

# THE CLOZE PROCEDURE: WRITING APPLICATIONS

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The efficient reader is one who has a highly developed anticipation mechanism. With very few textual clues, he or she is able to anticipate and predict content. The mark of an efficient reader then is not how many words he reads, or how rapidly he reads, or how progressively his eyes move across the page. Rather the good reader is the one who reads as few words as possible to predict meaning and who moves efficiently both backward and forward as he processes text. A poor reader, on the other hand, is forced to attend to the text differently, reading more and predicting less. All readers, however, unless they are merely calling words rather than comprehending, predict and anticipate as they read. In fact, the extent to which a person predicts is critical to his success as a reader.

The cloze procedure, predicated on the psychological concept of closure (hence, cloze) and the linguistic concept of redundancy in language (Vaughan 21), emphasizes and reinforces the role of prediction in the reading process. Introduced by Wilson Taylor in 1953, the cloze procedure has been defined as "a method of systematically deleting words from a prose selection and then evaluating the success a reader has in accurately supplying the words deleted" (Robinson 2).

Initially, cloze passages were used primarily for assessment — to determine the readability of texts or to test the comprehension of readers. Currently, reading specialists are discovering additional uses for the cloze procedure, including many that are instructional rather than evaluative. Developmental students benefit especially from this type of language experience because their lack of discrete reading skills is of-

ten compounded by their failure to understand the total process. These students need assistance in understanding not just *what* they read but *how* they read. By enabling them to understand the role of prediction in reading, cloze passages help them to understand more fully their own reading process and to attend more consciously to the text.

In spite of the widespread use of the cloze procedure in the reading class, composition teachers have thus far failed to explore possibilities for its application to writing. However, the integral relationship between reading and writing suggests that the cloze procedure is as appropriate in the writing class as it is in the reading class.

Writers, like readers, anticipate meaning. They not only anticipate their own content as their text evolves, but they also predict their reader's response — what he will understand, how he will react. Students need to be aware of the reciprocity of their roles as readers and writers, that as readers they must anticipate meaning in order to comprehend and that as writers they must help their readers to predict meaning. Cloze passages raise to the writer's level of consciousness the predictive nature of both reading and writing.

The cloze procedure also reinforces for the writer the importance of context. Both reading and writing are context-dependent processes. Therefore, writers need to understand the semantic and syntactic relationships that exist at the level of the sentence and the paragraph in order to make the linguistic choices that are based on these relationships. Cloze exercises, because they exist within a context, encourage writers to examine these relationships.

Developmental students in particular need the increased awareness of process that cloze passages provide. Psychologist Ellen Bouchard Ryan has observed that an awareness of one's own thought processes is one of the four essential cognitive capabilities prerequisite to the attainment of reading and writing goals (71).<sup>1</sup> Developmental students often lack this awareness. They not only fail to see the integral relationship between reading and writing but also have no clear perception of how either process works. Attempting to deal with linguistic items in isolation and attending prematurely to surface errors, they attempt to write with little understanding of writing as process.

In addition to, and partially as a result of, their lack of insight into language processes, developmental students also typically lack the ability to analyze language, especially their

own. By focusing their attention closely on a written text, cloze passages help students learn more about how language works — the interaction of vocabulary and syntax, the subtle influence of diction on style, the important grammatical relationships between words in a sentence, and the equally important logical relationships between sentences in a paragraph. Until students gain some understanding of these important concepts and acquire the analytical skills essential to mature writing, their progress as writers will be limited.

Thus the cloze procedure can be as valuable an instructional strategy to the writing teacher as it is to the reading teacher. The variety of ways in which it can be used in the composition classroom is limited only by the teacher's imagination. For example, cloze exercises can be used to focus attention on a specific part of speech. Rather than using a typical deletion pattern in which every fifth or seventh word is omitted, an instructor can delete from a passage all of the words belonging to a certain syntactic category. For instance, all the referential pronouns can be deleted from a passage and the students asked to supply the appropriate pronouns.

In order to perform this task successfully, students must be able to identify the antecedent to which each of the deleted pronouns refers and to select the pronoun that agrees with it in number and gender. In addition, they must determine its appropriate case from the context of the clause in which the pronoun appears. A similar exercise can be devised by deleting verbs from a passage. In supplying the missing verbs, students must be concerned not just with meaning but also with tense and agreement. In order to select an acceptable verb, they must identify the subject of the deleted verb so that their verb choice agrees with the subject and then determine from the context the appropriate tense. These types of exercises, simple as they are, encourage students to attend closely to the text, using the available context clues — both semantic and syntactic — to predict the correct word.

#### CLOZE PASSAGE WITH VERBS DELETED

After Sissy and I (*were invited*) inside, we (*walked*) through a dark hall to the parlor. The parlor (*was*) an interesting room — a room which (*told*) us a great deal about the cultural interests of the man we (*had come*) to interview. In one corner (*was*) a large bookcase filled with biographies of various musical composers. In another corner (*was*) an old phonograph surrounded with classi-

cal records. On the large desk in the center of the room (*were*) opera programs — old ones and new ones. The room also (*contained*) a piano and a violin but no television.

A slightly more challenging exercise can be devised by deleting all the transition words from a passage. In this type of exercise the students must be able to see the relationships involved between the different ideas in order to supply the correct transition word. The deletions can be limited to a certain type of transition, such as coordinating conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs, or can include all types. In order to make their task easier and to acquaint them with different types of transition words and phrases, students can be given a list of transitions from which to select their responses.

#### CLOZE PASSAGE WITH TRANSITIONS DELETED

Colleges and universities were once mainly attended by young, middle-class students who had just graduated from high school. Today, (*however*), campuses across the United States are populated with a variety of students, many of whom are neither young, middle-class, nor even North American. Some of these students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. (*In addition*) to students from lower economic backgrounds, U.S. colleges are (*also*) accepting increasing numbers of foreign students. A student does not have to be a citizen of the United States to attend a college or a university in this country. (*In fact*), one class may have students from several different foreign countries. Students today are (*also*) not necessarily young. Some students have been out of high school for ten to twenty years. Others never completed high school. (*Yet*) these students seem capable of competing successfully with younger students. (*Moreover*), older students often have an advantage over the young people in their classes because they have had more experience and often are more highly motivated. These new students who are poorer, older, or not native to this country add variety and interest to our campuses. Although these new students have not replaced the traditional young high school graduates, they have brought a new dimension to higher education in this country.

This type of exercise causes students to examine both the semantic and the syntactic clues provided by the text. In order to make appropriate choices, they must comprehend not only the meaning of the passage but also the rhetorical structure of the text and the syntax of individual sentences. Unlike exercises in which pronouns are deleted, this one allows students some flexibility in their responses. It is not necessary for the student to select exactly the same transition word or phrase as the author of the passage originally used. As long as students do not violate either the semantic or syntactic integrity of the passage, their responses should be considered acceptable. Showing the student the passage as it was originally written, however, provides an opportunity to discuss the subtle differences that result when other choices are made. If a student's response is decidedly inappropriate, the student and instructor can analyze together why that response will not work and why the student thought that it would.

An even more sophisticated cloze exercise, but one that is still appropriate for developmental writing students, is one in which students compare their responses to the original wording of a cloze passage in order to discover the resulting differences in tone. Words can be deleted randomly, or those from a certain syntactic category can be omitted. Although any part of speech can be selected for deletions, modifiers and verbs seem to work best. Students first predict the words that they think should be used in the blank spaces. Then their responses are examined for semantic and syntactic appropriateness. This work can be done individually or in groups. In either case, the class as a whole can then decide which of the various choices for each blank is most appropriate so that there is consensus on one version of the passage. Finally, the student version or versions are compared to the original. In this final step, the emphasis is not on whether the students' predictions are identical to the author's words but rather on the differences in tone that result from the semantic choices that have been made. Whether the students prefer the original version to their own is also not important. That they recognize the relationship between diction and tone is important.

The following cloze passage, adapted from Pat Conroy's *The Water Is Wide*, demonstrates this difference in tone. The first version is the original; the second is a student effort to

predict the deleted nouns. Notice that most of the student's responses are not incorrect but are less appropriate or specific than are the author's. Conroy's diction reflects the down-to-earth, simple qualities of his characters. The student's choices are frequently euphemistic and inappropriately formal in tone.

#### ORIGINAL VERSION

Flowers abounded beside the (*casket*), carefully tended by two undertakers, who seemed to encourage the atmosphere of (*sorrow*) and hysteria by their dramatic presentation of each new part of the (*ceremony*). Most of the (*flowers*) were plastic, a vivid example of a twentieth-century incursion of Yamacraw. Aunt Ruth's husband had been the island (*undertaker*) before his death. He had fashioned pine (*coffins*) in a shed near his (*house*). He would have none of the tacky death chambers wrought by factories and peddled by the oily undertakers of Savannah. (*Death*) on the island was cleaner and less packaged when he was alive. The plastic flowers, with their senseless bid for immortality, added an (*ugliness*) to the ceremony hard to define.

Adapted from *The Water Is Wide* by Pat Conroy (252).

#### STUDENT VERSION

Flowers abounded beside the (*grave*), carefully tended by two undertakers, who seemed to encourage the atmosphere of (*grief*) and hysteria by their dramatic presentation of each new part of the (*funeral*). Most of the (*flowers*) were plastic, a vivid example of a twentieth-century incursion of Yamacraw. Aunt Ruth's husband had been the island (*carpenter*) before his death. He had fashioned pine (*caskets*) in a shed near his (*business*). He would have none of the tacky death chambers wrought by factories and peddled by the oily undertakers of Savannah. (*Burial*) on the island was cleaner and less packaged when he was alive. The plastic flowers, with their senseless bid for immortality, added an (*elegance*) to the ceremony hard to define.

Much of the current research into the composing process indicates that we shall only understand writing as we understand more fully the reading process and the integral relation-

ship that exists between the two. Our writing students, especially those who are inexperienced writers, also need an awareness of reading process, for, as Mina Shaughnessy suggests, basic writers understand themselves as writers only when they can observe themselves as readers. In addition to giving students specific language skills, the cloze procedure helps them to learn about the predictive nature of both reading and writing and the importance of context to both processes. And, most important, cloze passages can assist students in perceiving the complex relationship that exists between writers and readers, writing and reading.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The other three cognitive abilities cited by Ryan are (1) basic perceptual, motor, and memory processes, (2) acquired linguistic knowledge, and (3) strategies — purposeful action to achieve specific goals.

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