THREE SYNS

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A lot of synning goes on in the typical composition class. I refer by way of pun to a group of words beginning with *syn* and having meanings of some importance for writing teachers: syntax, synopsis, synthesis, and, from poetry but still usable in composition class, synecdoche. It is not my purpose to alter or review the working definitions of these familiar terms but rather to introduce to composition three new *syn* words that may, if employed with students in constructive and appropriate ways, offer as much to a writing class as their better-known predecessors. In the order in which they should be presented to a class as problem-solving concepts for writers, the words are synapsis, synesthesia, and synergy.

Meanings ray out from them: the first is purely scientific, of course; the second may evoke Beaudelaire and *fin de siecle* arts; and the last has a contemporary ring to it—a high-tech buzzword. Related to composition, however, they take on new and useful dimensions: synapsis emphasizing transition and coherence; synesthesia, the use of the senses to enhance arrangement of ideas and compositional details; and synergy, the dynamic interrelationship of writing and other disciplines. Grouped together as *syn* words and given such expanded applications for English, they become a neat package of techniques for composition class. As Flower and Hayes remind us, "a new heuristic . . . must be presented as a classroom experience which ensures that the writer learns how to use and apply it" (460). To that end, I include scenes from my own classes which suggest the potential of these original (for composition) syns.

SYNAPSIS

Those familiar with physiology know that synapsis, which derives from a Greek word for point-of-contact, refers to the transmittal of electrochemical impulses from nerve to nerve. Certain elements in a well-written paragraph or series of paragraphs,

particularly transitional words and phrases, serve linguistically the same function as that bodily process—each one being a synapse in itself. But the paragraph must be seen much as Becker described it some twenty years ago when, making his own analogy from science (wave-particle-field theory), he wrote that "paragraphs are multisystemic . . . there is a continuity or concord between the parts, and there is a system of semantic relationships in which the reader's expectations are aroused and fulfilled" (238). But the gap between arousal and fulfillment is considerable. In writing, the willingness and the ability to bridge that gap can make the difference between paragraphs that are alive and those that are lifeless, just as synapsis is an obvious line of demarcation between literal life and death.

There are several ways to illustrate this principle of paragraph systems to students in a composition, once they understand the importance of each individual synapse to both the living body and their own writing. The methods cited here are part of a double-barreled lesson sequence on the problem of successful transitions, and they use both professional writing and the students' own paragraphs. In both portions of the sequence, the students are asked to think of themselves as lab technicians tracking down the exact point at which synapsis is occurring or should occur to make the system of a paragraph (or a set of ideas between or among paragraphs) optimally flow. It is always gratifying when students are willing to play such a game, and the syn and science angles tend to lure them in.

The professional models are chosen for the style with which they accomplish their flow, and as one might suspect the selections come from writers renowned as stylists—Updike, for instance, and Nabokov, two writers with whom I spend a lot of time at the Xerox machine. Typically, I find a passage appropriate for my classes, photocopy it, cross out most if not all of the transitions, and have a secretary type and mimeo it in altered form. When the paragraph or paragraphs are distributed in class I point out that, although they are dead now, they were once as alive as you and I. It is our job as technicians to restore them to some semblance of their former selves by re-establishing their synapses, which the class then proceeds to do either with a supplied list of transitions or by adding appropriate words and phrases of their own.

The other part of the lesson involves process-intervention—or, to be more exact and put the emphasis where it must be in teaching writing as process, *intervention in students' writing so as to facilitate their learning how to write*. It calls simply for students to circle each transition in their own writing, as they write, and then to discern with connecting lines and the instructor's help whether these form a proper sufficiency of synapses—conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, pronoun-referent connections—to keep the ideas alive and flowing. Just seeing such things schematized in their own paragraphs is a valuable aid for them, and it is not uncommon for a page of their writing to end up resembling, appropriately, a network of nerves.

So, while this is not a radically new idea, it borrows established pedagogy and adds a different dimension, one that today's game-based-learning student takes to rather quickly. It is the first part of a package, moreover, and students are always eager to know what their next *syn* is going to be all about.

SYNESTHESIA

The ways in which the five senses can and do interrelate is a phenomenon often overlooked by everyone but creative artists, yet these relationships and their perceptual fruit can lead to a deeper appreciation and understanding of life. It is with this idea in mind that I introduce the second original *syn* to my classes to help address issues like arrangement of observations and the power of carefully rendered detail. A variety of media is useful in achieving this end, from videotaped computer graphics to progressive jazz recordings. While I am far from the first to write about a-v aids in composition class, I do stress the use of an overall plan under the rubric *synesthesia*. As Douglas Catron phrases it in an article (on technical communications) with a thesis similar to mine, "if we can train our students to develop better vision, to see objects clearly and perhaps through a new set of eyes, we will have contributed something very important to their development as writers" (71). As a matter of fact, today's student may see things through eyes newer than ours as a result of the advent of music videos, which exploit synesthesia as an artistic *raison d'etre*. And, lest we be too wary of abandoning our proper domain, Harvey Wiener reminds us that "To hold an inveterate suspicion toward the non-

written medium as if it debases the word as a golden means of communication is a narrowness of vision that will not serve the interests of this special generation of students" (196).

My most successful classroom exercise using synesthesia is an instructive model of the entire process. I happen to have a collection of 9″ x 12″ art reproductions which are heavy, full-color, and thus perfect for opaque projection. Along with their application to writing, the nine-print set I use in class forms a supplementary side lesson on appreciation of the Masters, and together we truly do work toward interrelating aesthetic perceptions. All reasonably well-known, the nine reproductions were selected for qualities particularly appropriate to composition. In planned order of projection over a two-period sequence (we do linger), the first eight are Seurat's "Sunday Afternoon," David's "Death of Socrates," a detail from Bosch's "Hell," Van Gogh's "Starry Night," Bruegel's "Fall of Icarus," and three Mondrians shown in reverse chronological order.

The actual Seurat painting is immense, and yet (as I tell my students) it is built up entirely out of an incalculable number of tiny pointillistic "points," single-color dabs of paint. The lesson of a painting whose surface is measurable in square meters but whose essence is mere dots is not lost on their comprehension of how even the longest papers they write are created word by word, detail by painstaking verbal detail. From there it is on to David who, by contrast, achieved his monumental effects by carefully arranging large geometric units to form togas, human features, backdrops, etc. I ask the class to relate such solid, separate, yet carefully arranged units to the larger parts—paragraphs, idea-trains—of an essay. This point is more difficult to grasp, but the instructive contrast with Seurat seems always to hit home.

Similarly, the Bosch is a jolt; we spend long moments studying its minutiae as an example of the power of the human imagination to depict the previously unknown in pictorial and, by easy extension, written composition. "The Starry Night" serves to embody overstatement, hyperbole in art; such a view of this widely-admired painting is not gained by ignoring its meaning—the place of man in an astounding yet indifferent universe. But as actual oil on canvas it is anything but subtle in its effect upon the eye and understanding. Following the Van Gogh is Bruegel's rendition of "The Fall of Icarus," which at this place in the sequence

of prints demonstrates that understatement, if carefully accomplished, can have as dramatic an impact as overstatement. How much more lamentable is the death of the mythological youth when it happens virtually unseen—in a corner of the canvas, there, beside the hurrying ship.

The highlight of this two-period presentation-discussion is the projection of three paintings by twentieth-century Dutchman Piet Mondrian. In his career the artist went from representational style to abstract impressionism to a form of geometrism characterized by straight lines and basic colors. Capitalizing on the general human tendency to be somewhat puzzled by abstraction and, through comparison, to become more acutely appreciative of realistic depictions, I show these backwards through time. The comparatively late "Rhythm of Straight Lines" tends to leave students confused, if not cold, with its crisscrossing black and white lines; only along the bottom is there color-interest—squares of blue and yellow. Next comes "Horizontal Tree," dynamically swirling but still comparatively abstract; without the title, a viewer would scarcely recognize the "tree." Lastly I show "Landscape with Farmhouse," and the class breathes a sigh of relief. This early Mondrian is a delightful rural scene, replete with birds in the buttermilk sky and a shimmering pond. All three paintings were inspired by the Dutch landscape, I inform my students, as the artist groans from Beyond and the order of presentation makes analogously clear, how frustrating it can be to readers to be offered spare generalities rather than the sensual texture of reality.

This synesthesia-based lesson is almost complete. Under my breath I offer thanks and apologies to the wonderful world of art. But what of print number nine in the sequence? I use that one—a painting called, popularly, "Whistler's Mother"—as the basis of the students' very next writing assignment. I ask the class to answer, in an essay of whatever length seems appropriate and with the print available to them, addressing an audience of fellow newcomers to art, why the artist entitled it "Arrangement in Black and White, No. 1" and why, in their opinion, it is good enough to hang in the Louvre. In one way or another, the results are almost always gratifying, for the lesson almost always "takes." If I have failed to turn them into fledgling art critics, at least their arsenal of writing skills has been augmented.

SYNERGY

In her excellent *Successful Writing*, Maxine Hariston voices a problem common to writing teachers and, a page later, hints at a possible solution:

> Student writers in composition courses often have trouble writing because the problems they choose or are given to write about don't seem real or important enough to warrant their putting out the effort required to produce a creditable piece of writing (14).
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> A writer's attempts to organize ideas and express them in words have much in common with the efforts of scientists to understand and draw conclusions from their data and artists' struggles to capture their visions (15-16).

There is a sort of reverse writing-across-the-curriculum idea lurking beneath the surface of this interdisciplinary (or crosscultural) analogy, especially if one has faith in the power of two or more entities to interact and produce extraordinary results—the power of synergy. Examples of it abound in the natural and manmade worlds.

Examples closest at hand and most relevant to composition are our students' ideas and abilities as products of the elements of their educations—or, to phrase it as a question, what can they bring to writing class from their learning pursuits in other courses? This idea, again, is not original with me, but I have attempted to refine it systematically by importing specific concepts from various disciplines and attempting to see how such ideas might relate to and improve what it is we do when we write. In an essay called "On Teaching Relationships," Richard Basgall asserts that one goal of composition is "to free the student from restrictive habits of thinking early in his college career and thereby open him up, so to speak, to the new perspectives that he will encounter along the way" (184). But the process works the other way as well: students can be opened up for composition by new perspectives from their other courses.

To be more specific, whereas many departments have established writing-across-the-curriculum programs, I have implemented a sort of thinking-across-the campus program in my composition courses. Both programs contain the notion of inter-

disciplinary awareness, but mine is intended solely for the job of helping students, by cross-referencing their learning, to see and write afresh about the intricate web of the world. Writing is a mode of learning, of course, but learning can be a mode of writing as well. My example here is from a discipline common to all curricula, and thus familiar to students, but seemingly anathematic to writing: mathematics. Their languages are totally different, one would think—the categorically unambiguous numeral system vs. the richness and diversity of the written word. And yet, with a little thought, what works in math class can be made to work in composition as well. Take, for instance, set theory.

For those who have forgotten or not yet caught up with New Math, sets are collections of objects or symbols (including, of course, numbers) possessing a common property or properties. The individual items in a set are called its elements, and one set is said to be a subset of another, larger set if all its elements are among the elements of the larger set; similarly, if two sets have elements in common but other, diverse elements as well, the sets are said to intersect. Sets are ideal for teaching classification—nay, for *graphically illustrating* it. Venn Diagrams of sets can make clear that not all subtopics are mutually exclusive, and that topics and subtopics relate to one another in often unforeseen ways. Instructors are advised to bone up on set math before using this idea, however, because sessions at the board can be as instantly educational for them as for their students.

From Introductory Psychology, always a popular course on campus, I borrow the idea of the six psychological models of human nature: the rational, the psychoanalytic, the phenomenological, the behavioral, the interactionist, and the transpersonal models. Each has its own angle of approach to human nature, as I spend a class period discussing with students, depending upon the work of its founder (Freud, Rogers, Skinner, etc.) and its practical applications. From there it is an easy step to convey the idea of point of view and its relation to topic-development, and to encourage students to employ some sort of brainstorm modeling in order to see all the angles of a given subject. Often this train of thought leads to long single paragraphs or short essays on one topic written from a variety of viewpoints, an assignment that supplements the concept of audience. (I do point out that the psychological models have their own, probably mutually exclusive,

audiences of practicing psychologists.) While it is of course not necessary to use material from Introductory Psychology to teach either point of view or audience, students' insight into how disciplines interrelate, even along their peripheries, makes the effort worthwhile. Besides what it does for composition class, this lesson and others like it give students, through synergistic side effects, a renewed appreciation of and even enthusiasm for their own cross-campus learning.

These are just two of the ways in which I have related concepts from other courses to composition in order to help students—who have proven able to handle the challenge of interdisciplinary references—master various facets of the composition process. They appreciate the effort both on my part and their own to consider such references, and they are more willing, as well as able, to learn from them. Like the other elements of this entire *syn* set within the "universe" of written composition, synergy is rich with possibilities for the imaginative instructor.

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