A LIFE SENTENCE FOR STUDENT WRITING: THE CUMULATIVE SENTENCE

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"The deserted farm was a dismal scene, rickety, old and rotting, occupying space but serving no purpose, an eyesore to most, but to a few the sign of a peaceful surrender, a sort of white flag."

For the past eight years I have been making in-service presentations all over Oklahoma as part of the Oklahoma Writing Project, spreading the word about the cumulative sentence (Christensen, 1967), exemplified by the student sample above, the single most useful vehicle I've found to teach grammar, organization, specificity, and other aspects of writing. Subsequent reports from several teachers, elementary through college, confirm what I have found with my own students: work with the cumulative sentence can have an immediate, profound impact on student writing.

At this point, the reader might expect a definition of this marvelous concept. However, I prefer to introduce the cumulative sentence inductively as I teach it and as I present it in workshops, because the medium is as important as the message. Please examine the following three student sentences:

1. He was a big man, swinging an ax, chopping firewood, singing "Strangers in the Night" to the woodland animals.
2. The moon rose, arching across the sky, showering light onto the lake, making a perfect, romantic setting for the young couple.
3. The teacher smiled at the class, drawing the test from her briefcase, trying to comfort the helpless students, understanding their nervousness.

After having students read similar sentences, I engage them in a dialogue such as the following:

Teacher—What do you notice about these sentences?

Class—They're long.

T—What else?

C—There's a lot of description.

T—Like what?

C—"Swinging an ax, chopping firewood. . ."

T—What does that describe?

C—"Man."

T—What similarities do you notice between those phrases and those in the other sentences?

C—They all start with actions: "swinging, chopping, arching, showering. . ."

T—What do you notice about those action words?

C—They all end in *ing*.

T—You said that in the first sentence the phrases describe "man." What do they describe in the second and third sentences?

C—"Moon" and "teacher."

T—What kinds of words are those?

C—Nouns.

T—What kinds of words describe nouns?

C—Adjectives.

T—So these phrases that start with action words or verbs are used as adjectives?

C—They seem to be.

T—Let's look at the other words in the phrases besides the verbs. What does "ax" tell you about "swinging"?

C—What he's swinging.

T—What does "across the sky" tell you about "arching," and what does "their nervousness" tell you about "understanding"?

C—Where the moon is arching and what she understands.

T—So what would you say about the rest of the words in the phrases?

C—They tell you something about the action word.

T—Someone summarize what we've found out about these phrases.

C—They start with verbs ending in *ing*, they have other words that tell something about those verbs, and the phrases are used as adjectives to describe something else in the sentence.

T—Good. What you have just described is called a participial phrase, and those *ing* verbs are called participles.

T—Where in the sentences are all these phrases located?

C—In the last half of the sentence.

T—Could you put a period where the first comma is in each sentence, remove the description afterwards, and still have a sentence? For example: "He was big man."

C—Yes.

T—So why is all that description added on?

C—To give you a better picture.

T—So it accumulates detail to help you see better what the writer is talking about. This kind of sentence is called a "cumulative" sentence.

Notice that the only thing I "tell" the students is the name of the concept, and that name comes AFTER the analysis in which they actually "define" the concept. The key to this process, to be sure, is asking the right questions, then using the students' responses to focus and direct the dialogue.

The right questions, of course, depend on what the students already know and what they are capable of conceptualizing. For example, if they already know concepts like "verb," that terminology is fine for questions; otherwise, more concrete terms may be necessary like "action words."

Notice that the questions in the above dialogue focus on observation and reasoning rather than guesswork—an important distinction. Questions like "What do you think this might be called?" are not only generally worthless but result in a lot of wrong answers and, consequently, reluctance to answer questions. Observation and reasoning questions, on the other hand, enhance students' abilities to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate—crucial skills in writing—at the same time minimizing wrong answers.

Limiting variables also minimizes wrong answers. For example, I use only present participles, with their consistent *ing* ending, to introduce participial phrases, postponing the multivariate past participle endings until the students have a firm grasp of the basic concept.

Following the discussion of present participles, I provide simple sentences, such as "He was a big man," to which students add their own phrases. Then we read them aloud, and they are always impressed with each other's work, making comments like, "That sounds like Steinbeck" or "Did YOU really write that?"

After further practice, perhaps writing cumulative sentences with participial phrases to describe photographs, we may look at sentences containing past participles, comparing them to the present participles in the sentences they've written. Often students will have fortuitously used past participles in their sentences, and we can use them for comparison.

When students have become fluent with participial phrases (which doesn't take long), we explore other cumulative sentences such as, "The boy started down the road, hands stuffed in his pockets, his face hidden," their analysis revealing a subject/verb, clause-like structure made dependent by the verb form. A discussion similar to the earlier exploration of participial phrases leads to the concept of the nominative absolute, and again students practice writing their own sentences.

We repeat the process with cumulative sentences containing appositives (like "an eyesore to most," "the sign of a peaceful surrender," and "a sort of white flag" in the student's sentence that begins this paper), then with adjective series ("rickety, old, and rotting") and prepositional phrases, particularly similes.

Of course, once students learn the concepts of the cumulative sentence and its assorted phrases, they begin to experiment with variations. Although we initially study each type of phrase separately, we eventually mix them. As noted earlier, the opening sentence of this paper contains an adjective series and three appositives, as well as two participial phrases.

The last two appositives, "a sign of peaceful surrender, a sort of white flag," illustrate another benefit of studying cumulative sentences—metaphoric description. The sentences we analyze often are taken from well-known writers whose metaphors and similes seem to rub off on my students. One student added a bit of personification: "Slowly and as if to be very thorough, the fire spread through the forest, eating up the shrubbery and trees as a paper towel absorbs water."

After studying cumulative sentences, students are able not only to recognize and define the various phrases but, more importantly, to use them extensively in their papers, transforming their writing into richly-detailed, often professional-sounding prose.

Furthermore, the analytical process used in learning the phrases becomes useful in identifying and revising dangling participles, misplaced modifiers, comma splices, etc. For example, students learn that a comma splice such as "She moved away, her dreams were shattered by the sale," can be mended by changing the second clause to an absolute: "She moved away, her dreams shattered by the sale."

With the variety of phrase options learned via the cumulative sentence, students also revise for specificity, rhythm, subtlety, emphasis, and clarity. A confusing periodic sentence like "Should the board, recognizing the young man's model behavior but considering his record, a series of arrests for drugs, petty theft, and assault, grant him a parole?" may be rewritten, "Should the board grant the young man a parole, recognizing his model behavior but considering his record, a series of arrests for drugs, petty theft, and assault?" The cumulative sentence approach is especially useful in sentences containing several subordinate phrases or clauses which might otherwise interrupt the main idea and cause confusion.

Taught as a sentence-combining technique, the cumulative sentence can even foster conciseness, eliminating needless repetition. The preceding sentence, for instance, is much more concise than three separate sentences I might have written: "The cumulative sentence can be taught as a sentence combining technique. It can even foster conciseness. It can eliminate needless repetition."

If this study begins to sound like a complete course in composition and grammar, consider this as well: the structure of the cumulative sentence—a basic idea followed by supporting detail—may be seen as a small-scale expository paragraph with its topic sentence and supporting sentences, and as a microcosm of the traditional essay with is thesis and support.

Expanding into those concepts is easy after students have gone through the process detailed above. Again, I stress the process. Without it, the cumulative sentence may be just another term students can't remember after English class. With it, we may get sentences like this one from an eighth grader: "The moon rose, towering above the peaks of the houses, its goldish glow warming me in my dark room, lighting the trees outside, making their shadows dance on my wall."

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