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ABSTRACT

A study in which the patterns and possibilities of free modifiers in the writing habits of three students, who were rated low in language ability, is described. The primary purpose of the study was to determine if complicated syntactic elements used as free modifiers could be lifted from the complex subject of grammar and be presented as "sentence additions" to kernel sentences that students were already writing. The study thus involved instruction and practice in writing, and traced for five weeks the development of free modifiers in the written expression of three tenth grade students. (Author/DB)

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What Yolly, Willy, and Harriet Learned to Do – The Free Modifier: A Fresh Mode of Teaching Composition

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In recent years, numerous studies in language development and logical analysis have indicated differences between students rated high and low in language ability. These studies conclude that the more mature writer tends to draw upon the rich resources of language, extending meaning through the use of more complex grammatical forms, and by using a variety in word order, movables, and transformed syntactic elements. The student low in language ability, in contrast, tends to write with fewer words, and with fewer complex grammatical forms. His sentences are typically short and simple, instead of extended, embedded, and combined.

As many of us realize, many less capable students have had shattering experiences in writing, primarily because they have been taught by

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teachers who have felt that grammatical knowledge gives students the magic power to write "correctly." All too often students have had their "Fresh squiggles" mechanically corrected — merely made right to copy. Often, as a result, the whole world of written expression has been made to look so formidable as to appear unconquerable. As teachers, we must seek alternatives to the teaching of composition — positive and persistent methods for showing students other ways of writing.

Francis Christensen's¹ distinction between the bound and the free modifier suggests a structured approach to writing — as well as a fresh mode of teaching composition. For those of you who are familiar with the late rhetorician's research, I repeat my latter statement: Christensen's distinction between the bound and free modifiers suggests a fresh mode of teaching composition — not *Christensen's Rhetoric Program* nor necessarily Christensen's concept of the cumulative sentence — merely his distinction between the bound modifier and the *free* modifier. Let us look more closely at this distinction. Notice the following example:

The man *who came to dinner* stayed late.

The italicized bound clause modifies the word *man*. Bound modifiers are usually word modifiers that are fixed or restricted within the word order of the sentence. The bound clause *who came to dinner* is restricted or fixed next to the word *man* for purposes of identification.

Often, there are times when a student unintentionally extends bound modification into an unreasonable arrangement of words. Because bound modifiers are *restricted* or *fixed* within the word order of the sentence, excessive use of them often results in awkwardness and jargon — and often in this pattern: the long noun phrase as subject linked by a minimal verb to the long noun phrase as complement, as in this example:

The little girl on the brown pony galloping across the green meadow comes from the south side of town by the cemetery next to Mr. Smith's house.

Free modifiers, however, can be put to different use within sentences. They are modifiers not of words but of constructions. In the next example there are five italicized *free* modifiers, one adverb cluster or subordinate clause before the kernel sentence, and four verb clusters or participle phrases after it:

When I go swimming, I dive off a bridge, doing a swan dive while still in the air, descending steadily into the water, plowing my way to the bottom, and then ascending to the surface.

¹Francis Christensen, *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*, Harper and Row, 1967.

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Because they are grammatically loose, additive, non-essential or non-restrictive, free modifiers are set off from one another — and from the kernel sentence — by punctuation. They are free, then, in the sense that they are *not bound* or *embedded* within the word order of the kernel sentence or base clause. Thus, they are capable of being moved about. Moreover, they are capable of modifying one another, depending on where they are placed in the sentence — and for what purpose.

I would like to share with you the method and findings of a recent study I conducted in Oakland, California²— a study in which I explored patterns and possibilities of free modifiers in the writing habits of three students — Yolly, Willy, and Harriet — all rated low in language ability. The primary purpose of this study was to determine if complicated syntactic elements used as free modifiers could be lifted from the complex subject of grammar and be presented as "sentence additions" to kernel sentences that students were already writing. Grammatical construction capable of use as free modifiers or subordinate clauses, relative clauses, prepositional phrases, and noun, verb, adjective and adverb clusters or phrases. The study thus involved instruction and practice in writing, and traced for five weeks the development of free modifiers in the written expression of three tenth grade students.

Two important considerations received emphasis in the organization of the experiment. One concern was the sequencing of effective trials in a small group learning situation. Another was the use of the free modifier as one technique of language study. The free modifier was introduced through a simple, uncomplicated, and direct method — and without having the technique grammatically verbalized to the students.

For the first group meeting, the students wrote pre-test compositions. On these pre-test compositions, as we will see later, the students primarily wrote series of simple sentences. (The pre-test and post-test compositions are included at the end of this article.) This restricted use of structure, however, did not mean that their language was haphazard stuff, unadjusted to its use. What it did mean was that their language was restricted in its representation. During six subsequent lessons, the students were called upon to put complex grammatical structures into use and without referring to the theory that describes them. Working as a small group, they supplied and suggested their own topics and kernel sentences for initial elaboration.

²William S. Palmer, "The Free Modifier: A Fresh Mode of Teaching Composition," Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1970.

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ORGANIZATION OF TEACHING EXPERIENCES

LESSON	PURPOSE
1	Composition One: Pre-Test
2-7	Expanding Expressions: Initial Sentence Practice
8-10	Composition Two: First Draft, Group Revision, and Rewriting
11-16	Combining Additions: More Sentence Practice
17-19	Composition Three: First Draft, Group Revision, Rewriting
20	Composition Four: Post-Test

Three kernel sentences, one taken from each of the pre-test compositions, were used for introducing additions. These sentences with what additions students made to them, were written for observation purposes. They took turns reading the sentences aloud. Meaning, location of additions and punctuation in relation to additions were discussed. The students were encouraged to use punctuation within the sentence pattern, but only when they thought vocal pauses indicated the need for it.

Whenever the students generated free modifiers as additions, either orally or in writing, the initial word of each grammatical construction was listed. The words in each list were capable of generating both bound and free modifiers, depending on how the writers chose to use them—and the choice was theirs to make. All elaboration was encouraged—whether bound or free. More attention, however, was given to the use of free modifiers. Whenever one was used, the example was noted, and emphasis was placed on where it was located in the sentence, how it extended meaning, and what punctuation should accompany it.

Moreover, each list contained words capable of generating different kinds of syntactic structures. We can see that the students could use these words for a number of possible patterns—and with all of them capable of use as free modifiers. For example, there is the following potential:

- waiting*: (verb cluster)
- with*: (prepositional phrase or subordinate clause)
- all of a sudden*: (adverb cluster)
- suddenly*: (free word modifier: adverb)
- straight and still*: (adjectives in a series)
- quickly*: (free word modifier: adverb)
- smiling*: (free word modifier: adjective)

After the oral elaboration of sentences, subjects were asked to write at least three sentences a day, making use of the signal word lists to suggest additions. They were also asked to reread their sentences after writing them, to be sure that their additions reflected the logical connection they

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had intended, and as clearly as possible. Again, they were asked to consider punctuation in relation to vocal pauses.

Much time had to be allowed for the writing of these sentences. Students needed many moments to think about what they wanted to say, how they wanted to say it, what signal words they might use to help them, and where they should place newly generated structures in relation to meaning.

During the writing of their sentences, the young writers often asked each other how certain words were spelled and how to express various complex ideas. At other times they questioned aloud whether or not punctuation was needed, and if so, where. Often, they extended orally the information they were putting into written sentence form. This early kind of response and feedback was, of course, highly encouraged.

Whenever the students were not producing a variety of grammatical elements, the instructor encouraged oral elaboration of further structural possibilities. For example, by lesson six, a number of grammatical elements capable of use as free modifiers had been generated. Verb clusters, however, had been used sparingly. Thus, the teacher called the students' attention to *waiting*, *looking* and *going*, three signal words they had already produced — and suggested they search for words used similarly — with *ing* ending. As a result, the students generated a number of sentence structures, producing in the process a number of present tense verb clusters.

By the end of the initial sentence practice in expanding expressions in writing, the subjects had produced six lists of signal words and had written at least eighteen sentences. Using the signal word lists as they saw fit, the writers not only generated different kinds of additions, but a majority of free modifiers as additions, and in a number of different locations.

With sentence additions familiar to them, the three now wrote and revised a second composition during the next three lessons. They also were told ahead of time that they would be reading each other's papers in subsequent lessons. During the reading process, subjects often interrupted each other to make a suggestion. Sometimes, and similar to sentence revision, they spotted technical and mechanical errors — such as putting the title of movies in quotes, or the correcting of run-on sentences, fragments, and misspellings. But in addition, they started to question "sentence sense." When syntax was weak and expression awkward, they asked each other "what was meant" and for "more information." Whenever they were in agreement with each other's suggestions, they were encouraged to write down the comments, for use in revision.

Throughout the exchange of ideas, these students suggested simple but significant ways for the revision of their compositions. Furthermore,

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they used their own language, expressions, and terms to recommend re-adjustment in form, the qualifying of thought, the rephrasing and re-arranging of muddled expressions, and sentence-combining possibilities.

But in the give and take of this trial and error process, the students on their own did not think of a number of possible trials. Moreover, they did not always know how to go about combining sentences, although they recognized the need for such consideration. Whenever the teacher could, he encouraged oral revision of kernel sentences to "clusters," to be attached — and as free modifiers — to other base clauses, and without loss of originally intended meaning. Hence, the qualifying of thought, the elaboration of structures, and the use of word clusters were considered — and together. This kind of revision, then, became an extension of initial sentence practice — another way of bringing sentence additions into operation, and in a meaningful manner.

When the three rewrote their second drafts, they did make a number of changes, but by no means did they produce perfect revisions, nor was it expected of them. Their second drafts suggest, nevertheless, that they were realizing alternative ways for expression in writing.

For the next six lessons, they practiced combining two or more additions within one sentence. In their initial sentence practice, all three students — during one lesson or another — had written sentences containing more than one free modifier. Using them as models, they practiced generating together a number of constructions. To assist them, the teacher gave them each a sheet with all six signal word lists on it. Following oral elaboration of sentences, the students continued to write three sentences a day, a procedure similar to the one followed during the initial sentence practice. This time, however, emphasis was placed on combining additions, with no further attempt made, at this time, to produce more signal word lists. Instead, the writers practiced with those words and structures they were beginning to use with growing facility.

During lessons eleven to sixteen, the students put into practice a number of interesting ways to combine additions in sentences. One student, for example, would begin a sentence with an introductory free word modifier. Another student would attack a free modifier of construction. Then, the third student would add the kernel sentence. During other practices, one student would start with the base clause, and the others would take alternating turns, adding constructions one after the other. At other times, one pupil placed a cluster in the initial position of the sentence, and another would interrupt the basic pattern of the kernel sentence, adding a cluster in the medial position. By the sixteenth lesson, the three had produced not only more sentences, but a number of interesting and striking models.

During the next lesson, the teacher gave each student a second list

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of signal words. The words on this list, taken from each student's oral and written contribution during the past six lessons, were listed collectively. The pupils used both sheets of signal words while writing and revising composition three.

The three next wrote, read, and discussed their third composition during the next three lessons, suggesting to each other a number of alternatives — a procedure similar to that used for the writing of composition two. This time, however, they were encouraged to combine additions in writing.

On the last lesson, pre-test compositions were returned to the students. They were now asked to revise their first composition written during the study, only revision this time was to be done independently.

All writing done by the pupils was treated for total number of words used, length and number of communication units, number and kind of free modifiers used, and the location of free modifiers within the communication unit. By communication unit, I mean Watt's definition: "The shortest unit into which a sentence can be divided without loss of essential meaning and without leaving fragments." In addition, a number of fragments, run-on sentences, and misplaced modifiers were recorded. The kind of misplaced modifiers whether dangling or disjointed, was also noted.

The following coding system was used in treating the writing done by each subject:

- / : Run-on sentence
- () : Fragment
- : Free modifier
- (0) : Word omission
- [] : Misplaced modifier

In their writing and revision of papers, the three students used a variety of grammatical elements as "additions" to kernel sentences. These additions to base constructions were increased as they learned to use and combine new structures. As a result, not only the use of different kinds of free modifiers increased, but also the average number of words per communication unit.

The pupils placed most additions either at the beginning or end of kernel sentences, with a tendency, especially at first, to place them in the initial position. Nevertheless, they produced some modification in all three positions, but with less use of modification in the medial position. Moreover, all three produced — and without referring to grammar and the labelling of levels of generality — what Christensen calls the cumulative sentence. This kind of sentence accumulates additions at the end of the

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base clause — the kind of sentence, according to Christensen's research, that professional writers tend to construct.

Yolly wrote, for example: Disappointed, I *walked into the house*, wearily crossed the room, slumped into a chair and began to cry.

Willy: Usually, when I get sweaty from playing ball, I *go home*, take a shower, change into some clothes, and watch television before eating dinner.

Harriet: Crying, *the small child went to her room*, slammed the door, and fell on the bed, kicking her legs.

It is interesting to note the kernel sentence on which these structures have been built (italics above). The students generated, for students low in language ability, a number of "sophisticated" patterns. No fragments or run-on sentences appeared during the written sentence practice, but their use occasionally appeared during the writing and revision of compositions. Only two pupils misplaced a modifier, but only two times each for all writing done during the study. The use of different signal words, for use in the suggestion of different grammatical constructions (to be used in different positions in the sentence) became an exciting activity.

Pre- and post-test comparisons, both in written and charted form, accompany this article. As you read them, you will notice some differences, and you will note the results of three students struggling with some problems in writing: self image, the thinking, and the expansion of grammatical structures in our English language. Each of you must decide for yourself the *quality* of the difference. I propose to you, however, the following:

That growth in written expression can be based on free modifiers, and on the student's operational use of phrases, clauses, and sentence structure . . . that the relation of intonation to punctuation is precise and consistent enough to be helpful in the control of free modifiers generated, and necessary for the growing maturity of expression . . . that with teacher and peer guidance in small group learning experiences, students can be taught to rearrange, revise, and extend expressions in writing . . . and that when students are taught to recast sentences through this method, they will use a variety of syntactic elements in a variety of positions within sentences, extending meaning through the use of more complex forms.

We know there is no panacea for all compositional chores. A number of methods must be tried and strategies found — a plural approach to exploration. The free modifier, nevertheless, does suggest one method of observing patterns of modification in the English language, and noting how they fit together into larger patterns. Consequently, this grammatical

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distinction (between bound and free modifiers) suggests an alternative approach to the teaching of composition — the combination of the student's own use of language and one single technique of language study — a method broad enough in scope to meet the conditions of teacher experience, and specific enough to provide guidelines for future experimentation.

Pre- and Post-Test Compositions Analyzed and Compared

YOLLY

Pre-Test Composition

It was a warm day in June. Shall I say a beautiful day. And as time went on it got better a better. *To start off with* I was in one of my lazy moods. (Just sitting around thinking about my past wondering how I made (0) this far and how long did it last.) *Well for me* it is hard to look back, because so many things has happened (0) it hurts. It was because I'm Black or it was because I'm Libera than I thought, "Yolly, you're the one." I needed something or someone to come me down, but nothing or no one was to be found. I looked in my mother's vanity kit and I found something she had been hiding from my father. It shined like diamonds. It gleamed like gold. The rest my friend shall never be told.

Post-Test Composition

THE TRIP

It was a warm day in June, *bersting with sunshine, with a gleaming blue sky—a beautiful day.* And as the day went on, thing began to change for the worst, *because of my depressed mood.*

To start off with, I was just sitting around, *thinking about my past, wondering how I made it this far, and how long it was going to last.* *Well, for me,* it is hard to look back. So many thing has happened in my life that have hurt me, *causeing me to wonder why,* is it because I'm Black that I have suffered so many heartbreaks? Or was it because of my sign, *Libra,* that makes me think, "Yolly, you're the one."

Soon I became nerous, angry and upset, *ranting and raving all over the place.* *After a while,* I needed someone to talk to, or something to drink, *to come me down.* I look and look, *all over, finding no one to talk to.*

So I decided to change my appearance. *Looking in my mother vanity kit,* I found something, glory, glory, *something she had been hiding from my father.* Hellaluya, Hellaluya. It shined like diamonds. It gleamed like gold. I twisted the top anxious, *waiting for the moment.* "Here's to you, Yolly," I said. The rest, my friend, shall never be told.

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PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST COMPARISONS

Yolly

COMPOSITION	Pre-Test	Post-Test
LENGTH OF WRITING		
Total no. of words	139	220
No. of com. units	17	16
Av. no. of words per c. u.	7.17	13.75
FREE WORD MODIFIERS		
Adjective		
Adverb	1	2
FREE MODIFIERS OF CONSTRUCTION		
Subordinate clause	1	1
Relative clause		
Adjectives in a series		
Adverb cluster		
Noun cluster		3
Verb cluster	1	12
Prepositional phrase	1	3
TOTAL FREE MODIFIERS USED	4	21
LOCATION OF FREE MODIFIERS		
Initial	4	7
Medial		1
Final		13
SENTENCE ERRORS		
Fragment	1	
Run-on	1	1
Misplaced modifiers		
Dangling		
Disjointed		

WILLY

Pre-Test Composition

My friend and I was walking down the street when we came to a man hole. We went in and it was so dark you couldn't see your hand. My friend made a torch and we walked a long way before we came out. Soon we were out and there was a big crane in front of us. We got in and started pushing on things, / my friend got it going, / we got scared and started running. We ran right into the tunnel without a torch *running all the way*. We climbed out of the man hole and ran home.

Post-Test Composition

THE CRANE

Last summer, my friend and I were walking down a street, *goofing around, with nothing to do*. Suddenly, we came to a manhole. *Because we were bored and curious, we went in, knowing that we shouldn't.* Once we were inside, it became so dark you couldn't see your hand. *Because we wanted to explore, and because it was so dark, my friend made a torch out of stick, string, paper, and gasoline.*

Carrying the torch for light as we walked through the the tunnel, we round the bend, seeing the other entrance in front of us.

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As soon as we walked out of the tunnel, we came upon a crane, parked in some sand. We sat in the crane and started pushing pedals and pulling levers, not knowing it would start. Somehow, my friend got it going, only to scare us, because the big wheel started turning. Not thinking, we started running without stopping to look back, only to find ourselves in the tunnel without a torch.

Seeing the man hole ahead, we were released, knowing now we wouldn't be caught.

PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST COMPARISON

Willy

COMPOSITION	Pre-Test	Post-Test
LENGTH OF WRITING		
Total words used	100	182
No. of com. units	12	12
Av. no. of words per c. u.	8.30	15.16
FREE WORD MODIFIERS		
Adjective		
Adverb	1	2
FREE MODIFIERS OF CONSTRUCTION		
Subordinate clause		5
Relative clause		
Adjectives in a series		
Adverb cluster		2
Noun cluster		
Verb cluster	1	11
Prepositional phrase		
TOTAL FREE MODIFIERS USED	2	20
LOCATION OF FREE MODIFIERS		
Initial	1	11
Medial		
Final	1	9
SENTENCE ERRORS		
Fragment		
Run-on	2	
Misplaced modifiers		
Dangling		
Disjointed		

HARRIET

Pre-Test Composition

(The first time I every started sleeping in a room by myself.) I was put in a room by myself. I was put in a room in the back of the house. That was where it became dark first. *One saturday evening* my friend came to spend the night. I never told them it was my first time sleeping alone in a room. *That night* we went to bed a my friend sleep on the roll away bed. I kept hearing noise but I never said anything until she got up and came over. She stood there and I didn't say anything until she move/ I jump up and fell over the bed screaming. That when my mother came in and told her I never slept in a room by myself. She puts the twin bed in the first room always.

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Post-Test Composition
A NIGHT I REMEMBER

Long ago, when I was seven year old, I had to sleep in a room, in the back part of the house, and for the first time. That same saturday evening, my friend came to stay with me that night. I was embarrass to tell her that I never slept alone in a room, especially this one, where it became dark at night.

That night, about 11 o'clock, everyone in the house went to bed. My friend, who stay in the room with me, slept next to the window in the guest roll away bed. Thinking everyone asleep, I fell off to sleep, then, hearing noises, I open up my eyes slowly, not saying a word. Wondering what was happening, I laid there to listen. Then, I look, seeing some-one standing over me. Quickly I jump out of the bed. My mother, hearing me yell, comes to the room. When my mother turn on the light, then I realize it was my friend.

After my mother told her that I never slept in a room alone, we all when back to bed. Since then, my mother never put me in the back room.

PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST COMPARISON

Harriet

COMPOSITION	Pre-Test	Post-Test
LENGTH OF WRITING		
Total words used	141	193
No. of com. units	14	15
Av. no. of words per c. u.	9.2	12.8
FREE WORD MODIFIERS		
Adjective		
Adverb		3
FREE MODIFIERS OF CONSTRUCTION		
Subordinate clause		3
Relative clause		2
Adjectives in a series		
Adverb cluster	2	4
Noun cluster		1
Verb cluster		6
Prepositional phrase		3
TOTAL FREE MODIFIERS USED	2	22
LOCATION OF FREE MODIFIERS		
Initial	2	15
Medial		2
Final		5
SENTENCE ERRORS		
Fragment	1	
Run-on	1	1
Misplaced modifiers		
Dangling		
Disjointed		

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