Schemes and Sense: Teaching Creative Writing with Design in Mind

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Over the past several years I have become interested in the ways my students' awareness of sentence design helps them compose and revise their work. This interest has led me to seek out instructional approaches that illuminate the architecture of well-crafted sentences, approaches that encourage students to envision grammar and syntax as rhetorical and stylistic possibilities rather than simply regulations. The term *design* is helpful in this regard because its visual orientation is suggestive of a blueprint. *Design* calls attention to a text's organization and invokes pattern. The term eases toward aesthetics. This essay, then, is directed toward presenting a theoretical conception of design and suggesting teaching strategies that enhance what I call students' *design sense*. By focusing on design, I mean to highlight approaches to creative writing instruction that reposition and reformat texts on the page such that the functional relationships between sentence elements can be made more concrete and thus more comprehensible to students. My hope is that by helping students *see* the subtle part-to-part and part-to-whole dynamics within sentences we might illuminate the inner-workings of mature writing and inspire students to move beyond their usual stylistic and syntactical tendencies.

To clarify what I mean by *design sense*, I find it useful to review Louise Phelps' 1985 *College English* article, "Dialectics of Coherence." In this article, Phelps describes design as a "phase of reading" in which readers step back from the immediacy of ongoing word-by-word integrations in order to "put the textual meaning at a distance and contemplate it." Phelps argues that attention to design, "with its possibilities for distancing, objectification, and contemplation," helps readers negotiate work of great complexity, depth, and scope (23). Student writers, I would argue, benefit from pedagogical approaches that help them develop similar perspectives on their work, approaches that decelerate the immediacy of composition and emphasize the functional integrity of phrases, clauses, and sentences. To this end I want to highlight diagrammatic representations of sentences that productively disrupt the familiar flow of students' reading and writing experiences and thus compel them to examine the subtler stylistic features of well-wrought poetry and prose. If we accept Phelps' proposition that by attending to design readers become more sensitive

to the less prominent kinds of stylistic features of texts, then it makes good sense to integrate design lessons into creative writing instruction. But design might encompass so many aspects of reading and writing—where to begin? What to teach?

Here I focus on sentence design (as opposed to, say, paragraph or scene design) because I have found sentence-level instruction particularly useful for broadening students' stylistic range and encouraging them to add sensory detail to their writing. Beyond my attention to the sentence as a unit of composition, I consider the cultivation of students' *design sense*, which I define as an author's ability to perceive and interpret functional relationships between parts of texts and texts as wholes. I would argue that a writer's design sense is enhanced when he or she can *see* how relationships between phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs work together as part of a functional whole. High school and undergraduate creative writing instruction would benefit from approaches that highlight these subtle dynamics, such that students might see what Robert Frost describes as "the mind skating circles around itself as it moves forward" (Richardson 40). As an example of such an approach, I want to revisit the work of Francis Christensen, whose unique pedagogical approach offers a number of useful design schemes for concretizing part-to-part and part-to-whole relationships within sentences.

In 1967 Christensen laid the theoretical groundwork for his approach to teaching writing in a collection of essays entitled *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*. In 1968 he published a classroom-oriented boxed set of workbooks and overhead transparencies and by the early 1970s, a number of studies reported that this program, referred to as "generative rhetoric" or simply "the Christensen method," improved the syntactic maturity of students' sentences as well as the overall quality of their writing.[1] After Christensen's death in 1970, his wife, Bonniejean Christensen, continued promoting and defending generative rhetoric, coauthoring, in 1976, a textbook called *A New Rhetoric*, which included writing exercises and passages from her husband's essays. Despite these efforts, despite the scholarly respect it garnered, Christensen's program never achieved widespread application in the classroom. This dismissal was partly the result of unfortunate timing; Christensen published his work at a time when formalist conceptions of both literature and composition were under attack. When Sabina Thorne Johnson critiques generative rhetoric in a 1969 *College English* article, for example, she attacks both Christensen's ideas and formalism in general. Instead of style, which Christensen considers a matter of form, Johnson privileges matters of invention: "The weakness I see in student writing," she laments, "the paucity of thought, the monotony of style and structure, the superficiality of analysis and explanation, the insensitivity to words—all indicate to me that what students need first is training in how to attack a topic" (160). Though she does support Christensen's claim that teachers need a rhetoric "that will generate ideas," she, like many other scholars of her time, does not believe this generative capacity resides in the structure of sentences.

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[1] Empirical studies of Christensen's method include Charles A. Bond's "A New Approach to Freshman Composition: A Trial of the Christensen Method." *College English* 33.6; Lester Faigley's "Generative Rhetoric as a Way of Increasing Syntactic Fluency." *College Composition and Communication*, 30.2; and R.D. Walsh's "Report on a Pilot Course on the Christensen Rhetoric Program." *College English*, 32.7.

Nystrand et. al.'s intellectual history of composition studies cites James Moffet's collection of essays, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, as evidence of the field's shift away from formalism at the end of the 1960s. Moffet viewed language learning as a cognitive matter and argued for an English curriculum sequenced according to students' psychological development. A cadre of scholars inside and outside of English departments accelerated this cognitive turn, which attacked formalism's theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings. James Britton, for example, synthesized the work of psychologists, linguists, and philosophers to condemn what he called "dummy-run" written exercises—exercises that encouraged students to practice writing in prescribed forms. Robert Connors' essay, "The Erasure of the Sentence," describes the growing resistance to sentence-level pedagogy as composition coalesced into a field, calling anti-formalism "the first and most obvious of the lines of criticism that would engulf sentence rhetorics" (110). There were those, however, who remained interested in generative rhetoric despite the criticism. Indeed, studies conducted in the 1970's by Charles A. Bond, Lester Faigley, and R.D. Walsh offered empirical support to Christensen's claims. Nevertheless, Christensen's approach, like other sentence-level pedagogies, such as sentence combining and imitation, were hobbled by the widespread critique of formalism and eventually superannuated by process and post-process methods.

For the remainder of this essay I want to reexamine Christensen's work in light of two sentence-level concerns of creative writing instruction—elaboration and emphasis. I should add that I am not advocating a return to the bygone days of sentence diagramming and dry-run grammar exercises. I fully appreciate the merits of workshop and discussion, but I believe that high school and undergraduate creative writing instruction might be enhanced by lessons that highlight, through visual means, part-to-part and part-to-whole dynamics within sentences. I conclude by discussing some of the ways I use Christensen's approach in my undergraduate creative writing classes.

In his most famous essay, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," Christensen expresses dissatisfaction with the advice offered by textbooks and proposes a new rhetoric for teaching structure and style in writing. One of the primary goals of this new rhetoric is to teach students how to compose cumulative sentences—sentences comprised of at least one independent clause and multiple free modifiers (non-restrictive phrases and clauses set off by punctuation). Christensen's linguistic analyses of well-known novels, short stories, and nonfiction published during the first half of the twentieth century leads him to believe that professional writers—"those who live by their skill in using language" (xii)—tend to use many more free modifiers and fashion more cumulative sentences than college undergraduates.[2] Christensen's program is thus designed to teach students how to skillfully deploy free modifiers and write robust cumulative sentences, a practice that, Christensen believes, will help students write like the professional writers he admires.

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[2] Christensen analyzed these texts (which he refers to as "good modern prose") using Immediate Constituent Analysis (ICA). Applied in many modern systems of grammatical analysis, ICA involves dividing linguistic elements into successive layers.

This brief overview of Generative Rhetoric focuses on Christensen's central pedagogical device, a schematic heuristic he refers to as "levels of generality." Dividing cumulative sentences into levels of generality requires one to segment clauses and phrases into hierarchical arrangements, like so:

Example A:

1 He dipped his hands in the bichloride solution and shook them,

   2 a quick shake,

      3 fingers down,

         4 like the fingers of a pianist above the keys.

—Sinclair Lewis (Christensen, *Notes toward a New Rhetoric* 9)

The step-like formatting of this sentence highlights the way free modifiers add specificity to previous clauses and phrases. The Lewis sentence above exhibits four levels of generality; the first level, which Christensen calls the "main" or "base" clause, presents a complete idea—a subject and predicate. The noun, absolute, and prepositional phrases (2, 3, and 4 respectively) add specificity to the *dipping* and *shaking* actions introduced in level 1. All three subordinate phrases modify and elaborate ideas presented in the main clause. In Christensen's words, "The additions stay with the same idea, probing its bearings and implications, exemplifying it or seeking an analogy or metaphor for it, or reducing it to details" (6). In essence, Christensen argues that the structure of the cumulative sentence offers a semblance of the mind at work during composition, useful to the writer because it acts as a template for further probing of subjects, useful to the reader because of its dynamism—the way it represents the mind thinking.

To illustrate this dynamic to students, I offer them the second stanza of Theodore Roethke's poem, "The Meadow Mouse," divided into levels of generality:

Example B:

1 Now he's eaten his three kinds of cheese and drunk from his bottle-cap watering trough— /

   2 So much he just lies in one corner, /

      3 His tail curled under him,

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 3 his belly big / As his head,

 3 His bat-like ears / Twitching,

      4 tilting toward the least sound.

—Theodore Roethke (Christensen, *Notes toward a New Rhetoric* 21)

Reading this example, students gain an appreciation for Roethke's ability to refine and elaborate images through the layering of additional phrases and clauses. They begin to recognize how subordinate levels push the sentence forward while simultaneously clarifying material in preceding levels. It's easy to glide atop the surface of this stanza/sentence without giving much thought to the architecture maintaining its elegant construction. Reformatting sentences into levels makes this architecture—which is the architecture of elaboration—more obvious.

In my creative writing classes, I introduce examples of cumulative sentences divided into levels of generality to help students improve passages that lack specificity. Following the analysis and discussion of these examples, students select sentences from their own poems or stories and add free modifiers formatted into leveled arrangements. For example, a student in my introductory poetry class transformed the simple sentence, "I crested the hill," into the following cumulative sentence:

Example C:

1 I crested the hill,

   2 pedaling in my lowest gear,

   2 gaining on the leader,

     4 his back rising and falling,

     4 his turquoise jersey a beacon less than ten yards away.

The four additions to the base clause offer a more intricate representation of the speaker's efforts to win a bike race. This elaborated sentence, composed of two, short verbal phrases and two absolute phrases, captures the swift movement we associate with biking and expresses the speaker's attention to his actions as well as the proximity of his competitor.

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The concept of elaboration invokes design because writers' and readers' sense of elaboration is very much an interpretation of part-to-part and part-to-whole relationships. Indeed, elaboration is predicated on the addition of language and a sense of relatedness between old and new information, a sense that a central idea or constellation of ideas is being explored in greater detail or specificity. Levels of generality are, in fact, design schemes meant to encourage students to see the ways ideas and descriptions develop and hang together. In the aforementioned examples, the numbers preceding each line denote the degree of subordination each free modifier exhibits in relation to the previous phrase or clause. Not all sentences and paragraphs rely on subordination alone, however. Writers often elaborate on the same semantic level as a previous phrase or clause. Christensen refers to the relationship between these similarly-leveled sections of text as "coordinate." I should add that within Christensen's program a coordinate relationship is not determined by a coordinate conjunction; rather it is a function of readers' interpretations of the degree to which one modifying phrase or clause specifies or elaborates previous phrases or clauses. The following example from Walter Van Tilburg Clark illustrates this notion of coordination:

Example D:

1 He could sail for hours,

    2 searching the blanched grasses below him with his telescopic eyes,

    2 gaining height against the wind,

    2 descending in mile-long, gently declining swoops when he curved and rode back,

    2 never beating a wing.

—Walter Van Tilburg Clark (Christensen, *Notes toward a New Rhetoric* 10)

In this example, four free modifiers (verbal phrases, in this case) elaborate on the idea that the subject could "sail for hours" by specifying to the reader what this act of sailing looks like and providing a more vivid sense of how, precisely, this act of sailing might transpire. Phrases arranged at similar degrees of indentation and assigned the same number ("2" in Example D), demonstrate Christensen's semantic conception of coordination. Because these phrases all modify the same action, specifying what it means to "sail for hours," they function at the same level of generality. By dividing texts into levels of generality, then, students are encouraged to see the ways authors add detail and texture to their writing. The shape of the text on the page indicates the subordinate or coordinate relationship each free modifier has with the base clause and with those phrases and clauses that follow or precede it.

After showing students Example D, I ask them to create a similar list of coordinate free modifiers to add specificity to a base clause. One student wrote the following sentence:

Example E:

1 She stood beneath the walnut tree,

    2 contemplating her troubles,

    2 watching / a sixty-watt sun dip beneath her neighbor's roof.

When I first introduce these exercises, students tend to imitate the examples, matching the number of free modifiers added to the base clauses of model texts. As students become more comfortable modifying and elaborating their sentences, I remind them of the merits of concision, that they need not ape the model if their sentence requires fewer levels of generality. Originally, the student example above included two additional phrases, but after I suggested she revise toward concision, she whittled the sentence down into its final, more focused form.

The examples presented thus far place base clauses in the first position. Often, however, writers find it useful to situate base clauses at the end of sentences, like so:

Example F:

    2 Lying there like a corpse in the dead leaves,

        3 his hair matted,

        3 his face grotesquely smudged and bruised,

        3 his clothes in rags and muddy,

1 Will Farnaby awoke with a start.

—Aldous Huxley (Christensen, A New Rhetoric 36)

In this descriptive sentence, three coordinate noun phrases add detail to the initial verbal phrase, specifying what "lying there like a corpse" looks like, offering readers a more complete portrait of Will Farnaby. By dividing texts into levels of generality, students more easily witness the ways writers

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zoom in and zoom out on particular details. Operating like a camera, Huxley's sentence begins with an overview of a body among dead leaves. The focus then turns to the character's physical appearance—his hair, face, and clothes. The language then zooms out again, encouraging readers to imagine the whole of Will Farnaby, whose appearance has been clarified by the camera work of the three noun phrases. We can thus easily imagine this body emerging suddenly into wakefulness. In addition to concretizing elaboration, this leveled-sentence also illustrates the subtle rhetorical force of Huxley's prose. The first verbal phrase piques our curiosity about the status of this corpse-like body; is it alive, capable of thought and movement? Is this the body of Will Farnaby? Our interest is further fueled by the noun phrases, which incite, through the clarity of their images, further urgency while simultaneously withholding the most crucial bit of information regarding the subject's well being. Our questions are answered, our fears assuaged by the final clause, which informs us that this is indeed Will Farnaby's body—an injured body, perhaps, but one capable of waking.

Initiating tension, amplifying tension in subsequent phrases, suspending resolution until the final clause—these are rhetorically savvy strategies for authors aiming to attract and maintain readers' attention. As creative writing teachers, we want to make such techniques obvious and available to our students. Instead of attempting to explain these strategies in the abstract, we want to show, in concrete ways, how written language channels readers' attention through subtle modifications to independent clauses. Moreover, we want to encourage students to analyze the way syntax and semantics converge to energize sentences. These subtle strategies and effects may not be as evident to students in the normal flow of reading. One argument, then, for using design schemes such as levels of generality is that they compel students to read more slowly and consider more thoughtfully the ways sentence elements generate energy and interest.

So far I have suggested that dividing texts into levels of generality is a useful pedagogical strategy for the creative writing classroom because, as Phelps suggests, it opens possibilities for distancing, objectification, and contemplation. Students are asked to step outside the normal flow of reading and focus on the ways authors deploy modifying phrases and clauses to represent consciousness, or what Mark Doty calls "the mind playing over the world of matter" (33). In my experience, such design-oriented instruction, which visually represents relationships between phrases and clauses, may be most beneficial when students have opportunities to devise their own arrangements and interpretations of these dynamics. If students can explain their designs and justify their interpretations, they enrich their own, and often their classmates', understanding of stories, poems, and essays.

Though poets throughout the ages cast formal verse and metrical patterns as wellsprings of invention, critics of sentence-based pedagogy dispute claims that form can generate content, especially if *form* is narrowly defined along grammatical lines. Perhaps by replacing "form" with "design sense"—one's understandings of part-to-part and part-to-whole relationships in a text—we might add credence to Christensen's claims about the generative capacity of his method. In my experience, levels of generality concretize, through visual means, abstract concepts such as elaboration, subordination,

coordination, and cohesion. Understood as visual cues, we see how levels of generality may indeed encourage students to add specificity to their writing. I base this claim on observations that students are more apt to elaborate once they understand elaboration not just as an abstract idea but also see it has shape. By seeing how part-to-part and part-to-whole relationships are realized in concrete terms, how authors move between generality and specificity, adding details and examples, students are more likely to use similar strategies in their own work. It is, finally, this highly visual dimension of Christensen's design schemes that may be most "generative."

The success of design-oriented instruction, such as Christensen's method, is supported by research on the relationship between images and memory. Drawing on numerous empirical studies, cognitive scientists Mark Sadowski and Allan Paivio conclude, "mental images play an important role in episodic memory by providing conceptual pegs that link, integrate, and unify memories" (110). But the question remains, how might the mnemonic capacity of levels of generality help students generate text and refine their work? After all, Christensen suggests "the teacher can use the idea of levels of structure [generality] to urge the student to add further levels to what he has already produced, so that the structure itself becomes an aid to discovery" (*Notes toward a New Rhetoric* 24). The answer lies in the specific ways levels of generality might be integrated into instruction.

My previous examples focused on sentence analysis. I now want to illustrate how levels of generality can serve as heuristics toward helping students revise their writing, particularly with regard to matters of elaboration and emphasis. Once students recognize the relationships between sentence elements, they are more prepared to add detail and specificity to their work. In this sense, levels of generality may act not only as mnemonic devices but also as visual aids that scaffold students' descriptive writing and elaboration skills. What follows, then, are some of the ways I use levels of generality in my creative writing classes.

ELABORATION

I often read first drafts that introduce, but fail to elaborate, ideas, images, and characters. In the rush to get to the next scene or line or plot point, students sometimes overlook opportunities to enrich their writing with sensory details. These drafts also tend to *tell* rather than *show*, which is to say they lack precise descriptions of character, setting, and action. If a tree grows in the backyard, it is a generic tree; instead of seeing white grass beneath a white sun, we are told that the day is simply "hot." To encourage elaboration, particularly with regard to sensory detail, I ask students to identify passages in their own work—or in the piece being workshopped—that would benefit from more robust description. I then present a few design schemes to help them get started. Here's an example taken from *Olive Kitteridge*, Elizabeth Strout's collection of linked short stories:

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Example G:

1 She had arrived, as she always did, at precisely six o'clock,

    2 smiling her vague, childlike smile,

    2 chewing on mints,

    2 saying hello to the bartender, Joe, and to Betty, the waitress,

    2 then tucking her handbag and coat near the end of the bar. (49-50)

When students read this sentence formatted conventionally, they tend to overlook Strout's craftsmanship, but when I ask them to break the sentence into levels of generality, they notice the intricacy and fluidity of Strout's description. Finding few sentences in their drafts to rival Strout's prose, students are often eager to experiment with similar constructions in their own writing. Here, for instance, a student draws on the Strout passage to describe a character entering a restaurant:

Example H:

1 She arrived at precisely ten o'clock,

    2 tossing her blond hair,

    2 sucking in her smooth cheeks,

    2 waving to Adam and Seth,

    2 then taking a seat beside John in a dimly lit booth.

The student clearly followed the model text quite closely while composing this sentence, using the same number of free modifiers to describe a female character entering a restaurant. Indeed, one of the potential drawbacks of this approach, beyond its rather narrow focus on the sentence, is the fact that students tend to copy the design of model texts rather than viewing these designs as points of departure. That said, most artistic skills—learning to play an instrument, learning to paint, learning to dance—require many hours of imitation. I'm not concerned that students lean on model sentences as long as they consider alternative designs and opportunities for concision. As students become more comfortable adding free modifiers to base clauses, I encourage them to depart from the models and experiment with original arrangements.

EMPHASIS

I also use levels of generality in my creative writing courses to help students emphasize poignant moments in their stories, essays, and poems. I begin by asking students to locate passages in their drafts that they feel should be charged with emotional content. Sometimes this is the climax of a story, a thematic or tonal shift in a poem, or it could be related to the narrator's interest in a particular object or person. As an example, I give students this passage from David Benioff's novel *City of Thieves*:

Example I:

1 I turned and saw him gliding down the street,

  2 our German,

      3 his single black boot skidding over the frozen pavement,

      3 the great canopy of his white parachute still swollen in the wind,

        4 blowing him toward the gates of Kirov,

      3 his chin slumped against his chest,

      3 his dark hair flecked with crystals of ice,

      3 his face bloodless in the moonlight. (13)

Because we have discussed this novel in class, students understand why Benioff chooses to amplify this passage, as it precipitates the plot's inciting event. The description of the dead German soldier floating into Leningrad during the siege is amplified because of its larger significance to the narrator's fate. Moreover, this multilevel cumulative sentence reveals the narrator's interest in the German soldier. It is this interest that will send the narrator out after curfew and lead to his arrest, which sets into motion an absurd quest for a dozen eggs. In this way, I illustrate to students that sentence structure has a purpose beyond simply breaking up choppy prose. Cumulative sentences can be used to convey a character's heightened attention to meaningful objects and actions that comprise fictional worlds. By breaking sentences into levels of generality, students begin to see how syntax serves characterization. Following our study of Benioff's passage, I ask students to locate sections of their own writing that deserve emphasis, sections where it would be useful to suggest that a character's attention has been amplified. In the following example, a student describes the narrator's father discovering him drinking alcohol while still in high school:

Example J:

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1 I saw him limp toward me,

  2 my father, /

      3 his left knee buckling under his weight, /

      3 arthritic right leg dragging behind him, /

      3 a mop of gray hair mussed by the wind, /

      3 his eyes narrowed on the bottle in my hand.

The first draft of this sentence, which appeared at the end of a student's poem, concluded with the phrase "arthritic right leg dragging behind him." After reviewing Benioff's example and discussing matters of emphasis, however, the student chose to rearrange the clauses such that the father's gaze and the bottle in the speaker's hand comprised the final image. Though the Benioff sentence was drawn from a novel, this student was willing to adapt the design scheme for the purposes of a poem. It's important, I think, to provide students with models drawn from both poetry and prose to highlight the overlap between genres and to point out that sentence-level concerns about elaboration and emphasis are crucial to all forms of creative writing.

Jeanne Gamble's study of master cabinetmakers' mentorship of novice carpenters describes the important role visualization plays in craft pedagogy: "Visualization signifies a relationship between part and whole, which carries within it a notion of the 'ideal.' The adept 'sees' both what is there and what is not there" (196). In this essay I have made similar claims about creative writing pedagogy, suggesting that design schemes, such as levels of generality, help students visualize the part-to-part and part-to-whole dynamics within sentences. Moreover, I have argued that such design-oriented instruction is uniquely suited to helping students address matters of elaboration and emphasis. I am aware that design might easily be conflated with structure and thus conjure those common criticisms applied to formalist approaches to writing instruction. But I also know that good teaching transcends ideological categorization. Years spent teaching creative writing to high school and college students leads me to believe that a focus on sentence structure does not preclude discussion-based approaches, such as workshop. Quite the contrary, by illuminating the subtleties of style and syntax through visual means, I believe teachers encourage more nuanced conversations about writing. *Elaboration* and *emphasis*— these concepts tend to hover at impractical heights if not tethered to concrete illustrations. By making these concepts visible, by lending shape to relationships between sentence elements, and then clarifying those relationships through visual means, we scaffold a kind of awareness about the ways sentences proceed and hold together, an awareness of whether or not we have said enough, an awareness of when

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we need to clarify the image for ourselves and for our readers. When we invite students to see the ways clauses and phrases elaborate and emphasize more basic ideas and descriptions, we give them powerful tools they can apply within and beyond our classrooms.

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