

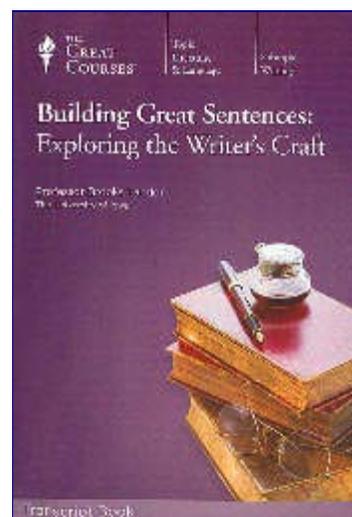
Site Map: [MAIN](#) / [A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2](#) [Webpage](#) [Printer Ready](#)



A READER'S JOURNAL

**Building Great Sentences:
Exploring the Writer's Craft**
by
Brooks Landon

ARJ2 Chapter: Writing
Published by The Great Courses/VA in 2008
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2012



Why am I reviewing my first Transcript Book?
Over the past twenty years I have continued my college education, expanding it from Science into

the Arts side of Arts & Science with the help of the Teaching Company's courses. They have allowed me to study with eminent professors from Cambridge to Iowa without having to travel long distances to do so, but I did leave home for the lectures because I chose to listen to these audio tapes and CD's in the comfort of my Maxima automobile over its fine Bose sound system. After I retired in 1995 to begin writing full-time, I enjoyed being home all day, writing and reading at my leisure on things I was interested in, and soon I was publishing books and creating a website.

In 1998, my daughter Maureen invited me to attend graduate courses on Education with her at the University of New Orleans where she was working on her Ph. D. Over a couple of years, I received credit for courses, in College Curriculum, College Teaching, etc. and enjoyed being back in college. Maureen and I would meet at PJ's Coffeeshop near the campus and her friend Mary, taking the same class as we were would join us for a latte and some discussion of the upcoming class or the term project we were collaborating on, and then we would drive together in one car to save on the auto registration fee. The double latte would keep me bright and awake during the three-hour lectures which were interesting and exciting enough without the coffee, but I came to enjoy PJ's lattes. After Maureen moved on into Statistics and Administration courses, I stayed home to work once more. But I noticed that during those long days at home, with my wife still working away from home full-time, I missed the Break Room which we had at all my previous jobs, a place where I could get up from my desk, walk over to a place to get coffee and interact with co-workers who might be taking a break at the same time. As fun and free as it was working at my own pace at home, I decided it was time for me to find, to create my own Break Room, and that turned out to be our local PJ's Coffeeshop, about 20 minutes drive from my desk. It was at this time, that I began ordering Teaching Co. courses and listening to them on my way to PJ's for a coffee break. During a round-trip to PJ's in the morning, I could get through one complete lecture or so of whatever course I was taking. Over the past dozen years I have bought and listened to over 60 Teaching Company lectures.⁽¹⁾ One could say that I used to go to PJ's on my way to college and now I go college on my way to PJ's.

Through all the courses, I absorbed the information verbally and rarely had to open the small Summary Book of each lecture, mostly I did so for spelling of unusual words and places, or to look at diagrams and maps. If I wanted to refresh my memory, I would re-listen to the lectures, which has also proved helpful in a few cases. About five years ago, I noticed that the Teaching Company was offering Transcript Books, a complete transcription of the lectures. When I ordered a second copy of "Building Great Sentences" I

was offered the Transcript Book for half-price, and I accepted it, thinking this was a course that I wanted to re-study the way I do books, and that means writing a review of it after reading it.

A few words about the lecturer, Professor Brooks Landon, Ph. D., professor of English at the University of Iowa: he is a delight to listen to and the information he presents is congruent in both content and process: if he is discussing the virtue of cumulative sentences, he will be speaking in cumulative sentences as well as offering outstanding examples of other writers doing so. He demonstrates, lecture after lecture, that he has mastered the content he is presenting and is able to demonstrate his mastery in his own speaking and writing. And a few words about the Transcript Book format: each lecture begins with the summary of the lecture in the Summary Book that comes with the CD and then is followed by full lecture. My quoted passages may thus come from either and not noted which. His summaries are as brilliant as his full text, but shorter, more concise. And a few words about how my taking Landon's course has change me: I came to realize that my writing style was better suited for scientific writing than literature: I was as if still in the hobbles of high school English. The marvels of cumulative sentences that he unfolded to me opened my eyes to the possibility of writing a narrative of events, invoking emotions, feelings, and anticipations of readers, pulling the readers into a new reality, grabbing their attention, keeping them rapt in breathless anticipation. And that previous sentence would have been impossible for me to write absent Prof. Landon's lectures.

The good professor was not presumptuous with his title "Building Great Sentences", nor with the subtitle "Exploring the Writer's Craft". The writer's craft is constructed of sentences, no matter what form it takes or what subject it handles. Annie Dillard once told a person who asked her if he might become a writer, "I don't know. Do you like sentences?"

[page 2] "This is what I mean when I call myself a writer," writes novelist Don Daylily, "I construct sentences."

If you don't like sentences, you will be bored with being a writer in short order. If you love sentences, they will become objects of affection: you will play with them in sometimes endless combinations, petting them, coddling them, ruffling their feathers, scalping them, marching them, etc, until at last you find a living sentence that cannot be further improved, up until now. I add that last phrase, because a written sentence can be improved by the next person who reads it; an assiduous writer wants to be that next person.

For myself, after I have written a long review or essay and have turned it over to my copy-editor, the best part is yet to come: the phase of writing that I, after Annie Dillard's lead, call "Playing with Sentences". This phase begins with gestation, which I see as a process of forgetting, forgetting that these words I am about to read were written by me, a process which can happen overnight, but usually three or four days is better. I begin reading the piece of writing as if someone else wrote it, and I find kinks in the wording, a better way of saying the same thing, a new word order, phrases that are redundant, typographical errors, and an amazing zoo of weird animals that have filled my writing. I tackle the zoo by keeping the animals I like and releasing back into the wild of the Text Sea(2) those I dislike. This might seem like drudgery to many writers, but consider how often you read an article or a passage in a book in which you think you could have written it better than the author: Well, here's your chance to do exactly that!

Since I am also the publisher of my work, I have the ability to publish my writing on-line at any time in the process of writing and revision. Since I currently average about 3,000 readers a day of the material on my website, as soon as I publish something on-line, some of those readers may be reading the new material, and that thought creates in me the impetus to re-read the material on-line as soon as possible and go through another level of playing with sentences! Catch that crazy aardwolf roaming in one of my sentences and toss her out before some strange reader catches sight of her. Don't you know about the promiscuous habits of the female aardwolf? One never knows where its offspring might emerge into sight and turn a readable sentence into a risible one.

Okay, all you writers and wannabe writers out there, Raise your hand if you like dealing with grammar! Hmmm, can't see any hands going up — makes sense to me, because grammar ain't no fun, no how! If a centipede tried to parse the order in which his legs move, he could never advance a centimeter, and a millipede nary a millimeter. Parsing, graphing and analyzing sentences is about the boringest job imaginable. Grammar to sentences is as important as learning to pedal a bicycle, how to start it going, and how to stop it safely, but one soon forgets the grammar of bike-riding when the cool air is blowing past your face and shoulder, and thus should it be for a writer. Grammar is important for stopping and starting parts of a sentence, but concentration on grammar will not allow you to create breezy sentences that cool and delight your readers. Professor Landon recognizes this and focuses on rhetorical aspects of sentences rather than grammatical aspects. If you wish to learn about how to create sentences that live, he will help you.

[page 3] We will learn how what is generally referred to as a sentence's style results from the strategies it employs for combining its underlying ideas or propositions. Accordingly, our goal will be to learn everything we can about how the sentences combine ideas. Understanding how sentences put ideas together is the first step in understand how they do things, the ways in which they work, the way they present information, and the ways they unfold their meanings — and to learn how t make them work for us. . . . Because our concern will be with how sentences work, the terms we will use will be rhetorical rather than grammatical, terms that help us understand how sentences move, how they take steps, speeding up and slowing down, how make us feel, rather terms that label the parts of sentence much as we would label the parts of dissected — and quite dead — frogs. This means that we will study the sentence as a thing in motion, a thing alive, considering the strategies that give sentences pace and rhythm, particularly the duple rhythms of balance and three-beat rhythms of serial constructions.

If you are looking for someone who will teach you how to write correctly or fix some problems you have in your writing, Professor Landon is not your man.

[page 8] In other words, this is a course in which we will dance with language, not a course in which will trudge toward remedial correctness. This is a course designed to help you write better sentences.

Write better sentences using the moves and strategies of the cumulative sentence as "employed by professional writers and best understood in terms first laid out by composition theorist Francis Christensen back in the 1960s." (Page 8) Writing better sentences will often include writing longer sentences than you ever wrote before, and this may seem strange to you at first, until you notice the power that a well-constructed cumulative sentence can bring to bear when describing a narrative situation in particularly.

[page 10] Listen to Joseph Conrad's elegantly balanced and extended sentence describing a native woman in the "Heart of Darkness", and I love this sentence, "She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress."

Gertrude Stein was a master craftsman of words and sentences, often writing sentences longer than a page. Here is a passage from her book I read back in 1984 in which one of her most memorable phrases appears. You likely have heard it, but perhaps never in its original context. These are some of her shorter sentences, but one can see the master at work.

[page 218 from *How to Write*] It is natural to suppose that a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose. It is as natural to suppose that everything is why they went. It is also as natural to suppose that they might be inattentive when they had aroused what was why and when it could be lost. Where could it be lost. It is natural to suppose that because inadvertently

they were obliged to be careful they might be nearly very often very well inclined to like and admire it here.

On page 39 of the same book, Stein begins her chapter "Arthur a Grammar" with this sentence, "Successions of words are so agreeable." In her entire book, there appears to be not a single question, merely declarative statements and sentence fragments. A sentence fragment is a succession of words that is agreeable. Her book *How to Write* breaks nearly every rule of sentence construction I was taught in high school and college. On pages 11, 12 Landon offers nine ways Stein might have written her saying using sentences and questions, but none of them got close to her "Successions of words are so agreeable." Nevertheless he distills an important point from her writing.

[page 11] "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" is a saying attributed to Gertrude Stein, and certainly the sequences of words we identify as sentences are capable of providing pleasure, just as surely as they are capable of conveying crucial information. Sometimes the most important information sentences convey is pleasure, as they unfold their meanings in ways that tease, surprise, test, and satisfy. Sometimes the way sentences unfold their meaning is the most important meaning they offer.

To be a writer, it seems to me, is to understand that a succession of words may be agreeable while offering either pleasure or displeasure, something Gertrude Stein famously understood.

To be a writer is to understand what a proposition is and when a succession of words contains one. Landon understands this well, and I very much appreciate his sharing that understanding with me. What I got from his exposition is that the sentence is the visible piece of writing, like the part of iceberg sticking out of the seawater, and the proposition or propositions are the underwater and invisible pieces of the sentence, often not visible and not written out. A simple sentence such as this: "The Titanic sailed." brings up all kinds of hidden meanings we call propositions, very much as the short biblical passage, "Jesus wept." is more than a description of a man weeping.

[page 12] I like to think of the written sentence as the part of the iceberg you see above water, while many of its underlying propositions remain out of sight underwater. To put it another way, propositions are the atoms from which the molecule of the sentence is constructed.

The above passage inspired me to write a litany of propositions, each line is short, but the propositions embedded in each one can create juxtapositions which range from mundane to humorous to nonsense. The writer writes the words and the reader reacts to the propositions which arise within while reading.

What is a Writer?

A writer is:

A blacksmith of words
A mason of phrases
A builder of sentences
An architect of books
A plumber of meanings
An electrician of shocks
A painter of adjectives
Dali depicting dripping metonymy
Monet painting pools of similes
Magritte scratching scrimshaw of metaphors
Picasso penning blockheaded verse
Da Vinci creating a TV Dinner

Michelangelo painting a Cistern
Beethoven composing Be Bop
Mozart reciting the rosary
Bach eating a Zweibach
Arnold Palmer playing Putt-Putt
Jack Nicholson playing Jack Nicholas
Bogart making a double-bogey
Tiger losing his balls in the Woods
A lion tamer going wild
Fred Astaire taking boxing lessons
Esther Williams learning to tap dance
Busby Berkeley repairing kaleidoscopes
Noah opening a zoo
Moses learning to read
Bobby writing propositions.

Want to be a writer? My advice is this:

*Become sentence acrobats
swinging on a star,
leaping from one clause to another,
Flying mast-over-beam, mid-air, with
Your only net the moist ground below
Your only tent the night sky above,
Navigating without maps,
Hope as your only compass.*

On page 42, Landon offers us a sentence that is jampacked with propositions with the base clause coming first, "He drove the car carefully, his shaggy hair whipped by the wind, his eyes hidden behind wraparound mirror shades, his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk." Then he shows in succeeding pages the effect of moving the base clause through the middle of the sentence all the way to the end, "His shaggy hair whipped by the wind, his eyes hidden behind wraparound mirror shades, his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk, he drove the car carefully." Note the difference in tone of each possibility of sentence structure, all of which are under the selective eye of the writer. But the first sentence form was the one that Landon liked, the surprise of the corpse in the trunk coming at the end. He says "even Professor Strunk suggests, 'The proper place in the sentence for the word or group of words that the writer desires to make the most prominent is usually the end.'"

During my training in the 1980s for certification as an NLP Practitioner, we were asked to learn the 32 kinds of presuppositions that Bandler and Grinder outlined in the [Glossary](#) of their book, [Structure of Magic](#), in 1975. They explained how presuppositions represent hidden propositions lying dormant in the visible statements that one makes and how one must be ready to identify them when they appear in clients' statements about themselves. For example, a young girl in therapy opens her statement to Dr. Milton Erickson, "My mother got pregnant out of wedlock, and here I am." Two simple statements, but fraught with propositions about the girl's life and the problems she was currently experiencing.

Landon says, " 'I like hamburgers' expresses a thought, but what exactly do I mean by *like*?" Or what kind of hamburgers, perhaps? A recent movie was named "Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle" — its droll title calling up any number of propositions about hamburgers because of the hamburger chain named White Castle is famous for its hamburgers. The entire movie can be understood like a long suspended syntax sentence with the base clause of "Harold and Kumar go to White Castle" and which sentence is only fulfilled when the two buddies wind up after many adventures in a White Castle outlet to order their hamburgers.

Landon uses the word *form* as I use the word *process*, thus the form of a sentence, to my way of understanding it, is the *process* one goes through in reading or hearing it. It is a live process which everyone does for oneself in a unique fashion and creates the variety of responses that different people have to the same writing. Landon claims that "form is content and style is meaning", and he explains it this way:

[page 17] Another way of looking at this assumption — that form is content, style is meaning — is to say that when we write, we are doing something with our sentences, and what we do unfolds in time, whether to our readers' eyes or ears. The summarizable or paraphrasable information conveyed in our sentences is only a part of their meaning, since what they do to a reader, the way they direct the reader's thinking and unfold information, may be as or more important than the information they contain.

A process is something which only unfolds in time; content is something which is frozen in time. *Process* is a territory; *content* is the map of the territory. As Alfred Korzybski famously claimed and proved to be so in his *General Semantics*, "A map is *not* the territory; it cannot represent all the territory." If we summarize, we create a map of a process thereby squeezing the life out of the process all the while pretending that we have allowed the reader of our summary to have the vital information of the original. But the very vital, living portion, of the original will likely be in the exact order of the words used in the original and the living effect it has on people reading it.

That is why I chose to emphasize Gertrude Stein's original words, "Successions of words are so agreeable." She apparently, so far as I can discover, did *not* write her thought as this question, "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" (3) but instead wrote a concise declarative sentence about the subjective agreeable effect that a succession words can have on one; whether or not one's succession of words describes a pleasurable or painful event, one can still find the succession of words agreeable. This aspect of *living meaning* is the reason that one quotes the direct words of an author whenever possible and distinguishes one's own paraphrasing from the author's original words.

On page 23, Landon quotes John Steinbeck's memorable passage about the Mexican sierra, a fish which will challenge all the strength and wiles of a fisherman and has XVII-15-IX spines in its dorsal fin. One can only count those spines on a dead sierra, however, not on pulsating, thumping fish which lands on board, flashing its colors in the Sun. Spines are content and the live sierra is process. Summarizing a sierra's fins may have a content and scientific value, but the process of catching a live sierra is lost thereby. Sentences are like the live sierra, they thump and pulsate, and our heart thumps and pulsates when a sentence grabs us and won't let go until, exhausted, we come to its end.

[page 24] Sentences are alive. We experience them in time, and we react to them unfolding as they twist and turn, challenging us, teasing us, surprising us, and sometimes boring or confusing us as we read them. Accordingly, whenever possible, I will use terms in this course that focus on the sentence as a thing in motion, an experience, something with which we form a relational reality when we read, rather than as something stiff and lifeless, whose parts can be counted or named. . . . I see this distinction as primarily between viewing the sentence as a grammatical phenomenon or as a rhetorical phenomenon.

To put it simply: grammar deals with *content*; rhetoric deals with *process*. Both are important to a sentence, but unfortunately the way English is taught in most places focuses mostly on grammar (content), ignoring the much more difficult aspect of rhetoric (process). Content can be taught, but process can only be learned. Landon equates grammar with the counting of spines on a dead fish (Page 30) and rhetoric with "the best ways of getting and holding attention with language, and shaping that attention to achieve particular outcomes." (Page 31) Rhetoric is like landing a lively sports fish, cleaning it, and preparing an elegant and tasty seafood dish with it, such as [*Pampano en Papillotte*](#).

Does Prof. Landon suggest that we all write longer sentences? No, he does not.

[page 25] It's far easier to remember the term *simple and direct* as a summary of Jacques Barzun's advice in his [Simple & Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers](#) than it is to remember simple does not mean simplistic, direct does not mean short, and simple and direct does not mean that we should write like Ernest Hemingway in a hurry.

Instead he calls for sentences to be as long as the sentence demands for its fullest understanding, and one can be sure that if one writes a long sentence that is interesting and cannot be easily summarized, that Prof. Landon would likely approve of the sentence.

[page 25] Accordingly, one of the assumptions shaping my approach to teaching writing is that unless the situation demands otherwise, sentences that convey more information are more effective than those that convey less. Sentences that anticipate and answer more questions that a reader might have are better than those that answer fewer questions. Sentences that bring ideas and images into clearer focus by adding more useful details and explanation are generally more effective than those that are less clearly focused and that offer fewer details. In practice, this means that I generally value longer sentences over shorter sentences, as long as the length accomplishes some of those important goals I've just mentioned.

Landon doesn't mince words when it comes to the definition of style, but rather gives us a short one that anyone can remember, "Style is what the writer writes and/or what the reader reads." He adds, "That's about as inclusive a definition of style as one can get." (Page 32) His definition focuses on style as *process*: what the writer *writes* — what the reader *reads*. Yes, content is important, but without style, few will read it.

Landon chooses(4) the final sentence of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* to illustrate a cumulative sentence in which the base clause is in the second position and fourth position (involving the narrator seeing white hat), but the sentence encapsulates the entire story into one sentence.

[page 47 *The Secret Sharer*] Walking to the taffrail, I was in time to make out, on the very edge of a darkness thrown by a towering black mass like the gateway of Erebus-- yes, I was in time to catch an evanescent glimpse of my white hat left behind to mark the spot where the secret sharer of my cabin and of my thoughts, as though he were my second self, had lowered himself into the water to take his punishment: a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny.

We can almost hear the music swell as Conrad's narrator marks the departure of Leggatt, whom the narrator has helped escape formal trial for a murder at sea, having decided that Leggatt's action was justified by an extreme set of circumstances, an early brief for situational ethics.

Landon loves cumulative sentences — as he explains:

[page 49] I like everything that a cumulative sentence does, from the way it allows us to add detail or information to a base clause, to the way its distinctive rhythm calls attention to the sentence as a thing in motion, making it particularly effective for capturing actions. It's no accident that sportwriters and writers of hardboiled detective stories use cumulative syntax for all its worth.

Here is a suspensive syntax, cumulative sentence describing two real events which happened to me, the second event about ten years after the first:

I began to write a suspensive syntax sentence describing a peaceful Easter Sunday morning, one I remember well, the walking outside early to fetch my newspaper to read while drinking my first cup of coffee to be poured shortly from the pot brewing in the kitchen, everyone in the house sound asleep, my wife in our bed, our daughter and her three small children in the guest room and living room, the baskets lovingly prepared and left by the Easter Bunny gracing the buffet a few feet from where three angelic faces were smiling on air mattresses on the floor, my oyster-dressing stuffed turkey newly placed into the oven, the shrimp-stuffed merlitions, green bean casserole, and pecan pies, all in a state of readiness for a grand family meal in a few hours, given no unforeseen circumstances such as the drain pipe from the water heater dripping water, which I noticed as I turned in the breezeway, requiring immediate attention, leading me to run up the steps into the attic to troubleshoot the dripping, which I soon discovered to my chagrin, came from the leaking heater and which I figured might be stopped by tightening a faucet but instead the faucet shot out of my hand, flying across the top of the living room, unleashing a continuous half-inch stream of scalding hot water in its wake with my only recourse to divert the hot water into the drain pan with my foot insulated from the heat by the sole of my deck shoe and to attempt to shut off the water, only the shut-off valve was unreachable without removing my foot, and I began screaming loud enough to waken the dead, or at least fetch my sleeping wife to the ladder to the attic, where I could request she immediately shut off the main water valve, but before I could complete my suspensive syntax sentence, my wife came into our cruise ship stateroom to ask what I was doing.

As a writer of poetry and prose, I appreciate Landon's including this passage from Josephine Miles' 1967 book *Style and Proportion: The Language of Prose and Poetry*.

[page 61, Miles] While every few feet, verse reverses, repeats, and reassesses the pattern of its progression, prose picks up momentum toward its forward goal in strides variably adapted to its burdens and purposes. Both use steps; neither merely flows; each may be perceived and followed by its own stages of articulation.

Landon introduced me to Ursula Le Guin's fine book on writing, [Steering the Craft](#) which I then bought, read and reviewed in 2009. He notes her advice on the virtue of long sentences which end with this quote on page 40 of her book.

[page 71, Le Guin] Teachers trying to get school kids to write clearly, and journalists with their weird rules of writing, have filled a lot of heads with the notion that the only good sentence is a short sentence. This is true for convicted criminals.

He offers us, however, a caveat about constipated sentences with clauses so crammed together that one cannot pull any sense out of them. Here's one example of such a sentence, followed by its version loosened up by Landon.

[page 73] It is encouraging to note the progress made by beekeeping to meet the challenging times, particularly in connection with the difficult problem of pesticides as they relate to the keeping of bees in the highly cultivated areas where bees are needed for pollination.

If your eyes glazed over reading that sentence, so did mine — unfortunately I used similar writing structures when I was writing for scientific publications in my youth. Note the improvement after he administers a cumulative dose of literary Ex-Lax:

[page 74] Beekeeping is making encouraging progress, responding to challenging times, facing challenges such as the difficult problem of pesticides, the problem being to keep bees in the highly cultivated areas where bees are needed for pollination.

Landon excavates John Erskine's contribution to the cumulative sentence, his 1946 essay, "The Craft of Writing". Here's Landon quote of Erskine:

[page 89, Erskine] Let me suggest here one principle of the writer's craft, which though known to practitioners I have never seen discussed in print. The principle is this: When you write, you make a point not subtracting as though you sharpened a pencil, but by adding. When you put one word after another, your statement should be more precise the more you add. If the result is otherwise, you have added the wrong thing, or you have added more than was needed.

As a wood sculptor, artisan of a craft which proceeds by subtracting, I can see now that writing is more like clay sculpting which proceeds by adding and adding until you achieve the precise result you desire with your sculpture.

Here is another quote from Erskine that is insightful, the concept of a noun as a trailer hitch, what you add to the noun is like what you hook onto a trailer hitch determines what kind of activity you are going to participate in.

[page 89, Erskine] What you wish to say is found not in the noun but in what you add to qualify the noun. The noun is only a grappling iron to hitch your mind to the reader's. The noun by itself adds nothing to the reader's information; it is the name of something he knows already, and if he does not know it, you cannot do business with him. The noun, the verb, and the main clause serve merely as a base on which meaning will rise. The modifier is the essential part of any sentence . . . In practice, therefore, the sentence proceeds from something the reader may be expected to know already toward whatever new thing we wish to tell him. we proceed by addition.

Here is a sentence I most admire, written by Landon, illustrating in *process* what is being discussed in *content*, a cumulative sentence written to describe the virtues and structure of cumulative sentences while demonstrating an effective example of a cumulative sentence in itself.

[page 102] The cumulative is, as Francis Christensen suggested, a generative syntax in the sense that it encourages writers to add information to their sentences, relying on free modifying phrases after the base clause, each new phrase a step forward for the sentence, each new phrase sharpening the sentence by adding new details or offering clarification or explanation for propositions advanced in the base clause or preceding modifying phrase.

Cumulative sentences can consist of coordinate modifying phrases and subordinate modifying phrases. The example Landon gives below consists of subordinate and coordinate modifying phrases, he shows the subordinate phrases by (2), (3), (4), and (5) and the coordinate phrase by repeating the number like this (2) (2).

[page 133] (1) Cumulative sentences can take any number of forms, (2) detailing both frozen or static scenes and moving processes, (2) their insistent rhythm always asking for another modifying phrase, (3) allowing us to achieve ever-greater degrees of specificity and precision, (4) a process of focusing the sentence in much the same way a movie camera can focus and refocus on a scene, (5) zooming in for a close-up to reveal almost microscopic detail, (5) panning back to offer a wide-angle panorama, (5) offering new angles or perspectives from which to examine a scene or consider data.

If you have any doubt about whether your cumulative sentence works, read it aloud as Landon's prescription. You'll know because if works, the gyroscopic action of the sentence will keep it in balance; your eyes will see the pretty picture the content portrays and your ears will hear and you will feel the balance of the gyro-action.

Here's a masterful paragraph by Landon in which he uses the hand as a simile for the cumulative sentence, using a cumulative sentence to do the heavy lifting. Note the variation in size of his sentences.

[page 163] We should think of cumulative form much as we think of the human hand, which functions in an infinite number of ways, depending on what we need it to do. Sentences are like hands. we use both to meet the needs of particular situations, and the point is almost never how we label or classify either our sentences when we set them to particular tasks, or what a hand does when we use to point or pick up or squeeze or gesture or sort or hold, or do any of the infinite number of tasks a hand routinely performs. the point is simple to get the job done.

Are you a writer or a security camera? I admit that I began as a security camera, simply recording events I saw as accurately as possible. It worked for my scientific writing, but reporting on a meeting of our Lockheed Management Club, which was a congenial get together with a guest speaker, I needed to put some feelings and some fun into the report. Writing up those meeting blurbs for our monthly newsletter became fun for me and I looked forward to the opportunity.

[page 191] One of the most important assumptions of this course is that the most effective prose establishes a relationship between writer and reader. That's a relationship between two people, two distinct personalities. If our writing doesn't offer some glimpses of writers as personalities, it's hard to say that it has a style, much less that its style will appeal to readers. As I noted in the last lecture, if our writing displays no more of the way we think, the ways in which we process information, than does objective technology, such as that we might find in a security camera at a convenience store, it probably doesn't matter that what we write accurately records and reports information. That's the difference between a writer and a security camera: The security camera only records what takes place in front of its lens, while the writer thinks about, reflects upon, forms opinions about, and frequently comments on what he or she is writing about.

One form of objective technology which has become popular is YouTube which provides a security camera view with audio. It has its place, but it cannot take the place of writing because the videos cannot provide what the actor or subject is thinking about, reflecting upon, forming opinions about while being recorded, something in the purview of every writer. I think that Landon has hit on the primary reason why all the jazzy Internet media have not reduced the popularity of magazines, those colorful shiny objects you can handle and open up to find filled with opinion, insightful reflections, informational commentary, and delightful stories. In fact, from what I hear the popularity of magazines have increased since the advent of the Internet!

Alan Turing proposed a way of determining if computers have reached the level of human intelligence: we interact over a keyboard (like via email) and if we determine by the answers coming back that a human being is on the other end, but it turns out to be actually a computer, then computers have reached the level of humanity. I once proposed that a computer writing poetry was no big deal, but if a computer could select great poetry, that would be a big deal — those automatons we call computers would have reached the level of humanity. Unless we write like a human being, including some of what we think, feel, or have opinions about, we might as well be an automaton, because we have lost the essence of our own humanity.

[page 192] The style of our writing is determined by a huge number of variables, but one aspect of that style should always be that our writing present us as individual consciousnesses, as personalities who process the information we pass on in our writing, rather than as automatons who only record, report, or summarize information, as if it were being spewed out by a machine, or even worse, by a committee.

Now in a transcribed lecture, one would expect to find a typographical error, but this one is so droll that it deserves special mention. First, the passage as printed and spoken:

[page 196] Some cumulative sentences place a second-level modifying phrase just after

the first clause in a compound sentence and just before the second clause, as in this sentence from E. B. White:

They damned the falls, shutting out the tide, and dug a pit so deep you could look down and see China.

Did you pick up the typo? If not read the above passage again. If this was being transcribed by an automaton, like *Dragon Naturally Speaking*, a Word Perfect product that I fought with years ago before giving up on it, the typo would be natural: it's due to the phonological ambiguity of *dam* and *damn*. It's just a *damn* typo! Or a *dam* typo! Clearly E. B. White didn't said that *damning* the falls would shut out the tide. Blame the *damn* automaton or an inattentive copy-editor who should have caught the transcription error.

Every now and then a marvelous phrase comes along which rolls off the tongue and tickles the fancy, and Edwin Newman, the droll and learned television commentator and writer came up with this one, "microcluster of structured role expectations." Here it is in context:

[page 244] And Edwin Newman also utilizes this two-sentence suspensive patter to powerful effect in his essay on viable solutions:

The day is not far off when someone about to join his family will excuse himself by saying that he does not want to keep his microcluster of structured role expectations waiting. True, I came upon this gem of social-scientific jargon in London, but that only shows how far our influence has spread and how determined the British are to join the Americans at the kill when the English language finally is done to death.

My wife and I have four offspring each from our first spouse. Each set of four offspring bring with them, singly or *en masse*, a unique *microcluster of structured role expectations* and God help the step-parent who unwittingly transgresses upon one of those! In the various chemical, manufacturing, and power plants where I worked, we shortened the process of stepping out of bounds of a *microcluster of structured role expectations*, by calling it a *cluster-f---k*. This phrase brought a sense of levity to the chaos and helped those of us involved to maintain a degree of sanity, which we might else have lost.

When building suspensive sentences, one should be aware of what Mark Twain said about German in a speech:

[page 257, Mark Twain] A verb has a hard enough time of it in this world when it is all together. It's downright inhuman to split it up. But that's what those Germans do. They take part of a verb and put it down here, like a stake, and they take the other part and put it away over yonder like another stake, and between those two limits they just shovel in German.

All the English courses I took gave explanations of how to use colons and semi-colons, but none of them were very useful to me as a writer, but finally, after Lecture 16 of Professor Landon, I got it: Use colons to perform the magic trick that you built up to, but which no one expects.

Use semi-colons to build up to the final trick; like in joke-telling where everyone expects a joke to end in a punch line; the build-up happens in-between, separated by semi-colons; then following the colon: the punch-line!

Balanced sentences, we recognize their power when we read them, but may not recognize them as part of the form called balanced sentences.

[page 283] A balanced sentence hinges in the middle, usually split by a semicolon, the second half of the sentence paralleling the first half, but change one or two key words or altering word order. In this sense, the second half of the sentence can be thought of as a kind of mirror image of

the first half, the reflection reversing the original image. Balanced sentences really call attention to themselves and stick in the mind, drawing their power from the tension set up between repetition and variation.

Here are some practice balanced sentences I wrote to get familiar with the form:

Did I write this sentence, or did it write me?
Much as he wrote the sentence, the sentence wrote him.
Try to write the sentence; it will then write you.
Write if you will, and will if you write.

And a short poem this meditation inspired:

What Is It To Be A Writer?

To write sentences
To forge them in the fires of will
To ink them upon a page
To abandon them to the surprise
of unsuspecting readers.

Parallelism is another form in sentences, and I am delighted to discover that faulty parallelism escapes the notice of computerized grammar and style checkers as pointed out by Landon here:

[page 294] In similar fashion, *The Little, Brown Handbook (5th ed.)* Offers this restrained and somewhat redundant definition: "Parallelism matches the form of your sentence to its meanings: when your ideas are equally important or parallel, you express them in similar, or parallel grammatical form," and it offers the understated example, "The air is dirtied by factories belching smoke and vehicles spewing exhaust." The only advantage for parallelism cited in *The Little, Brown Handbook* is that "it can work like glue to link the sentences of a paragraph as well as the parts of sentence," and it devoted equal attention to warning that computer grammar and style checker "cannot recognize faulty parallelism" because they "cannot recognize the relations among ideas."

This last caveat should cool the ardor of Artificial Intelligence fanatics who claim computers will come to be as smart as a human being, a goal as outrageous as it would be to claim humans will come to be as smart as God.[\(5\)](#)

[page 299] One of the best-known examples of the balanced sentence comes from John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

The double beat or duple rhythm of balanced form may derive its almost visceral power from the basic lub-dub beat of the human heart; the double words and forms of the balanced sentence derive their power an ability to stick in the mind from a mirroring effect that asks not what we can do with balanced form but what balance forms do to us.

In Kahlil Gibran's book, *Mirrors of the Soul* (published 1965, 1915 translation) in Chapter 8 "Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You," there is an Essay titled "The New Frontier" which contains the following two passages:

[page 60, 61 Gibran] There is in the Middle East an awakening that defies slumber. This awakening will conquer because the sun is its leader and the dawn is its army. In the fields of the Middle East, which have been a large burial ground, stand the youth of Spring calling the occupants of the sepulchers to rise and march toward the new

frontiers. . . . Are you a politician asking *what your country can do for you* or a zealous one asking *what you can do for your country*.

For President Kennedy's Inaugural Address, his speech writer apparently borrowed the Essay title for the theme for Kennedy's presidency, *The New Frontier*, and slightly reworded this wonderful parallel construction for his famous imperative statement "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" which is remembered and attributed to Kennedy, up until now.

Landon introduced me to William Gass's [On Being Blue](#) which I quickly acquired and reviewed. He said, Gass writes sentences that "*do things*, they are alive, are closely tied to the body's basic rhythms, and, when in the hands of a masterful writer, can be taught steps that dance across the lips and across the page." I will include the last half of the long two-sentence paragraph of Gass's that he quotes below:

[page 333] . . . blue is the color of the mind in borrow of the body; it is the color consciousness becomes when caressed; it is the dark inside of sentences, sentences which follow their own turnings inward out of sight like the whorls of a shell, and which we follow warily, as Alice after that rabbit, nervous and white, till suddenly — there! climbing down clauses and passing through 'a-n-d' as it opens — there — there — we're here! . . . in time for tea and tantrums; such are the sentences we should like to love — the ones which love us and themselves as well — incestuous sentences — sentences which make an imaginary speaker speak the imagination loudly to the reading eye; that have a kind of orality transmogrified; not the tongue touching the genital tip, but the idea of the tongue, the thought of the tongue, word-wet to part-wet, public mouth to private, seed to speech, and speech . . . ah! After exclamations, groans, with order gone, disorder on the way, we subside through sentences like these, the risk of senselessness like this, to float like leaves on the restful surface of that world of words to come, and there, in peace, patiently to dream of the sensuous, imagined, and mindful Sublime.

Professor Brooks Landon is not offering rules for writing, but suggesting what rules we should follow and which rules we should not follow, and *should* is too strong a word for his suggestions, as he gives us many options to choose from, such as: writing style should be what Richard Graves suggests, "a way of finding and explaining what is true."

[page 380] I mention all of this as a background for my heartfelt reminder that these lectures are investigations, interrogations, explorations, and celebrations of the sentence and of prose style. They are not meant as a verbal textbook that sets forth yet another set of guidelines or rules for good writing. So much that is wrong with writing instruction is wrong because a single person's beliefs have somehow been elevated to ex cathedra pronouncements and passed along from teacher to teach and from teacher to student through generation after generation, without ever being challenged, without ever being tested against experience, without ever really being thought about. In these lectures, I have tried to do some serious thinking about the received truths that have so largely guide our efforts to teach writing.

So what is style? Richard Graves says that the purpose of style "is not to impress but to express," which seems to me a common foible of writers at an intermediate stage of learning to steer their craft. If a writer can learn to avoid the extremes of technique, somewhere along the way one's own voice will begin to appear and others will call it a style. Style is ultimate gift which keeps on giving, as Landon explains below:

[page 387] As Lewis Hyde has so brilliantly explained the process of gifting in his *The Gift*, most indigenous peoples believe that the essence of gift-giving is that the gift must remain in motion — that it must keep moving as it is given again and again, passed from hand to hand. In this important sense, style is indeed a gift that keeps on giving just as it

is a gift that can and must be passed along.

A popular expression "re-gifting" has arisen, as if we should acknowledge that we are passing along a gift we previously received from someone else, all of which is unnecessary if we rightly understand the gifting process as a living process which continues indefinitely. Brooks Landon's lectures and writing are a wonderful gift which I am honored to have a chance to offer as a gift to others. May you study his work in detail and pass it along to others as well.

~^~

----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. The first courses I bought on Video Tape, but soon found that I preferred audio format because of the convenience of listening in my car. Only once since did I buy a course on DVD, because it was only offered in Video format, but after 5 or more years, I have only watched about 10% of the course.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

~~~~~

**Footnote 2.** A marvelous concept created by Jasper Fforde in his Thursday Next novels. See [The Eyre Affair](#) which started the fun.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

~~~~~

Footnote 3. I suspect, but have no proof, that this question was a summary made from memory and not a direct quote from Gertrude Stein, and that the original quote was "Successions of words are so agreeable."

[Return to text directly before Footnote 3.](#)

~~~~~

**Footnote 4.** Crediting Richard Ohman's 1966 *College English* for bringing this sentence to his attention.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 4.](#)

~~~~~

Footnote 5. Anyone who claims humans will become able to write computer software to recognize the relations among ideas, in my opinion, does not have ideas worth relating to each other.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 5](#)

~~~~~

