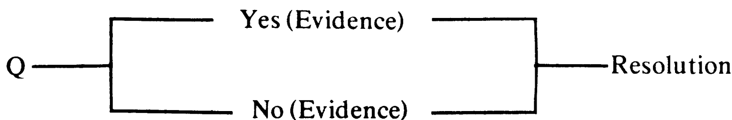
YES-NO QUESTIONS IN TEACHING WRITING

EUGENE WASHINGTON

Yes-no questions are, like wh-questions, a lingistic universal. All linguists and grammarians acknowledge their existence, and no known language is without them.[1] But it is a matter of historical fact that wh-questions have received far more attention from rhetoricians and teachers of composition.[2] The main reason for this, I suspect, is that only wh-questions seem to form (as they do in the journalist's formula) a neat paradigm of six or seven questions. Yes-no questions, on the other hand, present problems with classification and use: When can we be sure we have used all we should use? Used them correctly? Also it may be, taking a suggestion of Aristotle's, that we are drawn to wh-questions because only they seem to express the "universal," the necessary starting point for discovering particular facts.[3]

But writers do (and always have) made heavy use of yes-no questions to manage information in the text. Consider, e.g., the following schema and actual questions it can represent:



1. "Are Computers Alive?" (Simons).
2. "Did a Supernova Trigger the Formation of the Solar System?" (Schram and Clayton).
3. "Word Processors: Do They Help Writers?" (Brewer 1).

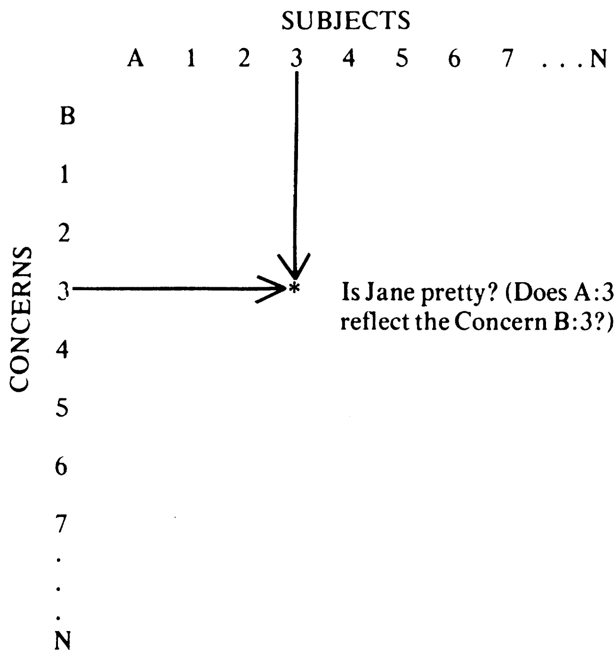
With the question (Q) we convey information in the form of a proposition. The two possible answers, "Yes" or "No," together with the evidence to support them, then introduces opposition (contrast) into the information. With the Resolution a choice is made between

either "Yes" or "No" and this, in most cases, ends the text. Such a pattern, my students and I find, is very common, as in 1., 2., and 3. above, where the author wants to present pro and con arguments for the existence of X, its nature, etc. The scope of the pattern is generally over the whole text, in which case the question usually stands as the title; but it also reaches over sections, chapters, and paragraphs.

I want to return to the Q:Evidence:Resolution pattern later. But first I want to describe a Matrix I routinely use to show students how important yes-no questions can be as a heuristic--not only for eliciting information about a subject, but also for giving it a sharp focus. Students also learn from the Matrix how yes-no questions can be used to explore ways to control their representation of the subject in the final text.

MATRIX

The Matrix is composed of a Subject axis and a (human) Concerns one. A correlation between the Subject and one or more Concerns generates a yes-no question:



In this particular instance "Jane" is the subject and the Concern is an aesthetic one (Is X ugly? Beautiful? Pretty?). But the subject could be anything the user chooses. It might be, e.g., an artifact like a house, a

typewriter, a garden; or it might be an institution (church, university, Elks-Club), or a natural object (tree, deer, landslide). Although students have little trouble, on the whole, in choosing a subject, I caution them that it should be one that they know quite a bit about and one that is sensory, something that can be seen, touched, etc.

No definitive listing of Concerns, obviously, can be given. But we can illustrate their general nature and give a partial list. A Concern, e.g., may be either positive or negative, either be something we think is "good" for us, or something we fear. Or Concern A may be the cause of Concern B; or A may come in conflict with B. In addition, A may be a more important Concern than B to us. The health of our family, e.g., may be more important than getting the house painted this summer. Concerns, finally, have some relationship to a person's sex, age, and profession. Men, on the whole, are more interesed in hunting than women; young people generally fear death less than old ones do.

A partial list of Concerns, like the following, also helps students to understand their role in generating a yes-no question:

1. Religious (Does X have religious value? Is it used in a religious ceremony?)
2. Economic (Is X costly? Is it often bought and sold?)
3. Political (Does X figure in the political process of your community? Nation?)
4. Aesthetic (Is X ugly?)
5. Historical/evolutionary (does X have a history and an evolutionary development?)
6. Private/public (Is X of concern to the individual or to society as a whole? Or to both?)
7. Quanta (Is X of small, or great, quantity? Is X discrete and countable?)

With this, students are invited to add other Concerns or to delete any of the present ones. Along this line I like to mention that the "N" at the end of the A and B axes of the Matrix stands not only for the unlimited numbered of Concerns, but also for their potential replaceability. Nothing about the Matrix should be considered absolute or permanent.

From the student's point of view the Matrix gives him or her a way of (1) selecting a subject (2) giving it an information focus with a Concern (or more than one), and (3) a way of experimenting with several different kinds of subjects; or creating several different kinds of essays.[4] Here is a list of some topics and titles produced by the Matrix in a recent class (English 101):

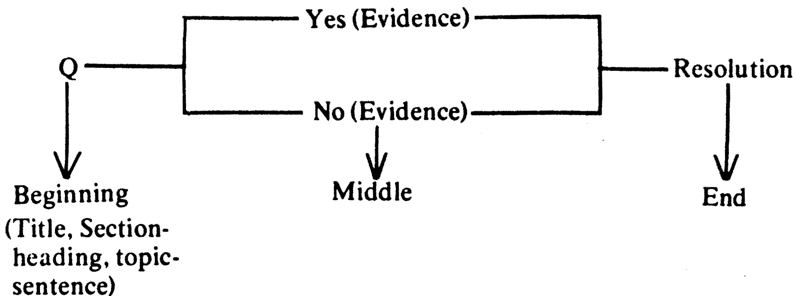
1. "Should I go on a diet?"

2. "Should I clean my room tomorrow?"
3. "Does an increase in abortions signal a decline of religious values?"
4. "Can we develop a safe nuclear reactor?"[5]

STRUCTURING WITH YES-NO QUESTIONS

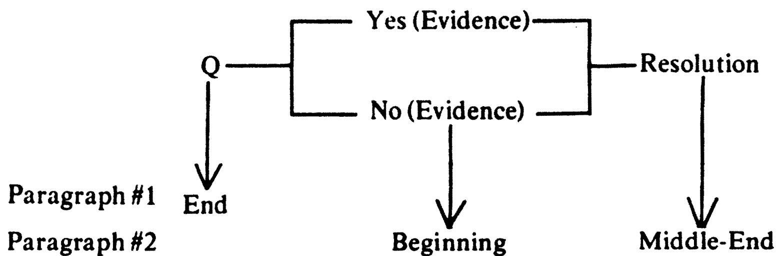
The Matrix is an extremely powerful heuristic. It can be used as a basis for lectures, by the student working alone on her own at her own speed, or by students working together in small groups. But it needs to be supplemented by a procedure for demonstrating ways yes-no questions can be used to structure information in the final text. For this I like to use the Q:Evidence:Resolution pattern earlier discussed.

In this we assume that the text as a whole, or any structure within it (section, chapter, paragraph, etc.) can be divided into a Beginning, Middle, and End. The pattern can then be represented as a control device for the structure. E.g:



Here the Q is represented as controlling the flow of information in the first part of the structure, Evidence in its middle part, and the Resolution in its terminal part.

But the pattern can also be seen as a control procedure for bridging between two, or more, structures--in the following example, between two paragraphs:



I.e., paragraph #1 terminates with a question and #2 resolves it. A variation of this is for the Resolution to extend to a third paragraph.

SUMMARY

Yes-no questions are the first kind of questions learned by children[6] (Clark and Clark 354). This suggests that they may be the primary way we acquire knowledge of ourselves, the world, our language. It further suggests that answering a yes-no question is a major way of representing such knowledge--in terms of this essay, in correlating a subject with a Concern, or Concerns. If this is the case, then answers to yes-no questions can become a model for evaluating students' texts. The procedure is this: (1) ask the student to write the entire piece as an answer to a yes-no question (the question need not appear in the text); (2) ask her to write, on a separate sheet, what the question is; (3) ask her to abstract, also on a separate sheet, what the essentials of her answer to the question are. Essentials, for me, are these: (a) Is your answer a "No" or a "Yes" one? (b) Where did you get the Evidence to support either position? Personal interviews? Books, or experience? Did you try to represent each position fairly? (c) On what grounds was your Resolution formulated? Personal experience, expert testimony, etc.? Small group workshops in class usually help students sort out any weaknesses in (a), (b), and (c). But I also think it is a good idea to confer with the student, at least once in the term, about (a), (b), and (c).

Eugene Washington teaches freshman, sophomore, and junior level courses at Utah State University, Logan.

NOTES

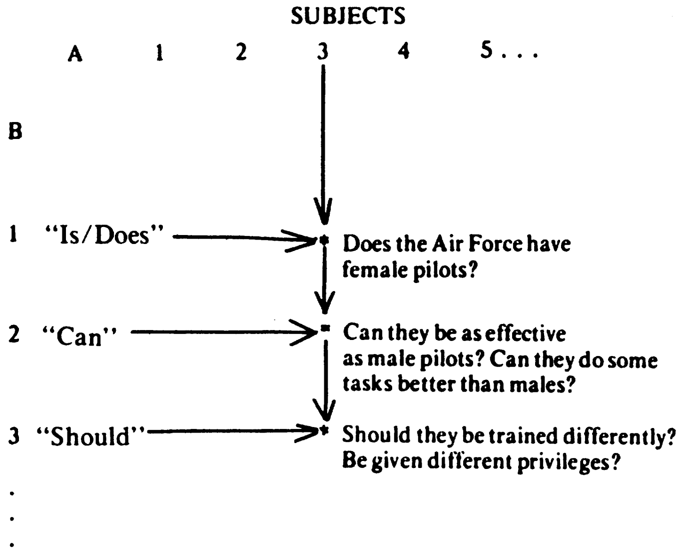
[1] E.g., Herbert H., and Eve V. Clark, *Psychology and Language* (New York: Harcourt, 1977), pp. 100-113; Randolph Quirk, *et. al, A Grammar of Contemporary English* (New York: Seminar, 1972), pp. 378-394.

[2] E.g., Jacqueline Berke, *Twenty Questions for the Writer* (New York: Harcourt [2nd edition], 1976); Ann E. Berthoff, *Forming, Thinking, and Writing* (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1978), pp. 70 ff. (the HDWDWW formula).

[3] See *On Interpretation*, 20-a, 20-b; *Topics*, 158-a.

[4] In a few expository writing classes I have used the tripartite classification of Natural object/Artifact/Institution to organize writing assignments for the whole term. Thus essay #1 was a description of a Natural object, #2 of an Artifact, etc. Information was generated for each of these by a series of correlations with the Concerns by means of yes-no questions.

[5] Some instructors might not want to go this far. But I suggest that you spend some time talking about the modal forms of yes-no questions, especially the "can" and "should" ones. Try putting these in the context of Concerns. Doesn't "can" reflect the "probability" Concern? "Should" the "prescriptive" one? You might even want to try this "mini-Matrix":



This Matrix forces the student to think in terms not only of the factual situation ("Is/Does") but also potential, or probable, ones ("Can," and "Should [Ought, Must]").

WORKS CITED

Brewer, Daryln. "Word Processors: Do They Help Writers?" *Coda: Poets & Writers Newsletter,* 1983.

Clark, Eve V. and Herbert H. Clark. *Psychology and Language.* New York: Harcourt, 1977.

Schram, David M. and Robert N. Clayton. "Did a Supernova Trigger the Formation of the Solar System?" *Scientific American,* October, 1978.

Simons, Geoff. *Are Computers Alive?* Brighton-Suffex, England: Harvester Press, 1983.