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THE **SECOND** IN A SERIES OF EXERCISES ON SENTENCE FLUENCY

NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES

BY DAVID PATES

SENTENCE STRUCTURE MAKES COMPREHENSION EASY

Section editors, reporters and copy editors make different judgments about the “newsworthiness” of a story before it is published. The section editor expects headlines and story content that appeal to an audience who will buy the publication or will stay tuned to audio and visual media. Reporters are keen about descriptive, accurate information concerning who, what, when, where, why and how. Copy editors — and on modern publications everyone on the maestro team — insist on a smooth read from the lead-in to the final paragraph. The goal is always to connect the details with newsworthy integrity — that means linking ideas with words that enable readers to comprehend the step-by-step relationships.

Journalistic “newsworthiness” does not end here, of course. News writers apply their knowledge and wisdom in forming “newsworthy” English sentences with purposeful nouns, verbs, adjectives, clauses and phrases that actively and persuasively engage readers, unconsciously creating desire to “keep on reading.”

PREVIEW ACTIVITY

From the local daily paper, select the opening two or three sentences of two stories. Instruct students to list every detail concerning who, what, when, where, why and how. Then discuss which story seems more informative and interesting? Discuss reasons for their conclusions.

PHRASES CARRY THE INFORMATION LOAD IN SENTENCES

Typically, journalists do not think about the act of writing the news this way: I think that I shall now type 10 to 12 sentences about last night’s basketball game. Each one will have a subject and a predicate. We won 75-72, and three players fouled out before the end of the game. One elderly person had a heart attack but did not die. I will punctuate my independent and subordinate clauses appropriately.

Instead, they reconstruct a series of facts (information) in their minds and intuitively construct a story line of clauses and phrases that are organized logically. When they analyze their sentences, they realize that prepositional phrases carry a heavy load of defining detail. Writers automatically place the details about the important nouns and verbs in prepositional phrases to enhance, to expand and to explain the concept being described.

If the phrase modifies a noun, the prepositional phrase is adjectival. If it modifies a verb, it is adverbial.

Individual prepositions are “form” words. They cannot breathe alone, meaning they always precede a noun (“object”). Furthermore, they function as “head” words in a word group that specifies, modifies or “completes” a main concept expressed about other clauses or phrases in the sentence. For example, in the sentence: “I am frustrated because my computer software is completely out of date,” the prepositional word group is completely out of date. In this phrase, completely out modifies the “head” word of, and date functions as the complement (“completing” the information). The adjectival word group clearly modifies the noun software. ▼

NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

EXERCISE 1: USING PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

DIRECTIONS

Step 1

Read the following "facts" recorded by the writer in her research. Then, independently or in small groups, create copy with prepositional phrases as a grammatical feature in your sentences.

Researched Facts

- A report says that Web 2.0 negatively affects student learning today.
- The Internet makes today's students impatient about properly evaluating Web-based information and providing appropriate attribution.
- Today's students tend to be "casual" about these academic practices.
- An academic committee chaired by Sir David Melville, former vice chancellor at the University of Kent (England), holds "strong reservations" (his words) about student abilities to be critical about information found on the Internet.
- Somebody should take the report as a warning.

Your version of the story

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins or other markings on the paper.

NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

EXERCISE 1: USING PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Step 2

In the author's version of the story, mark phrases in the unmarked version below, using brackets and parentheses to delineate the prepositional phrases. Proceed with the following three activities:

1. Compare your student-written sentences based on "facts" with Attwood's version below. Analyze how details embedded in prepositional clusters "tighten up" the logical sequence of a concept. Note how controlling "wordiness" allows a writer to remove stringy, rambling sentences.
2. On the version below, put a single line under all nouns and a double line under all verbs. Using an arrow, point each prepositional element back to the noun or to the verb it refers to ("modifies"). The goal is to comprehend and to demonstrate adjectival and adverbial prepositional phrases.
3. Discuss how this unfolding of clustered detail keeps readers connected to the story.

PUBLISHED SENTENCES

SOURCE: *The Times Higher Education*, May 15, 2009

By Rebecca Attwood, deputy news editor

Unmarked

Report issues warning over impact of Web 2.0 on teaching and learning, writes Rebecca Attwood.

The evolution of the Internet has produced a generation of students with "a preference for quick answers" and a "casual" approach to the evaluation and attribution of information, an inquiry has found.

Academic leaders who spoke to the committee, which was led by Sir David Melville, the former vice chancellor of the University of Kent (England), expressed "strong reservations" about students' ability to critically evaluate information from the Web.

NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

EXERCISE 2: SEQUENCING DETAILS

DIRECTIONS:

Step 1:

Read the published text below, details about golf pro Tiger Woods that present the sports writer's analysis during a two-year period.

- Working in small groups, reconstruct the details in complete sentences. Use prepositional phrases that support a main subject and predicate. Discuss the logical sequence of detailed ideas that modify a main concept in the sentence.
- After the first step is complete, read the original sentences published by Patrick Collins on the next handout. In small groups, read aloud the original piece. Then compare your version of the facts with Collins' arrangement of prepositions in a sentence.

Facts:

- Fans can understand this complex "whole" man by observing small, apparently inconsequential snapshots.
- They can watch him practice putting for the British Open at St. Andrews, Scotland.
- People queued three deep to do this early in the morning.
- It was as interesting to see him react to the flattery of his gallery watchers as it was to watch his own reaction to the elegance of his six-stroke victory.
- The profile begins in his millennium appearance at the Open in St. Andrews.
- In 2002, he still showed grace though he was eliminated from contention by bad weather.
- The Muirfield summer storm was thunderous and icy.
- Tiger Woods shot 81 and smiled. He did not blame the weather.
- All of Scotland was impressed when he said, "I should have found a way to play through it."

Your version of the story

NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

EXERCISE 2: SEQUENCING DETAILS

PUBLISHED SENTENCES

SOURCE: *Daily Mail Online*, London, Saturday, July 25, 2009

By Patrick Collins, sports writer / columnist

Unmarked

Again, the whole man may be glimpsed from inconsequential cameos. I recall the millennium (British) Open at St. Andrews (Scotland); not only the majesty of his six-stroke victory but also the way in which he reacted to the early morning galleries who queued three deep to watch him practice his putting. He said he was flattered that they should take such an interest, and he actually sounded as if he meant it.

His grace was still more in evidence two years later, when he was simply blown out of contention by the thunderous wind and icy rain of a Muirfield summer afternoon. Tiger shot 81, smiled through it all and flatly refused to blame the weather.

“I should have found a way to play through it,” he said while Scotland fell at his feet.

Step 2:

- a. Circle or underline nouns, adjectives and verbs (words and phrases) that reflect an “op-ed” style of writing about a famous public figure — clues to a personal point of view.
- b. *Advanced editing*: Discuss this question: How do these two pieces, one about Web-based research and one about Tiger Woods, compare as stories reflecting the journalist’s point of view? How do clear connections, which rely on prepositional phrases, make both accounts easier to comprehend? What examples demonstrate the clarity?

NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

EXERCISE 3: LEARNING FROM PROFESSIONALS

DIRECTIONS:

The following news item from the Asheville (N.C.) *Citizen-Times* employs the prepositions in the list on the left — numbers indicate how many times the preposition is used in the article. In the blank spaces of the text printed below, fill in the preposition you presume the writer employed. Choices do not include infinitive constructions, which require a preposition plus a verb. Then, in small groups, discuss variations anyone made as you compare copies of the original article.

Advanced editing: Choose sentences in which prepositional phrases are especially strong in developing the logic and the focus of ideas for readers. Discuss how the writer's newsworthy sentences made details easy to comprehend.

"Asheville Police Department creates downtown unit"

By Clarke Morrison, Citizen Times.com, Aug. 12, 2009

Prepositions in the published text

- about (1)
- at (2)
- by (1)
- for (5)
- from (4)
- in (8)
- of (6)
- on (4)
- over (1)
- to (6)
- with (3)

City police have dedicated eight officers ____ a new unit that will patrol downtown streets, responding ____ pleas ____ merchants and an increase ____ calls ____ service.

The officers will cruise central city streets ____ foot, ____ bicycles and ____ small electric vehicles ____ an effort to make them more accessible.

Almost 20 percent ____ the agency's calls ____ service and workload occur ____ the Central Business District, Chief Bill Hogan said.

"This is another way to address that call demand," he said, "Having eight dedicated officers ____ a fulltime focus ____ this area will allow us to develop and foster relationships ____ merchants as well as ____ the people who work, live and visit downtown ____ a regular basis."

Downtown business operators have been clamoring ____ a greater police presence, said Byron Greiner, who works ____ Keller Williams Realty ____ the corner ____ Asheland and Hilliard avenues.

"We would like to see more visibility ____ police ____ the downtown area to better control crime," said Greiner, president ____ the Asheville Downtown Association. "It's all ____ visibility when it comes ____ police. It's going to put dedicated people ____ areas where they are needed."

Police responded ____ 2,184 calls ____ service downtown ____ the first six months ____ this year, up ____ 1,530 calls ____ the last six months of 2007, when officers first started keeping the statistics, said APD spokeswoman Melissa Williams. The figures do not include calls initiated ____ police. ____ the same time frames, the number ____ citations ____ things like panhandling and being drunk and disruptive increased ____ 443 ____ 526 while arrests were up ____ 268 ____ 271.

NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE KEYS

EXERCISE 1: USING PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Marked text

Report issues warning [**over** impact (**of** Web 2.0) (**on** teaching and learning)], writes Rebecca Attwood.

The evolution [**of** the Internet] has produced a generation [**of** students (**with** “a preference) (**for** quick answers”)] and a “casual” approach [**to** the evaluation and attribution (of information)], an inquiry has found.

Academics who spoke [**to** the committee], which was led by Sir David Melville, the former vice chancellor [**of** the University (**of** Kent)], expressed “strong reservations” [about students’ ability (**to** critically evaluate information) (**from** the Web)].

EXERCISE 2: SEQUENCING DETAILS

Marked text

Again, the whole man may be glimpsed (**from** inconsequential cameos). I recall the millennium Open (**at** St. Andrews); not only the majesty (**of** his six-stroke victory) but also the way (**in** which he reacted) (**to** the early morning galleries who queued three deep) to watch him practice his putting. He said he was flattered that they should take such an interest and he actually sounded as if he meant it.

His grace was still more in evidence two years later, when he was simply blown [(**out** of contention) (**by** the thunderous wind and icy rain) (**of** a Muirfield summer afternoon).] Tiger shot 81, smiled (**through** it all) and flatly refused to blame the weather.

“I should have found a way to play through it,” he said while Scotland fell (**at** his feet).

EXERCISE 3: LEARNING FROM PROFESSIONALS

Text as published: “Asheville Police Department creates downtown unit”

City police have dedicated eight officers **to** a new unit that will patrol downtown streets, responding **to** pleas **from** merchants and an increase **in** calls **for** service.

The officers will cruise central city streets **on** foot, **on** bicycles and **in** small electric vehicles **in** an effort to make them more accessible.

Almost 20 percent **of** the agency’s calls **for** service and workload occur **in** the Central Business District, Chief Bill Hogan said.

“This is another way to address that call demand,” he said, “Having eight dedicated officers **with** a fulltime focus **on** this area will allow us to develop and foster relationships **with** merchants as well as **with** the people who work, live and visit downtown **on** a regular basis.”

Downtown business operators have been clamoring **for** a greater police presence, said Byron Greiner, who works **at** Keller Williams Realty **at** the corner **of** Asheland and Hilliard avenues.

“We would like to see more visibility **of** police **in** the downtown area to better control crime,” said Greiner, president **of** the Asheville Downtown Association. “It’s all **about** visibility when it comes **to** police. It’s going to put dedicated people **in** areas where they are needed.”

Police responded **to** 2,184 calls **for** service downtown **in** the first six months **of** this year, up **from** 1,530 calls **in** the last six months of 2007, when officers first started keeping the statistics, said APD spokeswoman Melissa Williams. The figures do not include calls initiated **by** police. **Over** the same time frames, the number **of** citations **for** things like panhandling and being drunk and disruptive increased **from** 443 **to** 526 while arrests were up **from** 268 **to** 271.