

ON IMPOSED VERSUS IMITATIVE FORM

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In “Confessions of a Former Sailor,” a wonderful essay about her own writing process, Professor Sue Lorch tells a traumatic tale from her undergraduate experience in advanced composition. The story is revealing, I think, about some important principles of one of the least understood and least discussed features of writing, the arrangement of a discourse. Lorch’s first assignment was to visit the art department and write a descriptive paper about a painting of cows in field. Lorch, who had always been a “good writer,” sailed up, applied the description formula she had been taught, going left to right and top to bottom, and produced a description so thorough it even numbered the spots on the cows. Having never received less than a B on a piece of writing in sixteen years of schooling, she was naturally shocked when her work received an F, an F for being boring.

Since her teacher required that Lorch rewrite the paper, shock became despair. How could she make a description of a boring painting anything but boring? “I tried to imagine what would interest [the professor]—an effective use of colons perhaps, more adjectives, maybe an allusion to a classical myth. What was the name of that cow Jove courted in the form of a bull?” (168).

Finally, she gave up and returned to reexamine the now-hated painting. The moment was a revelation. She suddenly saw that one cow had a different look on its face, a look that undercut the surface impression of bucolic bliss. By focusing on that cow and that insight, Lorch rewrote and achieved the painful breakthrough that transformed her writing process for all time. Instead of sailing smoothly down the page, her “progress is now

that of a '39 Ford negotiating hard terrain, a Ford operated by a slightly dim twelve-year-old child lacking entirely any experience with stick shift" (170). She does not describe the structure of the revised piece, but she does indicate that it had to be completely redesigned: "My all-purpose sea chart for getting through a description—begin at the upper left of whatever and move clockwise until you come round again to the starting point—was not going to get me where I needed to be" (170). A new form was required.

Structurally Lorch's original paper mirrored the shape of the topic she was writing about. Whatever appeared at the top left of the picture would be discussed first, whatever was in the middle next, etc. In other words, the form of the painting controlled the form of the discourse. That is what I will call "natural" or "imitative" order in discourse. On the other hand, when Lorch rewrote the paper to focus on the importance of that one cow and its odd look, she had to restructure the paper on her own. Whatever form she used, she had to create. This is "imposed" form, form not found in the topic, but chosen by the writer.

Not all topics manifest an inherent shape. Those that do involve either chronology or spatiality. Time and space, the two dimensions of the Newtonian universe, seem also to be the two dimensions of natural form in discourse.

Imposed form in contrast *restructures* the topical material in some significant way. Now imposed form itself has at least two variants. It includes the standard forms we sometimes teach—such as the alternating comparison-contrast structure—the forms of development that Frank D'Angelo presents as conceptual paradigms for various types of writing, what Coleridge called mechanical form. But imposed form also includes the organic form favored by the British Romantics, and by such essayists as Didion, Baldwin, Carlyle, and Emerson.

Having postulated the existence of two broad categories of form, I now offer the Theorem of Student Selected Structure: Whenever possible, students tend to arrange papers by repeating the shape of the materials discussed. In other words, students choose imitative rather than imposed form.

Let me illustrate the Theorem with a personal anecdote. It's the story of one of those times in teaching when what seems

like a really good idea at the moment turns into a disaster whose only virtue is that you learn not to do that again. At my university's annual spring symposium in honor of alumnus Sam Rayburn, David Schoenbrun was the featured speaker. All classes were cancelled, and we were to "encourage" students to attend.

Now what better way to encourage attendance than to make the speech the subject of a writing assignment? I did not want to ask for anything complex from first-semester freshmen, so I asked them to attend the lecture, then write an account of it as a news story—no critical analysis of the positions taken, just summation of what was said with some attention to what was most important. I explained the 5 W's briefly, devoted at least thirty seconds to inverted pyramidal form, and encouraged them to take notes or even record the session.

When I read the papers, I was aghast. The major problem was structure. As the ritual on such occasions goes, the program had not begun with Schoenbrun but with our student body president, who introduced a regional newscaster, who in turn introduced Schoenbrun. And a good many of my students' papers followed that same order, beginning with the student, then the Dallas newscaster, then Schoenbrun. Of course the papers also mirrored the order of his speech, which had the effect of leaving the most interesting material near the end. My students had enacted what some literary critic once called the fallacy of imitative form.

I was expecting the mechanical imposed form of the journalist's inverted pyramid, but I got imitative chronology. They had written the minutes of the assembly, not news accounts of it.

The students certainly were not at fault—except perhaps in the general sense that they are not very familiar with what a news article sounds like. They had done what students seem to do naturally: they had built their papers in the shape of the material being discussed. But *I* was at fault for providing such an opportunity.

When asked to write a paper based on personal experiences, students also "naturally" seize on chronological order. I often assign students an essay evaluating a teacher they have

had, addressed to an appropriate audience, such as the school board or future teachers of that discipline. Unless I take pains to explain the logic of evaluation, they tend to shape the papers by chronicling their experiences with that teacher, beginning with the first day in the classroom, or sometimes even before, with the rumors they had heard. They tend to be quite detailed about the first week or two, and then collapse the rest of the year into a paragraph or so.

Students are in fact ingenious about finding a natural structure, even where one would think it impossible. Last term I spent four weeks teaching research papers. We examined sample papers by other students, stressed use of multiple types of sources, and emphasized locating cognitive dissonance among the sources in order to focus a paper and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the topic. So I was perplexed at a paper I received with five main points about the effects of teacher personality on elementary students. It had one for each of the five articles the student had located. That particular sort of natural order had seemed so unlikely that I had never warned against it. Later it occurred to me that I had seen exactly the same thing happen in doctoral dissertations in the obligatory review of the literature, which is frequently treated chronologically and exhaustingly. That same term I read such a section that was seventeen paragraphs long. I know its length because it summarized seventeen prior studies, one study per paragraph, in the order of publication.

Why do students tend to seize on natural orders? First, a powerful economy may be at work: natural form is already there, but imposing some alternate form takes extra energy and control of text. Throwing out the form already present and hunting for another seems wasteful.

Second, our textbooks *teach* such orders. When students need to describe a place, person, or object (including Lorch's painting), the books direct them to follow the innate structure of the scene by moving left to right, or top to bottom, etc., although in my experience most published description does not follow such a structure. (Have you ever hunted for such a passage to supplement your textbook?)

Third, the structure our students are most familiar with from media of *all* types may well be chronology. From movies and

TV shows, to the literary works we teach, to the U.S. history they study, the majority of the extended discourse they receive is chronologically oriented. Undoubtedly, of course, the urge to hear and tell stories is deeply embedded in the human psyche. Such structure is thus *natural* in the deepest sense of the word.

My second theorem, therefore, is certain to be more controversial: "Natural order is usually ineffective." For mnemonic purposes, we can call it the INS theorem, with INS standing for the "ineffectiveness of natural structure." I base my INS theorem largely on the experience of having read so many ineffective natural-order papers, such as those news stories on David Schoenbrun, papers which could have been presented to a reader clearly and effectively if the same material had merely been reshaped.

I have neither the space nor the inclination to document these theorems directly by comparing alternate versions of student papers. Instead I count on readers having had pedagogical experiences similar to mine that illustrate both points.

I see two explanations for why natural order is less effective than imposed order.

(1) I take it as a given that writing is a purposeful activity. It is also non-algorithmic, meaning no set sequence of steps will guarantee a solution. Consequently, writers are inherently in the business of making choices to achieve their purposes. Certainly not a revolutionary idea.

Writers choose what to include and what to omit; they make stylistic choices, and grammatical choices—and structural choices. The grounds for all these choices ought to be, in the largest sense, rhetorical. That is, the choices should be based on the question "Which of my various options at this point will best help me achieve my purpose for my readers?" Students who follow natural form forfeit the right to make such purposive structural choices. They let the shape of perceived reality deprive them of their privilege to control movement to achieve a goal. They trade freedom for security.*

Jack Selzer says this extreme rhetorical view privileges audience-based choices inappropriately. I maintain, however, that whether one is writing science, persuasion, information, evaluation, or a note to the paperboy, audience-based choices *should* be privileged. We write to audiences in order to com-

municate to them, in order to affect them in some way. Any choice we make that interferes with the audience's reception of that message—whether the choice is in spelling, vocabulary, title, readability level, or structure—is a defective choice, one that *should* have been made otherwise. (See Martin Nystrand's discussion of the principle of "reciprocity" that should operate in discourse.)

I do not wish to oversimplify this matter. Peter Elbow has made a powerful "argument for ignoring audience" in which he asserts—correctly, I think—that "we often do not really develop a strong, authentic voice in our writing till we find important occasions for *ignoring* audience" (55) in order to concentrate on what we need to say. He concludes, however, that "we must nevertheless *revise* with conscious awareness of audience in order to figure out which pieces of writer-based prose are good as they are—and how to discard or revise the rest" (55).

That is my point as well: not that at all moments during writing a student should be conscious of audience, but that *finally* all decisions need to rest on audience—even the decision to retain some natural order discourse.

(2) The second reason for the ineffectiveness of natural order grows from the presumption that discourse is unified, elaborated predication. That is, discourse asserts a claim about a subject (a rheme about a theme, to use the jargon). Natural order focuses on the subject (such as Lorch's painting of the cows), rather than on the claim. Natural order takes whatever noun referent is being discussed—whether it be "pornography," or "my summer vacation," or "the Elizabethan world picture"—locates its spatial or chronological parts and builds the discourse around them, using some variation of a list construction. Natural order thus de-emphasizes the predication and foregrounds the subject.

But the *point* of writing is what the writer predicates.

One useful corollary of the INS theorem applies to writing about writing: in writing about another text, following the structure of that text rarely works. This holds whether one reviews a new textbook, refutes a previous article, or interprets a poem.

My own struggles with textbook reviewing remind me of this point constantly. Inevitably I draft a review that is mainly a summary of the book, with evaluative remarks tied on, clanking

like tin cans behind the newlyweds' car. And I defend the structure to myself on the grounds that one major purpose of the review is to tell other teachers what the book includes so they can judge whether it interests them. I maintain that charade through perhaps two drafts before acknowledging that reading even my own summary is boring, that the structure seems childish, mechanical (in the pejorative sense), and lacking in insight. At that point I know I must reconstruct the review, basing it not on the book's structure, but on my own evaluative insights, with supporting detail included but subordinated. In short, I must act on my INS theorem.

Another common example: When students are asked to interpret a poem, they automatically adopt a structure both spatial and chronological: namely, first stanza, second stanza, etc. If asked to analyze a character in a work of fiction, they will typically follow the character through the narrative. If asked to discuss several characters, they will discuss one, then another *seriatim*, often in separate paragraphs.

How often have we asked for more interpretation and less summary from our students? I submit that the problem is frequently not so much quantitative as structural. Following the shape of the work tends to produce summary and bury interpretation.

So far, this has all been personal speculation and pontification. But a fair amount of careful research supports the view that imitative order is generally less effective than imposed order.

The evidence comes from three different sorts of research: cognitive psychology, discourse analysis, and reading research.

Frankly, much of what I have been saying could have been entitled "Footnote to Linda Flower." In her classic "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," she asserts that "in its *structure* writer-based prose reflects the associative, narrative path of the writer's own confrontation with her subject" (269). Flower illustrates by comparing two versions of a report, written by students analyzing problems faced by the Oskalossa Brewing Company. When the group first drafted its report, it repeated the order of its own investigation, thus including a great deal of background material about the company that would be unnecessary, in fact counter productive, for the intended audience of company executives.

As Flower points out, such a structure has “an inner logic of its own . . . either a narrative framework or a survey form” (276), what I have been calling chronology or spatiality. But as she further points out, “a narrative obscures the more important logical and hierarchical relations between ideas” (276). This describes much of what our students write when asked to deal with a work of literature, as well as what often happens when they write about their own experiences. Now an argument can be made for the dramatic values of taking a reader through an experience with you—if indeed the experience itself happened to be well structured. Ken Macrorie and others have asserted a natural human “bias toward narrative” (see Dillon 65). But if one wants to make a more complex point about that experience, such as in my earlier example of evaluating a teacher, telling the story in its own order often isn’t enough. Even the strict single experience narrative is often improved by using some version of flashback rather than following the natural order of the materials. Narration need not equal chronology.

Suzanne Jacobs used Flower’s concept of writer-based prose in a case study of Rudy and his weekly in-class essays in advanced physiology. His teacher regularly gave the class an opening sentence designed to make them focus the ideas in that week’s lectures, such as “Muscle cells are cells specialized for contraction” (35). Rudy knew a lot about muscle cells, and his essay retold that information in the order he had learned it—with no attention to the predicate, “specialized for contraction.” Jacobs refers in a telling phrase to “the difficulty of fighting against the structure of remembered information” (38). Rudy imitated the order in which the teacher had presented the material. That order had worked for her purposes. But it would not work for his. He produced what we disdainfully call regurgitation. It is information-full, but not well formed.

In an article less well known than Flower’s but equally brilliant, entitled “Perceiving Structure in Professional Prose,” Gregory Colomb and Joseph Williams categorized the structures of prose in the professions: “There are, we believe, roughly three kinds of large-scale order. The first originates in experience, the second in historical convention, the third in something we will very crudely characterize as logic” (121).

The authors name the type “originating in experience” “iconic order.” It is what I have been calling natural or imitative form. The other two types represent varieties of imposed form, a mechanical one imposed by generic conventions, such as the form of a grant application, and an organic one created to help realize the discourse as an argument.

Based on their studies of business prose, Colomb and Williams conclude bluntly, “iconic order characterizes the worst professional prose: the order of information follows the associations of the writer, or the sequence of inquiry the writer engaged in, or the structure of the object under discussion” (122). The INS theorem again.

In a very different sort of study, Richard Haswell examined impromptu essays by 160 writers representing five different age groups, ranging from 18-year-old new freshmen in college to working adults age 30 and over already judged by their job supervisors to be competent writers. He discovered fourteen different macrostructures and was able to classify them into simple patterns such as partition, seriation, and consequence, or chained patterns made up by joining simple patterns. The important finding for my point is that the simple or unchained patterns could be further divided into symmetrical patterns and asymmetrical patterns. In symmetrical patterns, the parts are “categories of a common class, as in chronology where the parts are all units of time” (404). In asymmetrical patterns such as “consequence” and “problem/solution,” different parts are not subdivisions of one class. The five symmetrical patterns he found correspond to what I have been calling “natural” order. Nearly one-fourth of the 128 impromptu essays used “partition” (a natural pattern), but only one of the 32 essays by effective adults writers did (409).

The findings are complex, but in general the mature and effective writers tended to use the more complex asymmetrical and chained patterns, the ones I have been lumping as “imposed” structures. “Asymmetrical construction,” Haswell says, “lends itself to the adventurous kind of writing that competent adults favor” (413).

In an earlier related study Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle compared the abstraction levels of essays written by high school seniors and third-year college students in the same academic

subjects. In doing so they created a four part schema in which the two lower parts, the ones showing less use of intellectual abstracting (report and commentary), are written in natural order, while the two higher forms reflect imposed orders. College writers were found to use the forms involving higher level abstraction much more frequently than did the high school students. Thus the use of imposed form was found to correlate with developmental level, a conclusion that seems consistent with Haswell's.

Finally, probably the most elaborate explanation of why imposed structure (what Colomb and Williams call "principled order" and Flower calls "reader-based prose") is generally superior comes from the work of reading researcher Bonnie J. F. Meyer. She categorizes prose structures into five main groups: description, collection (which includes time-order), antecedent/consequent, comparison, and response (which includes such structures as question and answer, and problem-solution) ("Prose Analysis: Purposes, Procedures, and Problems" 11). Her first two structures, description and collection, are simple symmetrical patterns; the other three are asymmetrical. Meyer has done extensive research on how much information readers can recall when texts containing identical information are structured along different lines. (See Meyer and Freddie, "Effects of Discourse Type on Recall.") "Some of our ongoing studies suggest that the descriptive plan is the least effective when people read or listen to text for the purpose of remembering it" ("Reading Research and the Composition Teacher: The Importance of Plans" 41). Meyer's work again suggests the superiority of imposed forms.

In 1980 a national survey of leaders in composition revealed that the inability to organize papers effectively was considered the second most important weakness in student writing, with nearly 70 percent of the 219 respondents identifying it as a "major problem" (Bossone and Larson 12).

If we agree that this is a widespread problem, and we accept the principle that imposed forms are generally superior to imitative forms, what then do we do to help students structure their prose more effectively? On this issue, existing scholarship is much less helpful. Meyer suggests that we ought to teach students conscious use of effective schemata. So does Richard

Coe, but he cautions “not by pontificating about form; rather by creating processes that allow them to experience both the constraining and generative powers of forms” (“An Apology for Form” 21). Just what he means by that isn’t clear, since in his own pedagogy he begins with description and narration, which he agrees lend themselves to imitative form. He does, at least, have students try out alternate structural versions of the same paper so that they can discover for themselves the effects of alternate patterns (*Form and Substance* 238-41).

It is difficult to teach form directly without returning to the empty formalism for which current-traditional, or product, pedagogies have been widely criticized. Direct teaching of form almost inevitably divorces form from purpose by asking students to locate material suitable for pouring into the mold we have designed rather than imposing whatever form will achieve their purpose.

Instead, I suggest we begin simply by giving students the advice of Leonard Podis that “every paper ought to have a consciously crafted scheme of arrangement” (197) and thus stressing the superiority of imposed form. Then we can follow the lead of a number of teachers who include some discussion of the relevant structural issues when making specific assignments. Jean Jensen, for example, describes an interview assignment for high school students that includes the following directive: “If possible, try to organize by idea rather than by time” (40). Simply telling students not to use the most obvious form might lead them to discover workable alternatives, but probably showing them model interview essays, one organized by time and one done in some other way, would further sensitize them to the general preferability of imposed form. Similarly, Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield discuss at length a personal narrative paper they assign in which students are to “break the hold on chronology” (111) and avoid the natural “bed-to-bed” structure (111). Their chapter includes two versions of a student’s autobiographical paper, done six weeks apart. The revision dramatically alters the initial “bed-to-bed” chronological structure (113-121).

Of course, I am assuring that we will teach composition as an extended process—allowing both time for considering alternative structures and opportunities for revisions in which different

structures, not just improved surface features, can be tried. And I am assuming that we teach composition from a rhetorical rather than a formalist axiology. In a course based on rhetorical considerations, explicit discussions of natural versus imposed orders would not be out of order.

I already teach writing as a rhetorical process. Maybe in the future I will remember my own advice and spend time discussing preferable structures every time I make a writing assignment. Then, if I am lucky, I won't have to spend my weekends reading papers beginning, "At 9:00 this morning, student body president Martin Solis welcomed a large crowd to the University Auditorium and introduced Gloria Campos, news anchor for WFAA-TV, Dallas. Ms. Campos, in turn, introduced David Schoenbrun. Mr. Schoenbrun opened his speech by saying"

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NOTES

*Obviously in some cases natural order is also the superior rhetorical order—such as in giving directions for carrying out a linear process. I am not opposing *all* natural order, just natural order used without consideration of potentially superior rhetorical alternatives.

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