How to Do Things with Incoherence

Peter Wayne Moe & Kyle Winkler

To cite this article: Peter Wayne Moe & Kyle Winkler (2019) How to Do Things with Incoherence, Rhetoric Review, 38:2, 219-231, DOI: 10.1080/07350198.2019.1582238

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2019.1582238

Published online: 03 Apr 2019.
How to Do Things with Incoherence

When students write incoherent sentences, it is common—instinctive, even—for a teacher to translate those sentences, to make them conform to the expectations of readers wanting clarity, or to banish them altogether. In this article, we consider how incoherence might instead be a site of possibility, of invention, of nuance.

What might we, as teachers, do with sentences like the following, written by a student in response to an essay by Sherry Turkle on our overreliance (addiction, perhaps) to smartphones?

That “we have learned the habit of cleaning them up with technology,” she states this in a manner that makes technology a negative aspect of human relationships and directs the reader towards her goal of persuasion.

The student begins with a that-phrase quoting Turkle, pauses, then starts the sentence a second time with “she states this.” “This” points back to the “that” opening the sentence. To start a sentence then start it a second time, the second go-around referencing the first—this is a sentence that calls attention to itself as a sentence, that, as Joseph Harris says, makes us “aware of [the] writing as writing” (160). As Mina Shaughnessy would say, the student has “shift[ed] the reader’s attention from where he is going (content) to how he is getting there (code)” (12). For Shaughnessy, this shift occurs because of error, but for this student, it occurs because the sentence does something unconventional, something perhaps unclear, something perhaps artful.

And then there is the end of the sentence: “[Turkle] directs the reader towards her goal of persuasion.” There is no confusion in the syntax here. Turkle directs the reader to go somewhere. But the words themselves—what does it mean to “direct the reader towards her goal of persuasion”? Can someone be directed toward persuasion? Students often write sentences like this. Here’s another, from a different student: “All school’s obligations should testify against grade inflation.” This sentence seems to want to say that schools should fight grade inflation. But a school’s obligation should testify against it? Another sentence, from the same paper: “The eager step to college was especially asserted onto me due to my strong, hardworking performance.” What does it mean to assert something onto someone else? These sentences aren’t necessarily
“incorrect,” or even “bad,” but they use words in ways we are not used to, in ways that call attention to the words and the sentences they make.

One response to such sentences would be to say they are unclear and should be revised toward clarity. We’re not sure that’s the best response. We’re part of a small band of writing teachers pushing against clarity. We say a small band; in Helen Sword’s survey of one hundred style guides, she found only two that “explicitly argue against” clarity (Stylish 27). And yet, despite its dominance, clarity has long been questioned by (at least some) writing teachers. During what Paul Butler calls “The Golden Age of Style”—the 1960s-80s, when sentence-combining, imitation exercises, and Francis Christensen’s generative rhetoric dominated the field—even then, clarity met resistance (Butler 7; Connors). Winston Weathers and Richard Lanham each wrote textbooks lambasting it, and Richard Ohmann took to task Strunk and White’s dictum to “Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language.” More recently, Eric Hayot has warmly embraced jargon-laden, dense, difficult academic writing, while Nora Bacon, in The Well-Crafted Sentence, suggests writers need not perform dutifully in the plain style. She advocates “an experimental, even playful attitude toward language,” a call that echoes Lanham’s desire not for clarity but “a self-conscious pleasure in words” and one in-line with the pedagogy of Chris Holcomb and M. Jimmie Killingsworth’s Performing Prose (Bacon 10, 18).

Nearly a decade ago, Ian Barnard called attention to the ideological implications of clarity, suggesting a drive toward it is often aligned with an anti-intellectualist critique of theory. He notes that students are quick to “judge all writing . . . based on how easy it is to read.” He continues: “They may use their experiences of finding a text difficult to read as reason to dismiss or criticize the text, rather than to see this difficulty as exposing their own deficiencies or as presenting a productive intellectual challenge to them as readers and writers” (443). Though this sentence is written about students, can it be said of teachers as well? How often do we, as teachers, criticize student writing when it is difficult to read? And might that dismissal expose—difficult as this is to admit—something of our own deficiencies as teachers, our own unwillingness (or inability) to engage incoherence?

When a teacher writes “unclear” next to a student sentence, the teacher is, in effect, saying: “This isn’t what you mean,” along with “You don’t know how to use language,” or “You don’t know how to use language like me,” or, most likely, “You don’t know how to use language in and for the academy.” To some extent, these responses are true. These are, after all, students learning to write. But we wonder how else we might respond in ways more pedagogically productive than circling the sentence, writing “awk” in the margin, and moving on. We want to think instead about incoherence as an invitation rather than an obstacle, as a source of pleasure, even. We know this is “rhetorically risky in a culture where ‘clarity’ is the de facto prose style” (Kreuter). Future employers expect our graduates to be able to write clear sentences. And yet, we want to propose another way to read incoherence, one that dwells inside it rather than merely seeking to eradicate it from student prose. We want to think of incoherence as a topos, making the most of everything available, and seemingly unavailable, in a writer’s repertoire. For if our students are to learn how their sentences move on the page, if they are to learn how they might attend to the work of those sentences, then they, too, need to learn how to read their own incoherence.

Richard Lanham, in his Anti-Textbook, reminds us: “Obviously, there can be no single verbal pattern that can be called ‘clear.’ All depends on context—social, historical, attitudinal” (33).
T. R. Johnson echoes him: “‘[C]larity,’ of course, is a well-worn but rather misleading metaphor: language is never a transparent window into some extra-linguistic reality” (Rhetoric 24). Sword agrees, also drawing on a window metaphor: “I encourage my students to think about the difference between a stained-glass window, which calls attention to its own colours and patterns, and a clear glass picture window, which aims not to get in the way of the view beyond” (Email). Sword’s metaphor is helpful in recognizing that different windows have different purposes, and we don’t always want a clear window. And so, poet Terrance Hayes can say “I want my writing to be clear but not obvious,” and for himself, as the poet within those poems, to be “transparent but not invisible.” Strunk and White, those bastions of conservatism in prose style, can be read in-line with Hayes: “Even to a writer who is being intentionally obscure or wild of tongue we can say ‘Be obscure clearly! Be wild of tongue in a way we can understand!’” (79). Holcomb and Killingsworth say much the same, telling students that while clear prose makes certain moves that enhance its readability, “the best writers . . . deviate in ways that make their work unique and rhetorically engaging” (48).

So there is a correct way—or, rather, a rhetorically advantageous way—to be unclear, and, there is value to writing that is opaque. But note the somewhat pejorative tone of “opaque.” Is there any way to describe unclear writing without coming off as critical of it? Dense, difficult, convoluted, obtuse—that such a word is hard to find points to how entrenched clarity is as a value for writing. Anything deviating (another pejorative word) from it falls under suspicion. And yet, when such writing is written by people deemed capable (or authorized) to do so (people like poets and professors), it is read generously. And so we see what Barnard describes: “There is often a contradiction between the writing we enjoy reading—and expect our students to develop a taste for—and the writing we insist students produce” (443). Shaughnessy notes the same: “Great writers” can get away with unconventional, dense prose because readers are willing to expend the energy to make sense of it; “it would be foolhardy,” though, for the basic writer to expect that level of generosity from her readers (12). This is because, as Joseph Williams showed, readers find error when expecting to find it.

Consider how Harris describes the prose of William E. Coles, Jr. Harris reads Coles as having plain sentences, sentences that seem at first glance to say what they mean but then, through their construction, call that meaning into question. He explains:

In reading Coles, I find myself continually circling back in order to move forward, rethinking my place in the text, checking again to see how a certain word was used a line or sentence or paragraph before. His writing seems engineered to force a kind of rereading—or at least a very slow and close reading—from the start. His prose resists glossing; what it says seems peculiarly tied to the precise form of its saying. To use one of his most characteristic phrasings, I like how Coles makes me aware of his writing as writing—as the tracing of the particular choices of a particular writer. (159-60)

This is not something Composition asks of student writing. More often students are told to be unambiguous, for prose to be accessible, reader-friendly. That is how we were taught to write, and even as we admire Coles’s sentences—we wish what Harris says of Coles’s prose could be said of our own—we are not sure what it means to, or how we would, write a sentence like Coles, to write a sentence that moves as his do, to write a sentence that (as Bruce Horner says of Coles’s prose) “resist[s] commodification,” that resists gloss, that invites slow and careful reading, and that
rewards rereading even as rereading may not lead toward any definitive sense of what the sentence says (193).

In The Plural I: Coles claims: “When it comes to the teaching of art, what teaches finally is style. Learning, the other end of the activity, would seem connected with a stylistic response to style” (1). As a stylistic response to style, we want to teach sentences that come from the aesthetic Harris describes, sentences that work against themselves as a way of doing the work they must do. As teachers, we are inclined to be more generous with our students’ sentences, sentences like this, from another student in one of our classes: “This method is the way by which the image of a state (or country or any other grouping) persists.” Line-breaking the sentence helps to see what’s going on:

This method
is the way
by which
the image of a state
(or country or any other grouping)
persists.²

The subject—“image”—is buried. The verb is last. And the cluttered intro phrase “This method is the way by which” scuttles the beginning. Why? Because students often believe that they must sound like they’re saying Big Things in a Big Way to be Smart. Everything idiosyncratic and interesting about language use goes right out the door when we “translate” sentences like these. (We could easily suggest a revision that reads: “The state’s, country’s, or county’s image persists by this method.”) But these seeming incoherencies, if read generously, are moments of nuance. They can be invitations into considering how syntax might enable a certain kind of thought, a certain method, even. To translate them is to flatten them. We might ask this student, then, what is gained when the sentence is written this way—what work it does on the page, how it constructs meaning, how it situates the writer within a discourse, and how that work would change if revised. How, for instance, “method” changes if moved from the front to the rear of the sentence. Not when moved, but if, leaving open the possibility that this incoherent sentence might have value as it is.

§

Taking a hatchet to contemporary Composition, Geoffrey Sirc’s English Composition as a Happening bemoans what the field would fuzzily refer to as clarity. He senses “a disenchantment” in Composition: “What should be the central space for intellectual inquiry in the academy has become further identified as either a service course designed to further the goals of other academic units or a cultural-studies space in which to investigate identity politics” (24). He longs for something Lanham-esque. Pleasure-in-words. Something poetic, artful, unresolved. He blames the lack of interest in aesthetics and style on Composition’s “self-tormented quest for disciplinary stature” which has caused a “narrowing of the bandwidth of what used to pass for composition” (24). Composition, then, falls away from “expressivist or art-writing,” and so Sirc wants to reclaim and fold into the field the avant-garde and those who align with the 1960s idea of Happenings (25). These (mostly visual) artists are Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, and Abstract Expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. His self-described aim with this is to “dissolve,” be “generic,” and instead of “making,” he wants “choosing” (65).
For an example of a writer who exemplifies this kind of full-immersion into pleasure-in-words, we turn to Gertrude Stein. Not just because she’s the sine qua non of Far Out Experimental Writing, nor because she bucks trends of what most English departments accept as “correct.” Rather, we turn to her because she’s dense. Not difficult—dense. We’ve borrowed this dichotomy from literary critic Richard Poirier, who introduces the idea this way: “By ‘density’ I mean to describe a kind of writing which gives, or so it likes to pretend, a fairly direct access to pleasure, but which becomes, on a longer acquaintance, rather strange and imponderable” (Renewal 130). All the student examples we present fit the ambit of “strange and imponderable” because we find they’re working against (and within) syntax, punctuation, or vocabulary. Their density intrigues the reader (at least, these two readers) and upsets expectations for clarity and coherence, setting up subsequent moments of rhetorical productivity.

Philip Smith suggests we try out Gertrude Stein as a vehicle, in an article aptly titled, “How to Write Like Gertrude Stein”:

An effective pedagogy of writing must work at all levels of writing proficiency, and that means providing language experiences that test the construing faculties of the reader as a way of strengthening the capacities of the mind to conceptualize through language. That explore meaning relations as well as meaning. That are calisthenic for the reader and aim at reflexivity or even opacity of style, rather than transparency. (230)

It is a slipping out of, or sloughing off of, the collocations of the English language that Stein puts into practice. Students, too, slip out of familiar syntactic arrangements, but in Stein’s writing “metaphorical and conceptual significance is derived from special attention to etymological roots and to subtle ambiguities” (Franken 293). According to Poirier, Gertrude Stein offers a struggle against “fate” in the “organization” of language and finds “evidence of cultural imposition in syntax” (Poetry 40). Her compositional method questions typical sentence structures, specifically those that

give precedence to substantives, while transitives, including prepositions, conjunctions, and adverbs, merely speed the way toward nouns, more or less expending themselves in the process. Superfluity, itself an abstract noun, points to a human desire to go beyond these nouns, abstractions, concepts that serve the function of homes or still points, making us their dependents. (40)

Spilling over the boundaries of the sentence, asking her transitives (for example “and,” “for,” “about,” “through”) to speed beyond fixed meanings—Stein creates a compelling alternative to traditional writing instruction. Sharon Kirsch speaks to this alternative rhetoric. In *Gertrude Stein and the Reinvention of Rhetoric*, Kirsch states that “Stein’s rhetorical reinventions examine assumptions about clarity and communication, and remain deeply invested in ornament, style, and arrangement, though not at the expense of a poetics of invention” (15).

This description could very well be the brief for writing course syllabi in either of our courses. While we are invested, and agree, that reading student writing often engages different protocols than those used to read Stein, we again want to elaborate how the student essay generates *a particular rhetoric*, one that may unknowingly “examine assumptions about clarity and
communication.” As an element of this particular rhetoric, the density we’ve identified in student writing can be sharpened and put into relief by the density of Stein. The following is a significant selection from Stein’s biographical essay on Henri Matisse:

There were very many wanting to be doing what he was doing that is to be one clearly expressing something. He was certainly a great man, any one could be really certain of this thing, every one could be certain of this thing. There were very many who were wanting to be ones doing what he was doing that is to be ones clearly expressing something and then very many of them were not wanting to be being ones doing that thing, that is clearly expressing something, they wanted to be ones expressing something being struggling, something being going to be some other thing, something being going to be something some one sometime would be clearly expressing and that would be something that would be a thing then that would then be greatly expressing some other thing than that thing, certainly very many were then not wanting to be doing what this one was doing clearly expressing something and some of them had been ones wanting to be doing that thing wanting to be ones clearly expressing something. Some were wanting to be ones doing what this one was doing wanted to be ones clearly expressing something. Some of such of them were ones certainly clearly expressing something, that was in them a thing not really interesting then any other one. Some of such of them went on being all their living ones wanting to be clearly expressing something and some of them were clearly expressing something. (331)

With regard to Poirier’s concern about substantive and transitive words, let’s take Stein’s first sentence. Out of twenty words, nearly half (nine) are verbs or forms of verbs, six are pronouns (“many,” “what,” “he,” “that,” “one,” and “something”), and three are adverbs. We don’t have to laboriously scrutinize the entire paragraph to see that this one sentence is used as the palette for the rest of the sentences that follow. They are variations upon a theme. In fact, we could state first, that what instigates irritation in a reader of these sentences is likely a lack of classical punctuation, and second, it’s the rigoroussness of her repetition; that is, her exact, and exacting, superfluous repetition. But it is her repetition that orders the piece.4 (Each sentence starts as a description of certain people doing something. For example: “There were;” “He was,” “There were,” “Some were,” “Some of such of them,” “Some of such of them.”) The sentences operate like Russian nesting dolls, meticulously shading out groups and motivations. Below we’ve broken the lines of the last three sentences (not poetically per se) as a way to show the echoing phrases and the different types of declarative statements Stein makes.

Some were wanting to be ones doing what this one was doing
wanted to be ones clearly expressing something.
Some of such of them were ones certainly clearly expressing something,
that was in them a thing not really interesting then any other one.
Some of such of them went on being all their living
ones wanting to be clearly expressing something
and some of them were clearly expressing something.
These are three totally separate groups of people. (a) People who wanted to express clearly. Then (b) within that group, there were people "certainly" expressing clearly but nothing they expressed was interesting. Notice at the end of this sentence Stein plays with the usual way we read then/than. Natural inclination drives a reader to read it as "than any other one," but since it's "then any other one" we're forced to take it as something like, "therefore, any other one . . ." The implication being that those artists might as well have chosen "any other one" thing to express. (Thus, a lack of "being all their living"). And (c) we step back in the last line and see the difference between those wanting to be expressing and those who were.

This is not insignificant. Hers are ontological statements. But the import of these can be lost in Stein's fugue-like composing process. Reading this excerpt, we imagine a classroom of students, some of such of them wanting to express something and the others who actually are. In other words, Stein writes, there are artists who desire, and there are those who bring their desire to action. These sentences are, as we said at the beginning, sentences that seem at first glance to mean what they say but then, through their construction, call that meaning into question. In a way, one could say her density arrives from her total arid plainness or perhaps her radical rhetoric, an overkill of clarity.

§

Consider the following, from Stacey Waite's dissertation Teaching Queer: Possibilities for Writing, Reading, and Knowing. Midway through the term, a student notices that Judith Butler, whom they've been reading, has won an award for bad writing. Another student pulls up the award-winning sentence on her phone, and Waite transcribes it to the board. This is the sentence, weighing in at ninety-four words:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (Butler 13, qtd. in Waite 177)

Looking at the sentence, Waite "decide[s] it's a mistake to worry about what the passage means. It's a grammar lesson, I tell myself, but don't say to them. I'm a poet, I tell myself, I can do this" (177). The key to reading this sentence is not unpacking its theory but understanding it as a sentence. Waite tells the class that they will take the sentence in "moves," and she puts slash marks into the sentence, "like I would in poetry," her method akin to ours in this paper, the poetic an avenue into incoherence. Butler's sentence becomes this:

The move from a structuralist account/in which capital is understood to structure social relations/in relatively homologous ways/to a view of hegemony/in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation/brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure/and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory/that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects/to one in
which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure/inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony/as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (178)

Waite asks why this sentence is so difficult to read. One response would be that the sentence won its award because it is a “genre violation” (Giltrow 210). Within Butler’s “Further Reflections on the Conversations of Our Time,” the sentence works; excised from that setting, the sentence becomes unreadable, illegible, inaccessible, laughable, even, for how it moves and what it says. Any sentence would be if put into the right (or wrong) context.

But Waite’s students see it not as a matter of context but of grammar. One says, “it’s like it has parentheses missing” and Waite invites her to add them in. The sentence now reads:

The move from a structuralist account (in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways) to a view of hegemony (in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation) brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory (that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects) to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony (as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power). (178)

The sentence now legible—grammatically, at least; it is easy to see the moves it makes—the class discusses difficulty. One student asks, “I mean, if you could say it in an easier way, why wouldn’t you?” (179). This student, it seems, has been taught, and has internalized, the idea that prose should be Clear, that he should be using Definite, Specific, Concrete language. Waite pushes back, inviting the class to consider how difficulty “obscures and illuminates meaning at once” (179).

We pause on Waite’s comment, this notion that difficulty might illuminate meaning. This is a way of thinking about sentences that is all but absent in college writing courses. In this valuing of incoherence, we hear echoes of Salvatori and Donahue’s The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty, and we note that in the book’s title, “pleasure” is parenthetical. It must be shoehorned in. When coming up against difficulty, pleasure (or, in Waite’s case, illumination) is not a reader’s first reaction. But these parenthetical moments matter for readers, and for writers too. As David Bartholomae say: “If we taught the parenthesis with the same vigor as a nation that we teach the topic sentence, we’d have a whole different world; our children would be different. They’d be able to say something in their funny voice as well as their serious voice, or think of a qualification while they were thinking of the assertion” (Boe and Schroeder 264). This drive toward the topic sentence is not unlike the impulse toward clear writing, and it comes at the expense of the dual-voiced discourse Bartholomae describes, and Salvatori and Donahue’s title (and Butler’s writing as well) enacts.

So too, we read this scene from Waite’s classroom with Eric Hayot in mind: “I am suspicious, and for good reasons, I think, of the impulse against clutter—whether aesthetic or intellectual—when it seems to merge too cleanly with the concept of the work as an unblemished plane of coherence, or to a fantasy that dreams of academic writing as somehow beyond or above the footnote” (Elements 176). He continues, and we quote him at length (we hear Bartholomae in Hayot’s praise of the parenthetical):
I am interested always in breaking—in interesting and intellectually serious ways—the reader’s or the writer’s attempt to conceive the book as a perfect whole. Footnotes and other parenthetical structures help make that happen by pointing us to paths untrodden or unchosen, by adding complexity and nuance, and by establishing dialogue, either purely subterranean or between the upstairs and the downstairs, that allows the book to speak in multiple registers at once . . . The narrative footnote opens a small fold in the otherwise conservative conception of the page as pure and uninterruptible space. (176-77)

Hayot isn’t speaking directly to incoherence here, but he is suggesting muddiness can be crafted, density something to be sought after, something our sentences might work toward, a virtue in prose style. If writers want to resist “the pressure of language to be pat, complete, official, single-minded; . . . the pressure of language against complexity, uncertainty, idiosyncrasy, multiple-mindedness,” incoherence—whether through the footnote breaking the illusion of self-contained prose, or whether through layers of subordination made possible by a syntax that turns in on itself—can be the means to do so (Bartholomae, “Against” 196).

We can (and should) teach students to enter into such cluttered writing, and at the end of class, Waite invites students to do just that by imitating Butler. We read this moment in light of rhetoric’s long history of imitation exercises, but whereas the ancient Greeks and Romans (and teachers during the Golden Age of Style) had students imitating exemplars of masterful—and conventional—sentences, Waite asks her students to imitate something that won a bad writing award. They’re learning how to be incoherent. Here’s one of the imitations:

The move from Australia (in which news is understood to be a way of finding out what funny or strange things happened) to the US (in which news is a way of scaring everyone about tornados, murders and school shootings) brought the question of purpose into our thinking about media, and marked a shift from a form of entertainment and information (that takes important events that encourage a society as the most important subject) to one in which the well-known and accepted human fears are preyed upon as a means of control (as it is bound up in news sources and different cultures). (179)

Waite notes that all the students “imitated not only Butler’s grammar, but also some of her content—everyone had, for example, understood that the sentence was about a shift in understanding, that the sentence was about movement between a before and after” (180). What was inaccessible has now become something the students wield on their own by spending time inside a sentence once thought uninhabitable.

§

Another passage, from a student writing on propaganda, the street artist Banksy, and PR specialist Edward Bernays.

Bernays definition of modern propaganda is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea, and group. Banksy has done many anti-war works. Most of them depicting a popular image that has been altered or a symbolism of peace. Banksy uses street art because it gets his
messages to the common citizen. Like in his work “Stop Wars” based off the popular movie Star Wars. In chapter two is says that it needs to be “universal and continuous; and in its sum total it is regimenting the public mind . . . (25).” Star Wars is a very universally known brand. This work contributes to Banksy’s brand in his protest against war. He is conditioning people’s mind with many images of anti-war. With the hopeful effect of if they continue to see it maybe they will take notice and do something about it. Star Wars is just as popular today as it was in the past. The brand Star Wars is known throughout many generations so it will catch the eye of a lot of people. If the message is picked up by many people then it can be easily transferred throughout the whole population. If one person sees the image then he might talk about it with their buddy or family. Then the message will continue to spread by word of mouth and it will reach even more people. Which is important because then the message will gain more supporter and the more supporters something has the easier it is to have something done to fix it.

We hear Stein here, echoes of a writing process that depends on orality, on writing for the voice. And had this passage been written by Stein, it would be praised; written by a student, it is suspect. The student’s sentences resist gloss—gloss in Greek meaning, “language, tongue,” as in a spoken language or a tongue acting as a synecdoche for speech, the tongue under question being the academic tongue. We are in another tongue here, perhaps. A whole other mouth. And it invites the sort of rereading Harris says Coles’s sentences do.

The likenesses with Stein are many. There is a repetition and overdetermination of meaning and getting statements out as we read with the above clutch of sentences. Also in non-contiguous sentences, for example “Star Wars is a very universally known brand” and “Star Wars is just as popular today as it was in the past. The brand Star Wars is known throughout many generations so it will catch the eye of a lot of people.” Reading these, we can’t help but notice the play of the language—“Star Wars is a very universally known brand.” And we’re hearing cross-referenced tones and diction from the movie franchise—“known throughout many generations” sounds reminiscent of the epic, space operatic tone of “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away . . .”

The overdetermination and associational elements of the language—the superfluity—reflect what Astrid Lorange calls “Stein’s commitment to heterogeneity and affiliative (rather than teleological, familial, and/or causal) relations” (107). In other words, Stein is reaching out and letting in multiple events into one sentence. Students do this too, and it’s often labeled muddy or distracted or unclear. Like in this sentence: “With the hopeful effect of if they continue to see it maybe they will take notice and do something about it.” Here is that sentence again, broken into lines:

With the hopeful effect of
if they continue to see it
maybe they will take notice and do something about it.

The middle phrase—“if they continue to see it”—is doing the most interesting work here. The sentence, which is already itself optative in tone, has the subjunctive shoved down into it, creating (let’s say) a super-subjunctive mood. Something like an exception of an exception of a hedge. Obviously, a pair of commas would set this off, no problem. But this, like its sister sentence from
the Turkle paper discussed earlier, shows a strange sense of writing as writing. We’re able to see, in the reading, how the writing moves. Again, it’s doing two things at once. Is the hopeful effect “continuing to see it” or “maybe taking notice”? It’s both. The sentence is having its cake and eating it, too.

There is also pronoun confusion in “Which is important because then the message will gain more supporter and the more supporters something has the easier it is to have something done to fix it” where the first “it” refers to what? Gaining support? Having something done to fix [the message]? Also, why is the first “something” not “message”? The sentence turns unsure of itself halfway through, it seems. It wants to stick with propaganda and messaging but gives up to generalization. Like the sentence in the paragraph above, this sentence tries to do two things at the same time, whether or not the writer knew that was happening. This duality seems to be a method for the writer. What could happen in another version or in a subsequent composition if the author kept this method in mind, working within it rather than cleaning it up?

§

Students’ incoherent sentences can be read as moments of what T. R. Johnson calls “counter-productive excess,” as “possibilities for the most positive transformation” (Other 171). In such a view, incoherence has value as a stepping stone leading to new insights, one to be negotiated through revision. As Barnard writes, “sometimes something that escapes clarity’s bounds gestures toward revelation” (447). This is true, but we hesitate to move too quickly toward revision, toward transformation in hopes of revelation. Recall that in Waite’s classroom, students do not revise away Butler’s incoherence. They dwell in it. “In my teaching,” Waite writes, “I have noticed students make many grammatical ‘mistakes’ or write jumbled and incomprehensible sentences primarily when they are trying to say something they’ve never said before, something they’ve never thought before” (176). Hers is a generous reading of incoherence, one that does not turn away from difficulty but moves toward it, imitates it, even.

What we’re saying here is that we’d rather not have to translate student writing into another tongue so quickly. We’d like to wade into and wonder at the lack of Coherence and Clarity in student writing. We’re not advocating sloppiness but experiments and calisthenics with grammar and rhetoric. We’re suggesting lesson plans built on incoherent student writing, the discussion oriented not around revising toward clarity but instead trying to discern how these words move on the page, what work they do, and what work they might do if they were revised toward difficulty. It’s easy enough to identify moments of incoherence, whether in syntax or diction or metaphor or any number of ways a sentence can veer toward obfuscation. Much harder, though, to teach students to sit inside sentences and ask: How is language working here? Sentences like this: “School has never been a heavy issue for me to accompany.” Note how “me” behaves, as an indirect object within a prepositional phrase, but so too behaving somewhat like a subject; it is “me” who does the accompanying. “Me”, then, is both object and subject here, a curious way to position the writer, a writer’s whose ethos is already called into question by an overwritten claim regarding how easy school is, a writer who is trying to locate herself within the academy. And, by the way, what does it mean to “accompany” an issue?

If we—readers and writers, teachers and students—were to pay more attention to sentences like these rather than dismiss them, if we were to pull them out, analyze and discuss them, we could learn to read incoherence as a site of rhetorical possibility. We would read the incoherence within our own and others’ sentences as one of Stein’s earliest editors, Eugene Jolas, read hers:
“We are not troubled by manuscripts we do not understand. When such offerings arrive, we feel at once a certain respect for them. Our fear is that we shall understand them all too well” (177).

Notes

1 We thank RR editor Elise Hurley and RR readers T. R. Johnson and Star Medzerian Vanguri for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2 We display sentences in this manner taking a cue from both Francis Christensen and Verlyn Klinkenborg.

3 Kirsch joins a growing cadre of writers advocating for working Gertrude Stein into writing instruction. For more, see Bartholomae (“Living”), Leonard, and Kaufman. For Stein as a composition student, see Rosalind S. Miller’s Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility, which anthologizes her composition themes written at Radcliffe. Michelle Brazier’s dissertation, The Making of Gertrude Stein, is also formidable in its examination of Stein as a writing student. See, also, Winkler’s recent essay on Stein’s relevance for the first-year writing classroom.

4 See James Slevin for a reading of a piece of student writing that, like Stein and the student we quote later, “is clearly using . . . repetition . . . as the basis for his coherence” (171).

5 This scene also appears in Waite’s “The Unavailable Means of Persuasion.” We work from her dissertation because it offers a fuller account of what happened in the classroom.

Works Cited

Anonymous Students. Selected papers from first-year composition courses, Seattle Pacific University and the University of Pittsburgh, fall 2017.


Sword, Helen. Email to Peter Wayne Moe. 19 Apr. 2017.

Peter Wayne Moe is assistant professor of English and director of campus writing at Seattle Pacific University. His work has appeared in Rhetoric Society Quarterly, College Composition and Communication, and Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies, among other places.

Kyle Winkler is assistant professor of English at Kent State University-Tuscarawas. He teaches courses on writing, rhetoric, and style. His work has appeared in, and is forthcoming from, Composition Forum and Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal.