**Teaching as Unteaching**

By Rob Jenkins November 4, 2014

Is it just first-year composition instructors who have to spend half the semester correcting all the misconceptions students develop in high school? Or do faculty members in other disciplines encounter this problem, too?

For example, in the state where I live, the high-school language-arts curriculum requires that students begin each essay with a “thesis statement” that consists of four distinct elements: the thesis (or main idea) itself, plus three supporting points—all in the same sentence! The result, even when executed reasonably well, usually sounds something like this: “Smoking should be banned on all college campuses because it is unhealthy for individuals, creates an unhealthy and uncomfortable environment for all students, and produces large amounts of litter.”

Where to begin cataloging the problems with that unfortunate construction? Let’s start with the fact that not all topics lend themselves to such overt thesis statements, nor do all main ideas have exactly three supporting points. But even if you wanted your students to produce a traditional five-paragraph theme, with a clearly identifiable thesis and three distinguishable points, that is is no way to go about it. Cramming all those elements together into a single sentence detracts from both thesis and support. It also produces an unnecessarily long and ungainly sentence with no clear focus.

In short, no editor in America would allow such a sentence to stand. It’s simply bad writing. Why the high schools teach that approach is beyond me. But they do, and that means I have to spend an inordinate amount of time unteaching it. That requires a good deal of persuasion on my part, because by the time they get to me, many students are practically married to this stylistic atrocity.

And then there are the questions I’m constantly getting about what writers can and can’t do in a piece of writing—even though I’ve attempted, over the years, to head off problems by answering these questions early in the term. Here are some of the most frequently asked questions, along with my (abridged) responses:

Students: Can we use “I”?

Me: If you’re talking about yourself, of course you can. How else are you going to refer to yourself? In third person, like an NFL wide receiver? Just remember that we sometimes talk about ourselves more than we need to. If you find yourself doing that, the answer isn’t simply to eliminate the pronoun—it’s to edit out the extraneous or gratuitous self-references. But when you’re illustrating a point by using an example from your personal experience, of course you can say “I.”

Students: Can we use “you”?

Me: No, one cannot. Just kidding. The potential problem with “you” is that we sometimes use it to refer to people in general, and that isn’t really what it means. But when you’re addressing the reader—just as I’m addressing you right now—it’s perfectly appropriate to say “you.” The second person is also preferable when the alternative is some kind of hideous grammatical contortion adopted for no other purpose than to avoid that one pronoun. Something like, “One should always take one’s books home with him or her so that he or she can study.” (Shudder.) How about, “Be sure to take your books home so you can study.” Much better.

Students: Can we use contractions?

Me: As a father of four, the best advice I can give you about contractions is this: When they’re five minutes apart, it’s time to get to the hospital. (Very few students ever get this joke, which I suppose is a good thing.) Seriously, you have to judge contractions on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes using a contraction makes you sound like you just wandered down out of the hills. Other times, not using the contraction makes you sound like one of those car dealers who was too cheap to pay a professional announcer to read his ad copy on the radio: “Come on down to Joe’s Used Cars, where we are slashing prices. There is not a better deal in town.” And understand that those two situations might occur in the same sentence. Generally speaking, contractions smooth out your sentences and make them more readable, but not always. Sometimes they cost you a little credibility.

Students: Can we start a sentence with a conjunction? End with a preposition?

Me: To quote Winston Churchill, “That is nonsense up with which I will not put.” Seriously folks, the truth is that there’s nothing you can’t do in a piece of writing if you have a good enough reason. The corollary, the responsibility that accompanies the freedom, is that you should have a good reason for everything you do. If you happen to notice, in the editing process, that you began a sentence with “and,” examine that sentence very critically. Ask yourself if it’s really just a continuation of the preceding sentence and therefore ought to be attached. If not, maybe you can just drop the "and" altogether. Or maybe you need a slightly more forceful transition, like “moreover” or “in addition.” Or maybe “and” works just fine for your purposes. There’s nothing inherently wrong with using it to begin a sentence.

Students: But that’s not what our high-school teachers told us. They said in college we’d have to …

Me: Well, this is college, and you don’t have to. Hey, I remember my senior English teacher, back in 1978, making us do all sorts of things (like honest-to-goodness, bottom-of-the-page footnotes) because she insisted that’s how we’d have to do it in college. Then I got to college and found out that wasn’t the way we were supposed to do it at all. Maybe that’s how they did it when she was in college in the 1950’s. But I had to unlearn and relearn a lot of stuff. I guess you guys are in the same boat. You know what they say: The more things change, etc., etc., right? (Actually, most of them have never heard that saying, but that’s OK.)

Those are just a few of the issues that I have to address every semester in my first-year composition classes. I’d be interested to see if my fellow writing instructors have any other faux-rules to add to the list and how you respond. And I’m especially curious to know how if faculty members in other disciplines have similar problems, and exactly what those might be.

So please, leave a comment below. And I hope you’re enjoying teaching this semester—or will be, just as soon as you’re done unteaching.

**Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English at Georgia State University Perimeter College.**

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