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ABSTRACT

For one middle school teacher, the "functional grammar" approach to narrative writing promised to offer students explicit instruction in how to structure a narrative text to build up suspense, and it could give focus to the types of descriptive language that further engage readers. Her classroom research was built on the teacher resource, "Write It Right: Spine Chilling Stories," developed in New South Wales (Australia). It provided the teacher with the background knowledge she needed in the deconstruction of narrative texts. Her Year 7 students were a mixed-ability group of 31. Before they began the unit, the students wrote a narrative which involved the supernatural. Next, the topic was opened up through class discussion. Then the class viewed "Ghost Dad" and focused on narrative segments and devices: orientation; foreshadowing; complication; resolution; and special effects in the film. While they studied the film, the teacher introduced new concepts as "stages" in a narrative. They then studied short written narratives and deconstructed them into "orientation," "complication," "temporary resolution," "reappearing complication," and "resolution." The last narrative feature discussed was "evaluation." The next deconstruction phase was to look at some of the important language features of narratives with the focus on processes (verb groups) and nominal (noun) groups. Besides the deconstruction of narrative texts, this digest discusses the language features of narrative texts and reviews a sample narrative text. The digest ponders what allowed this mixed-ability class to engage in complex discussions about language and what kept their motivation high. It finds that functional grammar has given the teacher a new tool to explore the literacy potential within every student. (NKA)

In the Past...I was Clueless: Writing Scary Stories in the Middle School. PEN 136.

by Monica Williams

pen 136
PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING ASSOCIATION
PETA

In the past ... I was clueless Writing scary stories in the middle school

MONICA WILLIAMS

I don't usually like writing stories — well, I absolutely hate it — but this was really fun, writing a spine-chilling story.

– Anne

This is a story about teaching the narrative genre.

When I enrolled in a Functional Grammar course some years ago, I recognised that if I had more understanding of the structure of language, I would be better able to support my students. I am excited by the functional approach because it makes explicit the differences between spoken and written language and clearly outlines the structure and language features of each genre. Bringing this approach to narrative-writing appealed to me because it promised to offer students explicit instruction in how to structure a narrative text to build up suspense, and it could give focus to the types of descriptive language that further engage the reader.

I decided to build my classroom-based research on the teacher resource *Write It Right: Spine Chilling Stories*, developed by the Metropolitan East Disadvantaged Schools Program in NSW. It provided me with the background knowledge I needed in the deconstruction of narrative texts.

Using this resource, I wanted to monitor how the teaching of functional grammar informed the understanding and writing of narrative in the all-girl, Year 7 class that I was teaching.

My class was a mixed-ability group of 31. Around [illegible] students were quite gifted writers who enjoyed [illegible]allenging work. At the other end of the continuum were six students (adaptive education and ESL students) who needed a great deal of support to be able to gain access to the curriculum. Nineteen students fell into a range more typical of Year 7, although even within that group there was considerable diversity of ability. In all, this class had an unusually broad range of ability, a challenge that was compounded because of the large clusters at either end of the range.

Before we began the unit 'Spine-chilling Stories', I asked the students to write a narrative which involved the supernatural. Next, we opened up the topic through class discussion. Here it became apparent that the narrative focus promised to be extraordinarily successful. Very animated personal experiences were shared, *X Files* episodes revisited, horror movies reviewed, paranormal experiences of friends and family recounted. The students clearly found the topic absorbing, and from the very beginning there was an air of excitement. I was teaching in a way I had never taught before and the students were being introduced to a topic they relished through an approach they had not experienced before. There was a shared sense that we were on an adventure, and we had no idea what impact it would have.

The deconstruction of narrative texts

The next activity was a viewing of the film *Ghost Dad* (starring Bill Cosby). Here we focused on narrative segments and devices: orientation (which introduces the who, what, when, where and why); characters; foreshadowing (clues in the orientation about the problem); complication (the problems facing one or more of the characters); resolution (when the problem is solved for better or worse); and special effects used in film-making. After viewing the film once, the students were able to identify many of the techniques used to introduce the characters and setting. Viewing the opening of the film a second time allowed the students to develop their understanding of how skilfully the film-makers engaged viewers from the opening scene. While students were familiar with ways in which characters were developed in narrative texts, the concepts of foreshadowing, complication and resolution were new to many. While studying the film text *Ghost Dad*, I introduced these new concepts as *stages* in a narrative. Many of the students needed structured activities to build their confidence and skill in identifying these stages.

Following this, we studied short written narratives and deconstructed them into *orientation*, *complication*, *temporary resolution* (when the main character thinks the problem has been solved but it has not), *reappearing complication*, and *resolution*. We did this first as a class. Then, when a number of students had gained confidence, the class was divided into small groups. It was this early familiarity with narrative structure that made the individual construction of texts much easier for the students later on. Students' comments reveal this:

> *Before I learned about the structure of narrative writing I didn't really have any pattern to my writing. Now the complication is more definite.*
> – Cassie

> *I feel that my narrative has improved a lot because I have put my narrative into a structure that makes more sense.*
> – Bree

The last feature of narrative that I discussed with the students was *evaluation*. This is concerned with the main character's thoughts and feelings. Evaluation is not a defined structural element; it is not concentrated in one part of the narrative structure, but can appear and reappear throughout the complication and resolution. The form the author uses to present evaluation can vary between description of the main character's thoughts and feelings about events, repetition, negative expressions, questions, predictions, commands and exclamations. This was a more complicated writing strategy for the students to recognise. It took time and some repetition but, slowly, they recognised that evaluation was critical in the build-up of *tension* in the narrative. During this exploration, we identified the recurrence of mental processes (verbs like

Figure 1 Parts of a narrative.

Orientation
Sets the scene – the time and place.
Introduces characters and events.
Explains circumstances and relationships.
Foreshadows a problem or conflict.

Complication
Introduces a problem or conflict.
Creates tension – uncertainty about what might happen.

Temporary resolution
Provides a solution to the problem or reduces the conflict.
Relieves the tension.

Reappearing complication
Reintroduces the problem or conflict with greater intensity.
Builds tension to a climax.

Resolution
Provides a satisfying solution or outcome.
Releases tension.

'knowing', 'fearing', 'wondering', 'believing' and 'seeing'), which allow the reader to empathise more strongly with the characters.

It was at this stage that I gave the students a short task requiring them to match terminology from our study of the narrative (i.e. orientation, complication, temporary resolution, reappearing complication, resolution) with the correct definition. Nearly all students were able to do this correctly. Fig. 1 summarises these structural elements.

Language features of narrative texts

The next phase in the deconstruction was to look at some of the important language features of narratives, and here I focused on processes (verb groups) and nominal (noun) groups.

Processes

We began this topic simply by revising processes and then dividing processes into types: *action* (jumping, running), *mental* (wanting, knowing), *relational* (has, is) and *verbal* (said, replied, shouted). Generally speaking, the students found action, verbal and mental processes quite easy to identify, but were more hazy about relational processes.

We also experimented with how processes could be used to 'turn the tension' up and down. The students could see that 'I skipped into the corridor' dispelled tension, while 'I crept into the corridor' created tension. Bronwyn explains:

> *They [processes] sort of tell you more about what's going on and you sort of feel as though you're there.*

It was obvious from the students' final narratives (in Term 4) that they recognised the importance of processes in constructing a story, and that they selected their processes with care. Some extracts from student narratives written at the conclusion of the unit provide examples of carefully chosen processes.

> *Briony's eyes nervously darted out the window. The wind was wild – trees were being tossed about the place, their leaves blown off and swept into the gutter.*
> – Jane

> *Her heart seemed like it skipped a beat, her breath caught in her throat as she tried to blink back the tears.*
> – Eva

> *I jumped as a piercing shriek rang through the air and thirty other students and I sighed with relief, then immediately bolted for the door.*
> – Tina

Nominal groups

Our second important language focus in narrative-writing was on nominal groups (word groups based on a noun, e.g. *the delicate stained-glass windows in the sacristy*). All students benefited from developing an understanding of nominal groups, but the greatest development was among those students whose previous writing was mainly speech-like, as they shifted towards a more 'written' mode by the conclusion of this study. Students who write in the spoken mode tend to have short nominal groups, whereas students who write in the written mode pack information much more densely into their sentences and tend to have longer nominal groups.

When we looked at nominal groups, we identified the *pointer*, the *epithet* (short describer), the *classifier*, the *noun* and the *qualifier* (long describer) (see Fig. 2).

Noun	Process (Verb)	Nominal group				
		Pointer	Epithet	Classifier	Noun	Qualifier
Ursula	observed	the	delicate	stained-glass	windows	in the sacristry.

Figure 2 Parts of a nominal group.

As part of my research, I taped some of the lessons on nominal groups. In retrospect, students were able to recognise that their first writing was in the spoken mode, and that information was more tightly packed in the written mode. It was easy for the students to appreciate that the ability to build up nominal groups is highly developed in skilful writers.

Some examples of students' work written before the commencement of the unit reveal a more informal, spoken-like use of language, with shorter nominal groups.

> *Fran's best friend was Chris. Chris and Fran were always doing seances and trying to contact the spirits and all those kind of mystic things.*
> – Jessica, July 21

> *A day later we're packing up the car ready to leave. I say goodbye to Charlotte. I hop in the old station wagon and as we leave I see Charlotte bawling her eyes out ...*
> – Carmel, July 21

In fact the study of nominal groups is the most effective strategy I have found to help students who are having difficulty with more formal writing tasks because they are still writing in much the same way as they speak. At the end of the unit, it was obvious that the students had shifted away from spoken-mode writing. The example below shows more developed use of nominal groups using epithets (short describers), classifiers and qualifiers (long describers), indicating this shift to the written mode.

> *One rainy dark night I dared myself to walk through the forest next to my house ... I went to look in the mirror in case that was the last time I would see myself. I have dark, dark, black unkempt long hair, a pale white face and sharp pointy nose ...*
> – Carmel, November 12

Ada wrote this in July:

> *... it must have been fifty years ago the old lady's husband died and she grew mad, not angry mad, but nutty so she became a witch, not a witch on a broom but a black magic witch ...*

Ada was one of the more accomplished writers in the class, and this preliminary activity shows that she had some existing knowledge of how to develop nominal groups. She was enthusiastic about writing, and found the process of waiting until the end of the unit frustrating because she had been planning her next narrative for months. She experimented with more than one narrative outline before deciding on her plot. Ultimately, she wrote a sensitive and intriguing narrative, and the extract that follows is typical of her use of nominal groups and evaluation in her second text.

> *Our home was beautiful. It was a tiny little shack cluttered up with our most loved possessions, photos, teddies and even old scarves and hats. There was no colour scheme just bits but it was tidy and clean and it relaxed my puzzled mind with a sense of soothing relaxation. This was the calmness I did not get at home so I took advantage of it and breathed it in with gratification dismissing all my problems.*
> – Ada, November 12

Ada has built up her nominal groups skilfully in her second narrative, using words in much the same way an artist uses paints on a canvas — detailing the setting and creating the mood. To evoke the shack, Ada adds two short describers, 'tiny' and 'little', and a qualifier, 'cluttered up with our most loved possessions, photos, teddies and even old scarves and hats'. In the first narrative, Ada's writing style favours language prevalent in spoken contexts — 'she grew mad, not angry mad, but nutty' — whereas her second narrative packs information more densely through well-developed nominal groups and written-like language. Ada has chosen her processes carefully, and has used evaluation to explain precisely what effect the home had on her character.

I planned other activities that helped students to build up nominal groups using the pattern of: pointer, epithet (short describer), classifier, noun and qualifier. Fig. 3 demonstrates this sequence through a sentence constructed by Ada. In this instance she has chosen to use two epithets and not to use a classifier.

It was interesting to watch the students recognise that if this pattern was used for every noun, the writing became slow-moving and predictable. It

Noun	Process (Verb)	Nominal group			
		Pointer	Epithet	Noun	Qualifier
It	was	a	tiny little	shack	cluttered up with our most loved possessions, photos, teddies and even old scarves and hats.

Figure 3 Structure of a student-devised nominal group.

followed, then, that writers needed to be selective about how and when they built up their nominal groups, just as they needed to select their nominal groups with care. It was of great interest to me that when talking to students or reading their reflections on the unit of work, students generally found the activities based around nominal groups to be the most valuable.

I have learnt that to make the reader read on you need to have nominal groups to make it more interesting.
– Laura

Also one other thing that helped me during this unit is the sentence structure. I have learnt the names of words such as pointer and qualifiers and [I] know where to put them.
– Anna

I really enjoyed everything we did leading up to writing the story and [I] believe it did help a lot to make my second story much more exciting than my first story. In my second story I had built up my nominal groups a heap more than in my first story and [that] gave it more description and I think more tension.
– Laura

Reviewing a simple narrative text

Among the resources that we used in this unit, there was a sample of a rather amateurish narrative text about a girl, Alana, who is frightened during a night-time bike ride. I was interested in giving this text to the class to work on independently so I could assess students' ability to deconstruct a narrative text. As this text was quite simple — with quite apparent flaws in its staging, and limited use of language features to build up suspense — I decided it would be a suitable activity for a relief lesson. What is particularly interesting about this activity is that the relief teacher knew nothing of functional grammar; in fact at that time I was the only teacher in the school consciously exploring its teaching applications. The significance of this is that the students had only their own knowledge to rely on and were working in quite a tight time frame: they had 40 minutes before their individual written responses were collected. Nothing prepared me for the sophisticated analytical skills evident in all the students' written responses.

The sentence 'a vampire appeared' is probably what a little reception or year one would write. You could improve it by writing. 'a blood thirsty vampire appeared in the thin air right in front of Alana's eyes'.
– Nellie

Near death in the cemetery wasn't a well structured story. The main problem was that there were no short or long describers. The orientation could have been a lot better.
– Farah

I don't like this story at all ... It has no foreshadowing or evaluation. You don't know what any of the characters look like or what they like or dislike.
– Julia

The resolution ... [did] not make sense. is the vampire just turned to a bat and fly away?
– Sandy

This story is written with very poor language. There are no describers in it. The sentence structure is shocking. The story give[s] the reader no feeling. In other words. this story has no life.
– Sally

I certainly have quite a few criticisms to make because this particular short story does not explain things well. such as 'The ghost melted'. I think that they could have added more intense epithets to increase the suspense and terror ... I would've written something like 'The pale terrifying ghost melted away before my eyes into thin air' if I were the author.
– Emily

This story is really terrible. The first thing you notice about it is the orientation. All it tells us is that one night someone called Alana went for a ride on her bike. When was it set? Who is Alana and how old is she? What kind of bike was it? Why was she going for a ride? It doesn't make you want to read on. Also it has no foreshadowing or evaluation.
– Tina

Every student in the class could critique the narrative text confidently and discuss how the text was flawed, using appropriate terminology. All students wrote between 100 and 300 words on a very short text. Many students used quotes from the text and some rewrote parts of the text to illustrate how the sentence structure could have been improved. The students were aware that there were weaknesses in the narrative structure such as superficial orientation, no foreshadowing, a vague complication and an unsatisfactory resolution with no evaluation. The students criticised the inability of the author to build up tension and the inappropriateness of the title. They were critical of the brevity of sentences used as paragraphs and the short nominal groups, citing the absence of epithets, classifiers and qualifiers.

What allowed this mixed-ability class to engage in complex discussions about language? First, they had been provided with a language to talk *about* language. Equally, the 'spine-chilling' focus of the unit of work had both enthused them and increased their confidence. I have never had a class respond to any piece of writing with such passion and assertiveness. They had developed a real appreciation for written language that was evident in their skilfully crafted narratives. They had no hesitation in being critical of a poorly written narrative text. I had to remind myself that these were only Year 7 students and they had written these reviews without any guidance.

As the unit drew to a close, the students' enthusiasm for writing their own narratives was so high that I felt pressured to finish quickly. When the time came for the students to begin planning their narratives in Term 4, the excitement in the room was tangible. I found I had to extend the deadline for the stories because a number of students had written stories of over 2000 words in freehand, and wanted to use a word processor for their edited copy.

The final story

One element of the unit evaluation was a comparison between narrative-writing before and after the study of the genre. As is evident in the samples provided earlier in this discussion, it was obvious that the students had gained a much better understanding of how to structure a narrative. Ultimately, all of the 31 students in the class included all stages of a narrative in the appropriate sequence. From audio-visual tapes of students' discussions and from written reflections and critical reviews, it was clear that the students had developed a real mastery of narrative structure. These stories were by far the most imaginative, tightly constructed texts I had read by students in my 20 years of teaching. The students felt proud of their writing, and they enjoyed reading and learning from the texts of other students. Ada said:

I have learnt a great deal [about narrative writing and] what I have to do now is learn how to use it. I have learnt lots in the lessons but reading other people's has helped me too, particularly Melissa and Rosie. Melissa has a quick snappy structure and Rosie has this amazing style using nominal groups to the absolute limit of goodness.

The general feeling from the students was that the building up of nominal groups was the most significant factor in improving their writing. The development of richer nominalisation is apparent in the first and second narrative texts of this ESL student.

One day, her mother was go to the bookroom and get the key. She looking at the door, then she see the fire, she said very loudly 'help! help!' but no-one hear her ...
– Sandy, July 21

At midnight the horrible, deep wailing sound began again, it was getting louder and louder, deep and deeper. I opened my eye. 'Yh.' The horrible ghastly face setting on my eyes ...
– Sandy, November 12

The first extract of Sandy's writing reflects good sequencing of ideas with little development of nominal groups. In the second extract, it is obvious that Sandy is very deliberately building up nominal groups to create tension. She has also used evaluation to reveal the character's thoughts and feelings, and repetition to reinforce that something unusual has happened.

At the conclusion of this unit, all students had much more control of their written language, and could manipulate it to create suspense and horror. This extract from Kate's story illustrates the point.

The crisp sound of Matt's jumpy feet on the grass and the old rusty swinging chair on the balcony were the only sounds Matt heard through the suffocating darkness of the night. He ignored the thick dripping sound and the sudden warmth of another person at his back.

After reading her first story when we had finished studying the genre of narrative, Jane said:

I realised how much information I had absorbed, and that if I tried hard enough I'd be able to write a really good story that would keep the reader interested the entire way through.

Melinda claimed that:

This [unit on narrative writing] has influenced me a lot when I read because now I analyse the book and occasionally it helps me to understand the book better. Also while writing my story I read other books to see how they wrote their narrative and I compared the different authors' styles.

Since the start of the unit, my narrative writing skills have improved very much ... I feel my story is good. Don't think it's going to my head, but I really feel this is something I have [done well].

Conclusion

Right throughout this unit, students' motivation remained high, because they were exposed to information and processes that they felt they could 'take on' in an environment of high support and conscious reflection. Not only did the learning process allow them to review narratives critically, it also developed their skills in constructing narratives independently. The students became aware of the impact that processes can have on writing, and they learnt how to build up nominal groups. These two language features of narrative-writing can be applied to any writing genre. The unit has influenced how students read and view texts.

I have read books and watched movies in the past and really enjoyed them but now I can predict what is going to happen and I am a lot more critical about what I read and watch.
– Ursula, November 12

Ursula's sentiments were echoed by a number of others. She had shifted from being passively involved in the text to being able to appraise its structure and language features critically. Ursula and her classmates have taken a significant step in the process of demystifying texts.

And how has my attitude to teaching changed? Students are capable of amazing things. Sometimes our teaching approaches can unlock their potential as learners and provide exciting experiences for both teacher and student. Functional grammar has given me a new and exciting tool to explore the literacy potential within every student. As self-esteem and success at school are linked to literacy, this has fundamentally changed how I see students. With some explicit teaching, I believe students can develop a sophisticated understanding of how language functions to make meaning.

I can read stories I have written in the past and can name what I've done well and what I haven't whereas when I wrote them I was clueless.
– Alice, November 12

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About the author

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