument for Helping College Students Write Better Sentences”). Here, I’d like to offer more detail about a crucial part of my teaching.

Recognizing Awkwardness

To show students that some sentences have problems, I project two or three examples on a screen and ask what they think: are these sentences good or bad? (The sentences cited at the beginning of this article serve this purpose well.) Usually, at least half the class sees what I’m getting at, but there are always some students who don’t.

A note about awkwardness: part of the challenge of improving students’ sentences is that the causes of awkwardness seem nearly infinite. A scholar could list a handful of major categories, but a typical student

paper will include many problem sentences that don’t fit under any of the headings. Usually, what I find is a combination of different issues in each problematic sentence. Common issues include, among others: jarring juxtapositions of formal and informal diction; missing or misplaced punctuation; faulty subject-verb agreement; and incorrect use of prepositions when adding information. My approach to this complex challenge is to teach students about each of these issues, one at a time.

After displaying my examples of awkward sentences, I show the students edited versions of the same sentences, side by side with the originals. The edited versions have been made clearer, more graceful, and grammatically correct. The contrast is usually enough to convey the point to everyone in the room.

Learning to recognize awkwardness doesn’t happen instantly, once and forever. It’s a matter of sensitivity, and needs to be developed over time. I’ve created a variety of activities to help students see where the problems in sentences lie, and we come back those often during the semester (Laser, “Recognizing awkward sentences”).

Improving Problem Sentences

The next step is for students to learn how to revise their own sentences. We return to this skill in different ways over the course of the semester. I’ll share the simplest one here.

Problem sentences can be classified in different ways. To keep this manageable, I present students with three broad categories:

- Sentences that include awkward phrases or other minor problems (which can be repaired by focusing on the trouble-spots)
- Sentences that are much too long and need to be broken into two or more shorter sentences

- Sentences that have so many problems that the simplest way to improve them is to start over.

(This is not a penetrating analytical approach, I know; but it's straightforward enough for struggling students to use.)

Before they can fix a dysfunctional sentence, they need to figure out which sort of problem they're dealing with. I project a handful of sentences that need editing, and ask them which category each seems to belong to. A few examples:

1. "*Fences* is meant to portray the struggles African Americans went through, trying to get over the blockage of equal opportunity during that time period."
2. "You can connect the poem as to a vampire as the happiness and life has been sucked out of the author."
3. "When the blind man comes to dinner, the narrator is extremely uncomfortable at first, due in part to jealousy over the relationship his wife has with the blind man, which seems in a way better than her relationship with her own husband, and as a matter of fact, there is a hint that, if the timing had worked out, the blind man might have married her."

Here's what I say about each of these sentences:

1. The first half of this sentence works well enough; the problems begin after the comma. When I find this kind of problem in my own work, I put brackets around the part that seems clumsy, and come back to it later. The goal is to find a better way to express the idea you've bracketed.
2. The key idea in this sentence is visible, but overshadowed by confusing syntax. I'd advise this student to start over. Read what you wrote, then look away from it and ask yourself, Could I say that more straightforwardly? How

would I say it to a friend? Speak the words out loud. If you write down what you say, that will serve as a first draft, which you can polish.

3. This is the easiest problem to diagnose. This sentence goes on too long. Breaking it into more than one sentence would solve most of its problems.

Once I've introduced this three-category approach, I give the class sentences to edit, starting with simple, obvious problems. (For example, one word that's glaringly wrong, or a sentence that goes on, confusingly, for five or more lines.) Step One is to determine which sort of problem they're dealing with. Step Two is to revise the sentence.

Also, in almost every class, I give my students an awkward sentence and ask them to try to improve it. This exercise only takes about five minutes, and it gets them to think about sentences in a way that most of them never have before. They post their revisions (anonymously, if they prefer) on a page that I project in front of the room, and everyone studies the different solutions. Some students have said that they learned more from seeing how other people revised those sentences than from any other exercise.

Key Skills

At each class meeting, I teach one of the skills that I believe will do the most to improve my students' sentences. There isn't space in this article for a complete, annotated list of these skills, but they include such style tips as deleting unnecessary words, avoiding clichés, and replacing general words with more specific ones; and such mechanical basics as subject-verb agreement and how to use commas (Laser, "The key skills and how to teach them").

The strategies I've described here won't turn struggling writers into elegant stylists in one semester, but the gains they make will

serve them well. And I hope that their *sentence sensitivity*—the ability to distinguish graceful prose from its opposite, and to use that skill when revising their own work—will continue to develop after they’ve left my classroom.

Newer trends in teaching and in the world at large—digital literacy, social media, gamification—may make it seem that these traditional skills matter less, but that’s an illusion. Most jobs that require a college degree also require us to handle language competently. We owe it to our students not to ignore this aspect of language arts instruction.

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