

# THE FINAL FREE MODIFIER— ONCE MORE

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In the spring of 1965 a young English teacher told his high school seniors that he was going to show them some new insights into writing. The teacher had recently read Francis Christensen's article in *College Composition and Communication*, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," and was impressed about its potential for improving writing. The spring passed, but the teacher never got around to explaining it to his students as he had promised. *Fast forward*. Now, some 40 years later, the same teacher is sitting in a seventh grade classroom in the rural South. Again it is the spring of the year. The school is situated in a lush green forest so typical of the South. Now retired, he is there as a guest teacher. He watches as these young people compose cumulative sentences, the very kind he promised his seniors so many years ago. He listens and responds and remembers. *Why has it taken so long? Why haven't these ideas, which seemed to hold so much promise, caught on in the schools? How is it that these young people do so easily what seemed so difficult years ago?*

## What Is Christensen's Generative Rhetoric?

Essentially Christensen proposed the use of the cumulative sentence and the final free modifier as key factors in learning to write. He based his ideas on a broad analysis of contemporary writing: "With hundreds of handbooks and rhetorics to draw from, I have never been able to work out a program for teaching the sentence as I find it in the work of contemporary writers" (155). The cumulative sentence is composed of a short base clause that includes the main subject and verb, followed by a series of modifiers. A central idea in generative rhetoric is that the power

of the sentence lies, not in the subject and verb, but in the details that bring the subject to life. According to Christensen,

The main clause [base clause] . . . exhausts the mere fact of the idea; logically, there is nothing more to say. 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. (156)

In terms of levels of abstraction, the sentence moves from the general to the specific. The greater the number of details and the more the details are modified, then the more specific the sentence becomes. The following is an example of the cumulative sentence:

1. The soccer players came onto the field, (base clause)
2. scurrying to take their positions, (VC)
2. their uniforms ablaze with color, (ABS)
3. crimsons and golds, blues and oranges, (NC)
4. fiery and vibrant. (AC)

The first addition to the base clause is a verb cluster (VC), or what we often call a participial phrase. The second is a nominative absolute (ABS), an independent noun with its own verb and a deleted auxiliary verb. Next is a noun cluster (NC), or appositive. The final addition is an adjective cluster (AC).

Christensen devised a numbering system to describe the levels of modification within the cumulative sentence. Above, the base clause is labeled “1” and the VC and ABS as “2,” since both of these final free modifiers refer to the word *players* in the base clause. Any other modifiers of the word *players* would also be labeled “2.” The modifiers themselves may also be modified. In the sentence above, the noun cluster modifies “color” and is labeled “3.” At level 4 “fiery and vibrant” modify “crimsons and golds, blues and oranges.” The modifiers may vary in kind and length. For example, of the two parallel modifiers above, the first is a verb cluster and the second an absolute. Length may vary from a single

word to as many words as a reader can readily comprehend. The model sentences that Christensen provides are helpful in understanding his ideas (158).

The example above represents a basic skeleton of the cumulative sentence, indicating the function of the base clause, the varieties of the major final free modifiers, and the possibilities for modification. From these basic forms, a vast and seemingly infinite number of variations may occur, much too vast to catalog here. In the hands of an experienced writer, the cumulative sentence may be as striking as this sentence from Scott Momaday:

Now that I can have her only in memory, I see my grandmother in the several postures that were peculiar to her: standing at the wood stove on a winter morning and turning meat in a great iron skillet; sitting at the south window, bent above her beadwork, and afterwards, when her vision failed, looking down for a long time into the fold of her hands; going out upon a cane, very slowly as she did when the weight of age came upon her; praying. (10)

The roots of the cumulative sentence can be traced back to the seventeenth century, to the baroque style and the loose sentence, typical of Bacon, Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne and others. Their goal was to express truth as it occurred, asymmetrically, not in the balanced forms of the Renaissance but in loose and sometimes distantly connected expressions. “Their purpose was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking . . . . They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth . . . .” (Croll 1066).

The modern cumulative sentence seems to have more “life” or “movement” than the balanced or even a regular expository sentence. In some ways it is like a picture or photograph or perhaps a video. The modern cumulative sentence does not value the “deliberate asymmetry” or the “strangeness of proportion” of the seventeenth century so much as it does clarity and

authenticity. It is smoother and more readable, sometimes incorporating elements of balance and parallelism to accomplish its purpose.

### **Can Form Generate Content?**

One intriguing aspect of Christensen's work lies in his terse, nine-word sentence, "Thus the mere form of the sentence generates ideas" (156). The statement suggests that a knowledge of form, specifically the form of the cumulative sentence, will lead a young writer to ideas for writing. Unfortunately, Christensen did not elaborate or illustrate the truth of the statement, and two of his critics expressed doubt about its validity. The first critic, Sabina Thorne Johnson, asserts that form does not generate content, especially in expository writing:

This is perhaps the heart of my hesitancy about the Rhetoric Program. Christensen seems to believe that form can generate content (*Program*, p. vi). I don't believe it can, especially if the content is of an analytical or critical nature. (159)

The second critic, A. M. Tibbetts, argues that Christensen's statement "does not seem very accurate. In fact, something like the reverse can be true. Often the writer's *idea* will 'suggest' *form*" (875). According to Tibbetts, the major problem in Christensen's statement lies in the word *generate*.

I have gone a long way round to make a point about whether form does, or does not, generate content. Where both Christensen and Mrs. Johnson may err in their premises is in taking too seriously the idea of "generating." Unfortunately, the term implies an act of creation . . . . As Christensen uses it, the term is probably misleading, since it seems unlikely that a grammatical form, in any precise sense of expression, "brings into existence" any ideas. (877)

From informal conversations with teachers, we believe that most view form and content as two separate entities, not really understanding the kind of relationship that Tibbetts describes. In fact some teachers assign two grades to a piece of writing, one grade for form and another for content. Our research, however, supports the truth of Christensen's assertion that form can indeed generate ideas. But to be useful in the classroom, that truth needs some refinement and clarification. We explore these ideas further in our discussion of generative rhetoric in the classroom.

### **Can Generative Rhetoric Improve the Quality of Writing?**

For the classroom teacher this is clearly the most important question about generative rhetoric. If generative rhetoric does not lead to an improvement in student writing, then there is no valid reason for teaching it. If, on the other hand, it does lead to improvement, then by all means it should be included in the writing curriculum. Earlier studies such as Faigley (204), Nold and Freedman (172), and Davis (10) show that knowledge of generative rhetoric is associated with the quality of writing at the college level. Our research, "A Prominent Feature Analysis of Seventh-Grade Writing" (in press), sheds some light on the relationship between generative rhetoric and writing assessment scores of younger students.

The purpose of our study was to identify prominent features in the writing of students participating in a statewide writing assessment. We studied papers from 464 students in three middle schools in which teachers had participated in professional development programs that included aspects of generative rhetoric. In all some 32 prominent features were identified, 22 positive and 10 negative. Among the 22 positive prominent features were four features associated with generative rhetoric: cumulative sentence, verb cluster, noun cluster, and absolute. We examined the frequency of occurrence of those four features at each of the assessment score points, the scores ranging from 1 to

4, with 4 being the highest and 1 the lowest, and 0 for off topic or illegible. Table 1 shows the total number of student papers falling at each score point (1–4), the percentage of papers at each score point that contain each of the four features of the generative rhetoric, and the actual number of the four features occurring at each score point. In this assessment, only three of Christensen’s five types of free modifiers appeared: the verb cluster, clearly the most frequent with 76 occurrences; the noun cluster, 5 occurrences; the nominative absolute, 6 occurrences.

**Table 1: Frequency of Occurrence of Features of Generative Rhetoric at Five Scoring Levels of a Statewide Writing Assessment (N = 464)**

Features	State Writing Assessment Scores									
	0		1		2		3		4	
	Percentage of papers	Number of instances	Percentage of papers	Number of instances	Percentage of papers	Number of instances	Percentage of papers	Number of instances	Percentage of papers	Number of instances
Cumulative sentences	0	0	0	0	5%	14	14%	49	18%	6
Verb clusters	0	0	0	0	4%	10	14%	59	18%	7
Noun clusters	0	0	0	0	1%	4	0%	0	4%	1
Absolutes	0	0	0	0	1%	2	1%	4	0%	0
Number of cases	7		4		190		235		28	

Papers scoring 0 are considered off topic or illegible.

Statistical analyses showed that both the cumulative sentence and verb cluster were significantly correlated with the state assessment score at the < .001 level. Correlations of the noun cluster and absolute with the state assessment were not significant. Thus we see a positive relationship between the presence of a cumulative sentence and the assessment score and between the

presence of the verb cluster and the assessment score. These data also hint at possible readiness levels of the students and at sequences for teaching and learning about generative rhetoric.

The question arises as to whether or not the scorers of the assessment papers were favorably influenced by the presence of the cumulative sentences, especially the presence of the verb cluster. Did the lively, musical quality of these *-ing* participles resonate with the scorers? If they were so influenced, was it a conscious or an unconscious influence? Of course, we have no way of knowing the answer to these questions.

We did, however, conduct a series of informal experiments to determine something of the impression the cumulative sentence and the verb cluster make on professional teachers. From the level 4 assessment papers, we selected several paragraphs, each containing a cumulative sentence. We asked groups of teachers to “read each paragraph and underline the sentence in each that stands out to you as the best or most striking.” In all, we tried this exercise with some ten groups of teachers (at conferences, in professional development sessions, with study groups, etc.), and in every case the cumulative sentence was selected by the majority as the sentence that stood out in each paragraph. Taken together, these indicators show that a knowledge of generative rhetoric is associated with the quality of writing and has the power to lead toward improvement in student writing.

### **“Failure to Launch”**

Once again we return to the question we asked at the outset: Why hasn’t generative rhetoric been generally accepted as a means for improving student writing? Several possibilities come to mind. Teacher education programs may not include generative rhetoric in the education of writing teachers, so many teachers may not be aware of it. Some teachers may assume their students cannot master the complexities of the various final free modifiers and levels of modification. Some may view verb clusters as misplaced modifiers, or “dangling participles,” not understanding the power of what a participle can do in a sentence. Some may not

see the connections between the popular process models of teaching writing and the teaching of style. Still others may think that generative rhetoric is more appropriate for fiction than nonfiction or, as described earlier, that form and content are separate entities and do not relate to each other. We suggest that the answer is at once more pervasive, more systemic than any of these: *We simply never did know how to teach it.*

A passage from A. M. Tibbetts' critique of Christensen's work is an unwitting testimony to that failure:

Unlike either structural or transformational, Christensen's grammar can be taught in the schools. . . . A merit of his school grammar, which is outlined in his *Rhetoric Program*, is that Christensen provides an understandable set of directions and a group of exercises which go far to improve student writing. He has, for instance, some of the best exercises in subordination in modern school texts.

Essentially, most of Christensen's exercises consist of "pattern practice," in which the student learns to arrange base clauses, bound modifiers, and free modifiers effectively. . . .

1 They looked with dismay at the yard,  
 2        \_\_\_\_\_ grass and  
           (determiner)    (modifier)  
           \_\_\_\_\_ hedges,  
           (determiner)    (modifier)  
 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
           (prepositional phrase—comparison)    (870)

Looking at the passage now, we would be tempted to say, "What nonsense," for in today's classrooms, many teachers would consider such fill-in-the-blank exercises as antiquated, time-wasting, and ineffective. But we must remember that Tibbetts was writing at the tail end of the post-Sputnik era when fill-in-the-blanks, transparencies and worksheets were standard practice. This was before Donald Murray, James Britton, Jim Moffett, Ken



Macrorie and Janet Emig were to become household names in the profession—in other words, before process teaching and learning entered the nation’s classrooms.

## **Teaching Generative Rhetoric: What We Do and Why**

We borrow Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s term *organic* to describe our approach for teaching generative rhetoric to young people (55). We begin with the verb cluster, not the base clause (which to some might seem the logical place to start) because the *-ing* form is the most accessible entry into generative rhetoric. We are reminded that the 69 cumulative sentences identified in our seventh grade study included 76 verb clusters, 5 noun clusters, and 2 nominative absolutes. That writing in the state assessment is “pure” writing, i.e., unedited, unrevised, on-demand writing, suggests that the verb cluster is the free-modifier of choice for these young people.

We have presented the lesson, Teaching the Cumulative Sentence with Three Verb Clusters, across the country for students in elementary, middle, and high school; at several conferences for teachers; and for a number of National Writing Project groups. We provide here an overview of the lesson with our observations and reflections along with student examples. The full lesson appears in the Appendix.

The lesson usually requires an hour and a half, but we encourage teachers to continue it for several days. We begin with everyone seated in a circle, a face-to-face arrangement that provides a real and living audience. Since the focus of the lesson is on composing, we keep technical terminology basic, always appropriate for the grade level. The mental processes of composing are different from the mental processes of understanding and applying definitions. Consequently, we normally reserve technical language until after students have built up an understanding of the concept which then becomes a useful rhetorical tool.

We begin by asking, “Think of a person you know and care about.” Then we ask, “What do you remember your chosen person doing?” Around the circle we describe what we remember the person doing. We go around the circle yet a second and third time describing different activities. In this process we not only hear the stories of others but continue to develop our own as well. By the third time, the responses become more elaborated: “singing,” for example, might become “singing in the choir on Sunday morning.” The oral responses provide a rich resource for writing. The personal vision inherent in each carries its own sense of authority, unique to each individual, often surprising or delighting the teacher.

Now the writing begins. We provide a simple base clause (“This morning I remember...”) which we all write, filling in the chosen person. We then add the three verb clusters. At this point come the editing and revision. “Do you need to add or delete something?” “Do you need to change a word? Move it somewhere else?”

We ask that each person examine the three elements to determine which should come last and which first. The student’s own sense of priorities is revealed here. We ask everyone to count the number of words in their sentence and compare that with the average sentence length for their grade level, described by Kellogg Hunt (306). Most students have now written sentences that are comparable to or exceed the average length for “mature adult writers.”

We now ask that each person compose a short sentence, one that summarizes or gives the essence of the longer one. The short “zinger” sentence should be direct and powerful, finding the heart of the thought or feeling in the longer sentence. The two sentences combined provide a small rhetorical context; they are not isolated “sentence exercises” but connected in deeply meaningful ways.

Finally comes the occasion for oral reading. We all take turns reading our passage aloud. This reinforces the writer’s commitment to the text, identification with it, ownership. We

encourage the classroom teacher to continue the lesson over the next several days in order for the students to develop a full portrait of their chosen person.

Below are some unedited examples of seventh graders' first efforts to compose a cumulative sentence. Experienced writers will note some of the obvious flaws, but also the rich potential of these young writers.

- *This morning I remember my dad, riding the horse in our pasture, riding me on the go-cart and flipping us over, and taking care of me when I was sick. I miss him so much.*
- *This morning I remember my stepmom, being there when I need her, cooking a dorito casserole for family gatherings, coming home on her lunch break and cooking me a chicken sandwich. She means a lot to me.*
- *This morning I remember my grandma Claudia, making sandcastles in the river bank with my sister and me, trying a jump rope with my cousins and me, jumping after a birdy playing badmitten in her camp yard. She was the best Grandma.*
- *This morning I remember Christoper Tice, Making us all steaming cups of coffee, Telling me how special I was when I was sad, saving many lives as a volunteer fiefighter, and singing me a lullaby as a little girl when I was sick. Sometimes it feels as though he's still alive.*

What happens next? Teachers with whom we have worked have instituted an array of teaching practices, displaying students' cumulative sentences as models, inviting students to incorporate the sentence form in fully developed pieces, creating daily practice in which a class member offers a short base clause and invites others to add to it, exploring the cumulative sentence in the revision process. As students begin to point out cumulative

sentences in their reading, some teachers incorporate these as models for teaching style in writing.

Although the lesson plan for Teaching the Cumulative Sentence with Three Verb Clusters is a small part of the generative rhetoric, it serves as a solid foundation on which other rhetorical elements may be taught and learned. We do not argue that generative rhetoric should become the central focus of a writing classroom, but contend that a number of other rhetorical skills and principles occur, implicitly, in the process of teaching it: the distinct rhythm and “music” of the English language; the role of punctuation and pause in oral reading; sequence and prioritization; balance and parallelism; coordination; subordination; diction and the power of words; sentence variety; the modulation of sentence length; the poignancy of details; the development of voice; avoidance of redundancy; achieving coherence through sentence connections, for example.<sup>1</sup>

### **What We Have Learned**

As stated earlier, we use the word *organic* to describe our approach to teaching and learning. We could have used another word, a simple word with profound implications, perhaps even a better word, the word *local*. Taken together, the two words are almost synonymous, both pointing to the same truth, namely, that teaching and learning grow best in the rich and fertile soil of community.

How this translates into classroom practice means that we use the language of our students rather than canned, programmed, or packaged language. The authentic and spontaneous language of our students is richer than the manufactured language of textbooks, especially for the purpose of literacy learning. We bring to the forefront a *sense of place*, wherever that might be. We also believe that the full spectrum of language—reading, both silent and oral; listening; dialoging, asking and answering questions; and writing—is important in the learning process. Almost always, speaking and listening precede writing. In the circle format described earlier, participants listen to others offer verb clusters

to describe people important to them, all the while thinking of their own chosen person, dredging up details from the unconscious and letting them come alive once again in the conscious mind. The articulation of these details is brought about by the *-ing* form and by the process through which the form is taught. Like a tiny hook that catches a minute fish, the form brings obscure details to the surface.

The responses of our students have given us deeper insight into Christensen's cryptic comment: "Thus the mere form of the sentence generates ideas." We learned that it is not the form of the sentence that generates ideas but rather the form of the free modifier, in our case, the *-ing* form of the verb cluster. The *-ing* form functions simultaneously as both scheme (figure of form) and trope (figure of thought). The *-ing* provides the form for the next verb cluster the student is composing, but it also serves as a tool for digging into the unconscious to discover other details buried there. Christensen's comment does not mean that form provides a topic for writing. Writers must find their own topics, but once a topic is found the form helps generate ideas—more specifically details, scenes, events, and stories related to the topic.

A major aspect of the lesson on verb clusters centers around the questions that we ask students. The key question, "What do you remember your person doing?" is derived from our understanding of verb clusters, but the response to the question is personal and local. Thus the teacher becomes a nexus between the subject matter and the student. The lesson calls for a specific mental process, a building up, an adding to, a remembering of details. The last step in the lesson, "the zinger," requires precisely the opposite mental process, reducing all the elements to their essence. We have found that students are able to write these zingers easily, without discussion or further explanation. We wonder about these two discrete mental processes. Is one silently at work when the other is active? In the process of bundling all the details, is the mind, of its own nature, unconsciously preparing itself to find their essence? We really do not know, but as teachers

we are as concerned about the underlying mental processes that generate language as we are about the language itself.

Francis Christensen's generative rhetoric no doubt provides valuable principles and insights into improving writing. In contrast, his Rhetoric Program, designed to teach those principles to young people, clearly missed the mark. The problem in the Rhetoric Program becomes clear when we ask ourselves, "What mental processes are required for completing these fill-in-the-blank exercises?" It seems to us that students are asked to create hypothetical verbal examples of complex grammatical categories, first imagining the artificial situation posed by the exercise, then attempting to call up appropriate language to describe the artificial situation using correct forms and grammar, and finally being expected to transfer the simulated writing exercise to their own written work. We believe that the teaching of writing should reflect genuine underlying mental processes of composing itself, not artificial activities, convenient though they may be.

Let us instead encourage our young writers to be the starting point for their own learning, first unearthing a topic, then digging out the details significant to that topic, the events, sights, and sounds, finally capturing the appropriate language to express all this. They are, after all, writers.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Several significant correlations at the  $<0.001$  level, both positive and negative, in our Seventh Grade Study, offer support for these claims. The cumulative sentence and verb cluster are both positively correlated with the presence of voice (.15 and .17 respectively); effective organization (.22 and .22); balance and parallelism (.15 and .19); and adverbial leads (.14 and .17). Significant negative correlations were observed between the cumulative sentence and redundancy (-.15) and the verb cluster and redundancy (-.20). This suggests that skill in generative rhetoric may reduce the presence of redundancy, which was the major negative factor in the writing of the 464 seventh graders in the study.

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## APPENDIX

### TEACHING THE CUMULATIVE SENTENCE WITH THREE VERB CLUSTERS

- Seat students in a circle so they can see and hear each other.  
*Students need to hear and see each other for three reasons: to validate and witness oral communication, to build on the ideas of others, and to appreciate each others' unfolding stories.*
- Ask students to think of one person who is special to them, a person they know well and are often with.  
*This promotes student ownership of topic. Rock and sports stars are usually inappropriate because students don't know them personally.*
- Go around the circle, with students naming the person who will be their focus for the day. The teacher models this activity by being the first to name a chosen person. ("my grandmother")  
*This task creates direct personal involvement for students.*
- Ask students to think of something they remember that person **doing**.  
*The word **doing** elicits the -ing form.*  
Teachers model by telling something their person could be found **doing**, a phrase beginning with the *-ing* form. ("cooking biscuits and ham every morning")  
*Constant reminders of what one is **doing** help students hold the -ing form in mind.*  
Going around the circle, students tell something their person might be found doing. (Should a few students begin with a word other than the *-ing* form, coax them to come to the *-ing* form or phrase.)



*Emphasis should be on the topic person, not the student writer. (example: “seeing her cook biscuits and ham every morning” would focus on the writer rather than the selected person and would require revision. “What do you remember your **grandmother doing?**”)*

- Go around the circle again, this time asking students to tell a second thing they remember their chosen person **doing**. Teachers model again with a phrase beginning with the *-ing* form. (“letting me stack the layers for her pineapple upside down cakes”)

*Typically, students will not come up with their best ideas on the first round. Additional rounds of oral sharing allow them to borrow or expand on the ideas of others.*

Point out effective use of details in some students’ phrases to encourage more details in other student responses. (example: “Did you notice that Sam didn’t just say ‘working on the car?’ He said, ‘changing the oil in the old Studebaker.’”)

*We suggest waiting until the second round to press for details when students are comfortable with the process; we further suggest pressing for details by complimenting a student or two who have included detail in their phrases.*

- Go around the circle a third time with each student sharing another thing they remember the chosen person **doing**. Model again with an *-ing* phrase. (example: “teaching me to sing The Star Spangled Banner”)

*Most students catch on firmly to the *-ing* form by the third round. Some are able to help classmates. This continuing process brings details from the unconscious to the conscious mind. It allows students to hear a host of authentic verb clusters articulated by classmates.*

- Ask students to notice the characteristics of the first word everyone says as you go around the circle. Probe until someone discovers that the first word is an *-ing* form.  
*If students discover—rather than being told—that the key is the -ing form, they will remember the verb cluster more readily.*
- Ask students to write the name of their chosen person at the top of a page, then write their three *-ing* phrases (verb clusters) as a bulleted list under the name of the person.  
*Point out that none of the verb clusters is a complete sentence.*
- After hearing their classmates' *-ing* phrases, students often want to add details as they list their verb clusters.  
*We encourage, but don't insist upon, elaboration at this point. This allows students to generate additional content and to act upon ideas picked up from classmates.*
- Ask students to underline the *-ing* in each verb cluster.  
*This insures that each student is aware of having three verb clusters.*
- Ask students to draw a horizontal line across the page just below the list of verb clusters.  
*This line provides separation between pre-writing and the cumulative sentence that they are about to compose.*
- Ask permission to use one student's ideas (topic and verb clusters) as a model. Write these on chart paper for all the class to see through the remainder of the lesson.  
*The chart paper model helps visual learners to capture the form of the sentence. Because we are writing on chart paper, the model can be posted in the classroom as a reference tool for students.*

- Ask students to write, under the horizontal line, a base clause similar to the following on their paper, adding the name of their chosen person: “This afternoon I remember \_\_\_\_\_.”

*We provide the base clause in order to maintain focus on the verb cluster. Later, students will learn to compose their own base clauses.*

- Ask students, “What mark of punctuation follows the base clause?” Make sure students understand that the base clause is a complete sentence and that a period is appropriate. Put a period—but then change it to a comma. Ask, “Why are we using a comma here?” Let students tell you that the comma signals that there is more to come.

*It is imperative that students understand that the base clause is a complete sentence. With the comma, we confirm what most students have predicted—that the verb clusters will be added to the base clause.*

- Lead students to prioritize their verb clusters. “Look at your *-ing* phrases. Is there one that should be last for any reason? Maybe one is the funniest, the saddest, the most surprising, the shortest? Maybe they are all equal and it doesn’t matter which order they are in. Number your *-ing* phrases in the order they should go in your sentence.” *Prioritizing is a rhetorical skill that can be taught or reinforced in this activity; here we base the prioritization on students’ native intuition, but we invite their rationale.*
- Lead the students to add the first verb cluster to the base clause. Ask, “What mark of punctuation should we place after our first *-ing* phrase?”

*Teaching the punctuation for the cumulative sentence along within the student's own content creates an effective contextual learning package.*

Lead students to add their second and third verb clusters, placing commas between each of the added members.

*Going slowly here helps keep students from losing sight of the overall sentence.*

- Address the inevitable question: “Why don’t you use the word ‘and’ before the last member?” Ask students to read their sentences both with and without the added “and” to see which version best fits their intended meaning. (“This afternoon, I remember my grandmother, cooking biscuits and ham every morning, letting me stack the layers for her famous pineapple upside down cakes, teaching me to sing the Star Spangled Banner.”)

*We prefer to demonstrate the cumulative sentence with the free modifiers separated only by commas; however the “and” before the third member is also correct. This illustrates the flexibility of the English language and the role of voice in writing.*

Note: Some students may want to use only one or two of their verb clusters. Some will want to add a fourth or even more. Some, an initial adverb.

- Celebrate success by inviting students to read their “magic” or cumulative sentences aloud.

*When students have a name (magic sentence) for the sentence form, they are more likely to add it to their personal repertoire of writing skills.*

Model oral reading of the cumulative sentence so that students “feel” a pause where the commas fall and hear the rhythm of the sentence.

*The rhythm and meaning of the sentence, with its added modifiers, is enhanced when the reader “hears” the pauses indicated by the commas.*

During this time, it is sometimes appropriate to ask for permission to “play” with any problematic sentences. Classmates can sometimes help each other with the form. We make a point of thanking the students who allowed everyone to play with their sentences.

*Make the learning non-threatening, even celebratory, by “playing” with the sentences rather than correcting them.*

- Ask students to count the words in their sentences and write the number of words on their papers. Ask them, “What is the average length of a sentence for your grade level?” Share with students the average sentence lengths, as defined by Kellogg Hunt: fourth graders, 13.5 words; eighth graders, 16 words; twelfth graders, 17 words; college-educated adults, 25 words (306). Invite students to share and celebrate the number of words in their sentences.

*In every group, we find that sentences are longer than the average for grade level.*

- Remind students that too many long sentences will get readers all tangled up. Invite them to write a short sentence—a “zinger”—following their long one.

The teacher should model with his/her own zinger. (“She was my first teacher.”)

*Here we are encouraging sentence variety. Writing the “zinger” points toward the whole of writing, not just a one-sentence activity.*