

Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

Clause Patterns, Clause Meanings

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Overview

In my writing classroom, I want students to approach revising and polishing with the idea that there is benefit to trying different phrasings and sentence structures. Even if their current writing works, the only way to know if there's a better version is to try new versions and see how they feel.

Many students are hesitant to engage in this type of work, and when they reflect on why, they express concern that their new versions might not be an improvement, and may even undo the acceptable work they've already accomplished. In response, I have tried to cultivate an approach that frames sentence-level revision as a form of linguistic play, rather than a process of correction or improvement.

Playfulness can still benefit from structure, and this activity provides students with an inventory of English clause patterns. Before they apply these patterns to their own work, students identify these clause patterns in course readings, and explore how these grammatical structures contribute to meaning.

This language-focused activity does not aim to push students toward a standard, but rather to identify space for creativity and linguistic difference. In Whitney Gegg-Harrison's essay on "playful, productive curiosity about language," she connects the use of language play in the writing classroom with an ethos that celebrates linguistic diversity. For instructors interested in similar approaches, the learning outcomes for this activity are organized within a Critical Language Awareness framework (Shapiro).

Time Commitment

Single instances of this activity can be done in 10 minutes, and it is more effective when integrated as short engagements across multiple class sessions.

Materials

The only materials needed are a class reading and the inventory of sentence patterns (see Appendix for my version)

This activity pairs well with *Writing Spaces* essays such as Bunn's "Reading Like a Writer" or Hulst's "Grammar, Rhetoric, and Style"

Assignment or Activity Process

- Students will review an excerpt from a course reading and identify a sentence to use for the activity; sentences can be chosen based on preference (e.g., Pick your favorite sentence) or an instructional goal (e.g., Pick a sentence where the author is using descriptive imagery).
- Next, they will compare it to a selection of clause patterns and choose the best match.
- If the selected sentence does not match one of the clause patterns, students can discuss why that might be.
- Next, the students will rewrite the sentence using a different clause pattern.
- Finally, the students will discuss the effect of the change: what meanings were lost or added?
- As this activity is repeated, a larger inventory of patterns is

built up, and students have more options for the identification and rewriting activities.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- gain access to the resources for explicit metalinguistic discussion of clause structure,
- recognize that a language repertoire that includes prototypical clause patterns and divergent options is a communicative asset,
- develop the agency to decide whether a prototypical clause pattern is an appropriate option or to opt for less prototypical patterns.

Learning Accommodations

- Early instances of this activity can be done as a group to scaffold and set expectations.
- Students can work independently or in groups.
- Instructors can choose the level of metalinguistic detail that is appropriate to the students' experience and course goals.

This activity can be used with literary and expressive texts to generate close-reading analyses or with academic texts to suggest models for the students' own writing. It can be completed individually, in small groups, or during a whole class discussion.

Works Cited

Gegg-Harrison, Whitney. "Encouraging Playful, Productive Curiosity About Language in the Writing Classroom."

Journal of Teaching Writing, vol. 36, no. 1, 2021, pp. 159–85.

Kolln, Martha, and Loretta Gray. *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*. 6th ed., Longman, 2010.

Shapiro, Shawna. “Unpacking the ‘C’ in CLA: Enacting Our Commitment to Linguistic Access, Asset, and Agency.” *Journal of Multilingual Theories and Practices*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jmtp-2-Shapiro>.

Appendix: Sentence Frame Activity

Here is an example of a course text and a basic pattern inventory, which I introduce one pattern at a time.

For instance, we can introduce the Transitive Verb Pattern by looking at the opening clause: “People evolve a language. . . .” We can compare that to an Intransitive Verb version: “A language evolves . . .” and discuss how that might change the meaning of the sentence.

Reading Excerpt (Baldwin, James “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?”)

People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they are submerged.) A Frenchman living in Paris speaks a subtly and crucially different language from that of the man living in Marseilles; neither sounds very much like a man living in Quebec; and they would all have great difficulty in apprehending what the man from Guadeloupe, or Martinique, is saying, to say nothing of the man from Senegal--although the “common” language of all these areas is French. But each has paid, and is paying, a different price for this “common” language, in which, as it turns out, they are not saying, and cannot be saying, the same things: They each have very different realities to articulate, or control.

Clause Patterns

Adapted from Kolln and Gray (Chapter 2)

The *be* Patterns

- SUBJECT + *be* + ADVERBIAL
- SUBJECT + *be* + SUBJECT COMPLEMENT

The Linking Verb Pattern

- SUBJECT + LINKING VERB + SUBJECT
COMPLEMENT

The Intransitive Verb Pattern

- SUBJECT + INTRANSITIVE VERB

The Transitive Verb Pattern

- SUBJECT + TRANSITIVE VERB + OBJECT

The Transitive Verb Pattern (2 Complements)

- SUBJECT + TRANSITIVE VERB + INDIRECT
OBJECT + DIRECT OBJECT