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The Writer's Mixing Desk

Elen Caldecott

A metaphor for reading and writing prose.

Lightbulb moments in my classroom are what sustain me as a teacher. I love seeing new vistas of understanding open up before my students. So, in a time when we may all need a little more sustenance than usual, I want to share a writing exercise with you which has led to a veritable Blackpool Illuminations of lightbulb moments for my students.

This exercise grew up in response to the struggle I often see when students are first asked to 'read like a writer'. They don't know where to begin and often reach for the more familiar language of English Literature lessons: they will spot developing themes or recurring images. In a real panic, they might reach for the language of Amazon-review criticism: "I like/don't like this". Neither approach helps improve their writing by any noticeable degree.

It seemed to me that students aren't sure at which scale to start their close reading. Should they talk about the whole piece? A scene? A word choice? Something else? In the previous edition of *Writing in Education*, Ronnie Scott (Michael et al. 2020: 110) talked about the importance of sentences as a discrete unit for copyediting, "there are only sentences, there is no final work". We see a similar case made by writer Joe Moran (2018: 7) who dedicated a whole book to the sentence: "Sentences are my core output, the little widgets I make in my workshop of words". Sentences, then, are a useful unit for writers and editors. I would suggest that they are the right scale for close readers too. In my classroom, I ask students to read sentences like writers.

This is where the 'Mixing Desk' exercise comes in. It is a way to encourage students to examine a text at sentence level and really ask themselves what each unit is about and why.

To explain the exercise properly, I first need to introduce the metaphor. A mixing desk is, as we know, a way for a sound engineer to raise or lower the volume of a particular channel of sound in order to create a harmonious piece of music. With this metaphor, I imagine that a harmonious piece of prose is created by mixing together the right types of sentence. The 'types' of sentence (the channels) are: description, action, dialogue, interiority and exposition (see figure).

Any information can be conveyed by any type of sentence.

For example, consider the information, 'Claire is excited about a dance performance she's giving'; this is the information that the writer wishes to convey to the reader. The writer may choose any type of sentence to convey the information:

Description: She hung the dress above her shoes on the peg. The skirt was a frosting of feathers, white and cream. So many feathers that would fly out in a cloud around her in just a few hours.

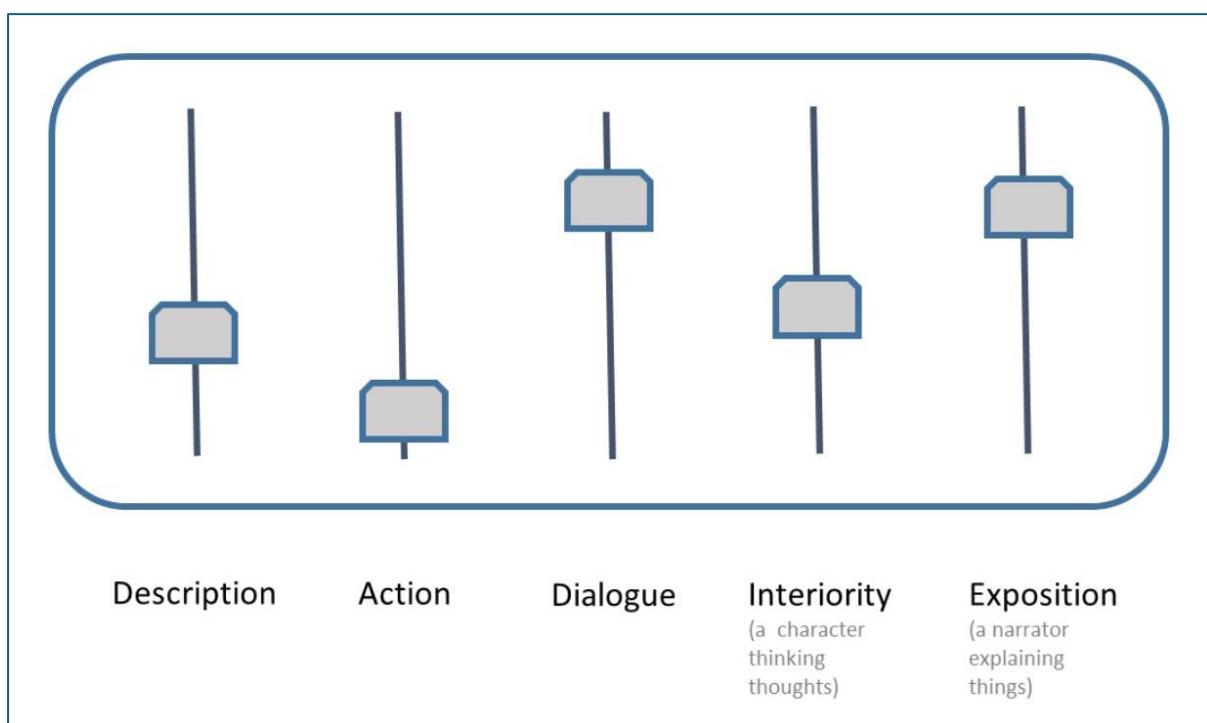
Action: She hugged herself, bouncing on the soles of her feet at the side of the stage, anticipation fizzing every nerve.

Dialogue: 'I feel like there are butterflies, and crickets, and a whole field of bugs bouncing in my belly,' Claire told Monika.

Interiority: There was no feeling like it in the world, she thought, no feeling like stepping out on stage with every eye in the house ready to be entranced.

Exposition: Claire was so excited to be dancing on stage in front of everyone.

Some of the sentences above are better at presenting the information clearly and concisely (action and exposition); others are better at conveying voice or emotion (description, interiority). There isn't necessarily one type of sentence which is inherently better at conveying the information than any other. They each have strengths and weaknesses. Which the writer finally chooses will be dependent on the harmony they are trying to achieve in their prose.



Once the students have been introduced to the Writer's Mixing Desk, I then ask them to spot these types of sentences in an extract from a novel or two. Often, I will choose extracts from both a crime novel and a piece of literary fiction. Students are invited to first identify a sentence's type, then underline each type in different coloured pencils: perhaps green pencils for all the dialogue; pink pencils for all the descriptive sentences etc.

Now, there is no right answer when completing this exercise (though there are wrong answers; I once discovered that a student had no conception of what interiority was and this exercise usefully revealed that gap in his education). When completing the task, some students will choose to foreground a striking image over the fact that is a character's thought, so will label the sentence 'description', whereas others will label the same sentence 'interiority'. The purpose is not to create identical rainbows with our colouring pencils. Rather the purpose of the exercise is to encourage students to really see the sentences, and to critically examine how a writer has constructed their 'widgets'.

There are other useful conversations which tend to arise from completing this exercise. For example, students are likely to have highlighted lots of action and dialogue in crime fiction, which then encourages them to think about genre conventions. In literary fiction, they might have appreciated the role of exposition or interiority in creating the narrator's voice. In both extracts, they are likely to ask how the text would change if the writer had used a different channel to convey the information; thus engaging with what Philip Pullman (2017: 25) calls the 'phase space' of the unwritten sentence, the "ghosts of the sentences I could have written at that point, but chose not to."

And from there, the lightbulbs start to switch on thick and fast. Students come to see how contingent a published piece might be. They realise any writer, no matter how august or celebrated, is faced with a whole range of choices when they sit down to write. This is often a very liberating realization. Students' editorial judgements become more sound as they are able to conceptualize why one type of sentence might be preferred over another. They find new ways to talk about the pieces they read and provide better feedback as a result.

One student told me that this exercise had helped her to understand how, in a polished piece, there should be a sense that "each sentence had a strong sense of purpose". Another student was encouraged to greater ambition, saying, "I'm definitely going to go through some of my work to see how I've constructed my sentences...to see if I can create an effect I hadn't even thought about!". These responses demonstrate that by looking closely at the sentence-level, identifying the 'types' of sentence, and thinking critically about what they discover, students are strengthening their ability to 'read like writers'. And hopefully to write like writers too.

References

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Author Bio

Dr Elen Caldecott is a writer for children and young people. Her novels are published by Andersen, Bloomsbury and Hodder. Her most recent title The Short Knife was completed as part of her practice-led PhD.

It explores the opportunity to use multiple languages in texts for young readers. She teaches creative writing at Cardiff University and Bath Spa University.