The Erasure of the Sentence

This article examines the sentence-based pedagogies that arose in composition during the 1960s and 1970s—the generative rhetoric of Francis Christensen, imitation exercises, and sentence-combining—and attempts to discern why these three pedagogies have been so completely elided within contemporary composition studies. The usefulness of these sentence-based rhetorics was never disproved, but a growing wave of anti-formalism, anti-behaviorism, and anti-empiricism within English-based composition studies after 1980 doomed them to a marginality under which they still exist today. The result of this erasure of sentence pedagogies is a culture of writing instruction that has very little to do with or to say about the sentence outside of a purely grammatical discourse.

In the 1980s, as composition studies matured, theoretical and critical interrogation of much of the field’s received wisdom began in earnest. The field of composition studies, increasingly in the hands of the new generation of trained specialist Ph.D.’s, began to do more and more effectively what intellectual fields have always done: define, subdivide, and judge the efforts of members. Some elements of the older field of composition teaching became approved and burgeoned, while others were tacitly declared dead ends: lore-based and therefore uninteresting, scientistic and therefore suspect, mechanistic and therefore destructive. Little attention has been paid to these preterite elements in the older field of composition; they have been dropped like vestigial limbs, and most of
those who once practiced or promoted those elements have retired or moved to more acceptable venues, maintaining a circumspect silence about their earlier flings with now-unpopular ideas such as paragraph theory, or structural linguistics, or stage-model developmental psychology. Of all of the inhabitants of this limbo of discarded approaches, there is no more dramatic and striking exemplar than what was called the school of syntactic methods. These sentence-based pedagogies rose from older syntax-oriented teaching methods to an extraordinary moment in the sun during the 1970s bidding fair to become methodologically hegemonic. But like the mayfly, their day was brief though intense, and these pedagogies are hardly mentioned now in mainstream composition studies except as of faint historical interest. The sentence itself as an element of composition pedagogy is hardly mentioned today outside of textbooks. But we can learn as much from watching the working out of Darwinian intellectual failures as from participating in the self-congratulatory normal science of the current winners, and so I offer this history of syntactic methods since 1960 in the spirit of the old New England gravestone: “As you are now, so once was I; as I am now, so you shall be.”

From the earliest point in American composition-rhetoric, the sentence was a central component of what students were asked to study, practice, and become conversant with. From the 1890s onward, chapters on The Sentence in most textbooks were fairly predictable. Western rhetorical theories about the sentence date back to classical antiquity, with roots in Latin grammar and in the oral rhetorical theories of the classical period, and they came to their nineteenth-century form by a long process of accretion. Traditional sentence pedagogy assumed grammatical knowledge of the sort inculcated by Reed and Kellogg diagrams, but the prime elements in these textbook chapters were taxonomic, all this time focused on their place in sentence construction. Along with the breakdown of sentences by grammatical types—simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex—which was usually taken up in the grammar chapters of textbooks, the traditional classification of sentences is by function: declarative, imperative, interrogative, and exclamatory sentences. The traditional rhetorical classifications of sentences were also covered: long and short, loose and periodic, and balanced. In addition, sentence pedagogy nearly always included coverage of the old abstractions that informed modern composition-rhetoric from 1890 through the present: those of Adams Sherman Hill (clearness,
energy, force), Barrett Wendell, (unity, coherence, emphasis), or C. S. Baldwin (clearness and interest).

All of these traditional sentence pedagogies included many exercises and much practice, and we fail to understand them if we think of them only as defined by their abstractions and classifications. Most sentence chapters in textbooks asked students to create many sentences, and indeed, sentence-level pedagogy was an important part of traditional writing courses. It became even more central during the 1950s, a period when composition teachers were looking to structural linguistics with expectation and sentence-writing was much discussed. But as I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Composition-Rhetoric 162–70), it was just as structural linguistics was gaining a serious foothold in composition pedagogy that its theoretical bases came under sustained and successful attack from Noam Chomsky and the theory of transformational-generative grammar.

Here we enter a more familiar modern territory, the post-1960 era of composition and composition studies. And it is here that we find the beginnings of the three most important of the sentence-based rhetorics that were to seem so promising to writing teachers of the New Rhetoric era: the generative rhetoric of Francis Christensen, imitation exercises, and sentence-combining. I want to take up these three more modern syntactic methods in roughly chronological order, beginning with the ideas of Francis Christensen.

**Christensen rhetoric**

Francis Christensen, a professor of English at the University of Southern California, began to publish essays in the early 1960s complaining that traditional theories of the sentence widely taught throughout the first sixty years of this century were primarily taxonomic rather than generative or productive. Except in providing examples, they were not of much real help to teachers in showing students how to write good sentences. In 1963, Christensen published what is arguably his most important article, “A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence.” In this article and in other works published up to his death in 1970, Christensen described a new way of viewing sentences and a pedagogical method that could be used to teach students how to write longer, more mature, more varied and interesting sentences.

In the opening sentence of “A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence,” he announced his intentions: “If a new grammar is to be brought to bear on composition, it must be brought to bear on the rhetoric of the sentence” (155). Christensen was certain that the sentence is the most important element in
rhetoric because it is “a natural and isolable unit” (“Course” 168). Complaining that the traditional conceptions of the sentence were merely descriptive, Christensen argued that traditional sentence pedagogy simply did not help students learn to write. “We do not really teach our captive charges to write better—we merely expect them to” (“Generative” 155). Christensen indicated that both the grammatical and rhetorical classifications of sentences are equally barren in the amount of real assistance they give to students. “We need a rhetoric of the sentence that will do more than combine the ideas of primer sentences. We need one that will generate ideas” (“Generative” 155).

Christensen rhetoric did not follow the traditional canons of rhetoric, which begin with conceptualization or invention; instead it opted for a view that all other skills in language follow syntactic skills naturally. According to Christensen, you could be a good writer if you could learn to write a good sentence. His pedagogy consisted of short base-level sentences to which students were asked to attach increasingly sophisticated systems of initial and final modifying clauses and phrases—what he called “free modifiers.” Effective use of free modifiers would result in effective “cumulative sentences,” and Christensen’s most famous observation about teaching the cumulative sentence was that he wanted to push his students “to level after level, not just two or three, but four, five, or six, even more, as far as the students’ powers of observation will take them. I want them to become sentence acrobats, to dazzle by their syntactic dexterity” (“Generative” 160).

For some years after 1963, Christensen’s syntactic rhetoric was widely discussed, praised, and damned. His few short articles—and all of them were contained in Notes toward a New Rhetoric, a book of 110 pages—created an intense interest in syntactic experimentation and innovation. Several experiments confirmed the effectiveness of using generative rhetoric with students. During the early 1970s, two published reports appeared on the use of the Christensen Rhetoric Program (an expensive boxed set of overhead transparencies and workbooks that had appeared in 1968). Charles A. Bond, after a rather loosely controlled experiment, reported that there was a “statistically significant difference” between the grades of a group of students taught using Christensen methods and those of a control group taught by conventional methods; he also mentioned that his students were enthusiastic about cumulative sentences. R. D. Walshe, teaching a group of adult night-class students in Australia (it is hard to imagine two groups of native-speaking English students as far removed
from one another as Bond’s American first-year students and Walshe’s Australian working people), found that although some of Christensen’s claims for his system were inflated, the Christensen Rhetoric Program generally worked well and was liked by his students.

These tests of Christensen’s program were unscientific and anecdotal, and it was not until 1978 that a full-scale empirical research test was done on the Christensen system. The experiment’s creator, Lester Faigley, began with two hypotheses: First, that the Christensen sentence method would increase syntactic maturity in those who used it (for a fuller discussion of the concept of syntactic maturity, see the next section of this paper), and second, that the Christensen rhetoric program as a whole would produce a measurable qualitative increase in writing skill. Faigley tested four experimental sections and four control sections in his experiment. The experimental sections used Christensen’s A New Rhetoric, and the control sections used a well-known content-oriented rhetoric textbook, McCrimmon’s Writing with a Purpose. Faigley proved both of his hypotheses; he found that the writing produced by the Christensen program not only was measurably more mature but also received better average ratings (.63 on a six-point scale; statistically significant) from blind holistic readings (“Generative” 179). Faigley’s experiment showed that the Christensen method does produce measurable classroom results.

Imitation

The argument about Christensen rhetoric was in full swing during the middle 1960s when another syntactic method was first popularized: imitation exercises. Unlike Christensen rhetoric, imitation was part of the rediscovered trove of classical rhetorical theory that was coming to light in English departments. From the time of Isocrates and Aristotle, exercises in direct imitation and in the copying of structures had been recommended by theorists and teachers of rhetoric, and after Edward P. J. Corbett published his essay “The Uses of Classical Rhetoric” in 1963 and his Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student in 1965, the use of imitation exercises in composition classes enjoyed a renaissance of popularity. There are, of course, different meanings for the term imitation, but in rhetoric it has always meant one thing: the emulation of the syntax of good prose models by students wishing to improve their writing or speaking styles. The recurring word used by the ancients concerning imitation, according to Corbett, was similis; the objective of imitation exercises was to make the stu-
dent's writing similar to that of a superior writer (“Theory” 244). This similarity does not imply that the student's writing will be identical to the writing she imitates; the similarity that imitation promotes is not of content, but of form. Corbett recommends several different sorts of exercises, the first and simplest of which involves “copying passages, word for word from admired authors” (“Theory” 247). For students who have spent some time copying passages, Corbett recommends a second kind of imitation exercise: pattern practice. In this exercise, the student chooses or is given single sentences to use as patterns after which he or she is to design sentences of his or her own. “The aim of this exercise,” says Corbett, “is not to achieve a word-for-word correspondence with the model but rather to achieve an awareness of the variety of sentence structure of which the English language is capable” (“Theory” 249). The model sentences need not be followed slavishly, but Corbett suggests that the student observe at least the same kind, number, and order of phrases and clauses.

After Corbett’s initial arguments for imitation, other scholars took the method up as an important technique. As Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester put it in their 1969 textbook on imitation, Copy and Compose, writing “is a civilized art that is rooted in tradition” (2). The assumption that imitation makes about contemporary student writing is that it is often stylistically barren because of lack of familiarity with good models of prose style and that this barrenness can be remedied by an intensive course in good prose models. Weathers and Winchester—whose Copy and Compose and The New Strategy of Style, as well as Weathers’s An Alternate Style: Options in Composition, recommended imitation as a primary exercise—became the most notable proponents of imitation. Weathers and Winchester used a slightly more complex model of imitation than did Corbett: They asked their students first to copy a passage, then to read a provided analysis of the model’s structure, and finally to compose an imitation. During the 1970s, Frank D'Angelo, William Gruber, Penelope Starkey, S. Michael Halloran, and other writers all supported classically based imitation exercises as effective methods for attaining improved student sentence skills. A second set of imitation exercises proposed during the late 1960s and early 1970s were called “controlled composition exercises,” and were actually a hybrid, melding some aspects of imitation and some aspects of sentence-combining. Controlled composition, according to Edmund Miller, is “the technique of having students copy a passage as they introduce some systematic change” (ii).
From the middle 1960s onward, a small but significant number of voices kept reposing the value of imitation. Frank D’Angelo noted that imitation connoted counterfeiting and stereotyping in most people’s minds, when it should connote originality and creativity. A student who practices imitation, he suggests, “may be spared at least some of the fumblings of the novice writer” for forms in which to express his thoughts (283). A “student will become more original as he engages in creative imitation,” claimed D’Angelo (283). Weathers and Winchester took the argument further: “Originality and individuality are outgrowths of a familiarity with originality in the work of others, and they emerge from a knowledge of words, patterns, constructions and procedures that all writers use” (Copy and Compose 2).

Like Christensen rhetoric, imitation was put to the test, in this case by Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams, who performed an experiment in 1977 that compared sentence-combining pedagogy with an imitation pedagogy that they evolved under the term “sentence expansion.” Hake and Williams found that the students in their imitation group learned to write better expository prose with fewer flaws and errors than students using sentence-combining pedagogies (“Sentence” 143). Since sentence-combining was known by the late seventies to produce better syntactic results than non-sentence methods, this finding was important. Imitation, proponents claimed, provided students with practice in the “ability to design” that is the basis of a mature prose style. The different imitation techniques, whether they consist of direct copying of passages, composition of passages using models, or controlled mutation of sentence structures, all have this in common: They cause students to internalize the structures of the piece being imitated; as Corbett points out, internalization is the key term in imitation. With those structures internalized, a student is free to engage in the informed processes of choice, which are the wellspring of real creativity. William Gruber, writing in 1977, argued that imitation assists in design: “Standing behind imitation as a teaching method is the simple assumption that an inability to write is an inability to design—an inability to shape effectively the thought of a sentence, a paragraph, or an essay” (493–94). Gruber argued that imitation liberates students’ personalities by freeing them of enervating design decisions, at least temporarily. Without knowledge of what has been done by others, claimed proponents of imitation exercises, there can be no profound originality.
The sentence-combining juggernaut

Sentence-combining in its simplest form is the process of joining two or more short, simple sentences to make one longer sentence, using embedding, deletion, subordination, and coordination. In all probability sentence-combining was taught by the grammaticus of classical Rome, but such exercises have tended to be ephemera, and none has come down to us. Shirley Rose’s article of 1983, “One Hundred Years of Sentence-Combining,” traced the use of similar techniques back to the nineteenth century and argued that teachers asking students to combine short sentences into long ones was a pedagogy growing out of schoolbook grammar and structural grammar as well as more modern grammatical ideas (483).

While combining exercises can be found in the 1890s, it was not until 1957, when Noam Chomsky revolutionized grammatical theory with his book Syntactic Structures, that the theoretical base was established upon which modern sentence-combining pedagogies would be founded. This base was, of course, Chomskian transformational-generative (TG) grammar, which for a while caused tremendous excitement in the field of composition. TG grammar, which quickly swept both traditional and structural grammar aside in linguistics between 1957 and 1965, seemed at that time to present to composition the possibility of a new writing pedagogy based on the study of linguistic transformations. In 1963, Donald Bateman and Frank J. Zidonis of The Ohio State University conducted an experiment to determine whether teaching high-school students TG grammar would reduce the incidence of errors in their writing. They found that students taught TG grammar both reduced errors and developed the ability to write more complex sentence structures. Despite some questionable features in the Bateman and Zidonis study, it did suggest that learning TG grammar had an effect on student writing.

The Bateman and Zidonis study was published in 1964, and in that same year a study was published that was to have far more importance for sentence-combining: Kellogg Hunt’s Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels. Francis Christensen had been using the term “syntactic fluency” since 1963, but Christensen’s use of it was essentially qualitative and impressionistic. Hunt’s work would become the basis for most measurements of “syntactic maturity,” a quantitative term that came to be an important goal of sentence-combining. To recap Hunt’s study quickly: He wished to find out what elements
of writing changed as people matured and which linguistic structures seemed to be representative of mature writing. To this end he studied the writings of average students in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades and expository articles in Harper's and The Atlantic. At first Hunt studied sentence length, but he quickly became aware that the tendency of younger writers to string together many short clauses with "and" meant that sentence length was not a good indicator of maturity in writing. He studied clause length, and as he says, he “became more and more interested in what I will describe as one main clause plus whatever subordinate clauses happen to be attached to or embedded within it” (“Synopsis” 111). This is Hunt’s most famous concept, the minimal terminable unit” or “T-unit.” “Each T-unit,” says Hunt, is “minimal in length and each could be terminated grammatically between a capital and a period” (112).

The T-unit, Hunt found, was a much more reliable index of stylistic maturity than sentence length. Eventually he determined the three best indices of stylistic maturity: the average number of words per T-unit, the average number of clauses per T-unit, and the average number of words per clause. When applied to writing at different grade levels, he found that these numbers increased at a steady increment. Below is a chart that Frank O’Hare adapted from Hunt’s work and from similar work by Roy O’Donnell, William Griffin, and Raymond Norris:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>Superior Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clauses/T-unit</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words/Clause</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see, the rise in these three indices over time is obvious. Although these preliminary studies of Bateman and Zidonis and of Hunt used no sentence-combining at all, they did represent the bases from which high-modern sentence-combining sprang: the methodological linguistic base of TG grammar and the empirical quantitative base of Hunt’s studies of syntactic maturity.

These two bases were brought together in the first important experiment involving sentence-combining exercises, that of John Mellon in 1965. Mellon called the 1969 report of his experiment Transformational Sentence-Combining:
A Method for Enhancing the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition, and his was the first study actually asking students to practice combining kernel sentences rather than merely to learn grammar. "Research," wrote Mellon, "... clearly shows that memorized principles of grammar, whether conventional or modern, clearly play a negligible role in helping students achieve 'correctness' in their written expression" (15). What could help students do this, reasoned Mellon, was instruction in TG grammar plus practice exercises in combining short "kernel sentences" into longer, more complex sentences.

With Mellon's initial publication of his work in 1967 and then with the national publication by NCTE in 1969, sentence-combining was established as an important tool in helping students write more mature sentences. But the grammar question still remained open. Since Mellon had to spend so much time teaching the principles of TG grammar in order to allow his students to work on his complex exercises, there was doubt as to which activity—learning the grammar or doing the exercises—had gotten the results. After all, Bateman and Zidonis had gotten error reduction—though admittedly not scientifically measured growth—from mere TG grammar instruction alone. How much importance did the sentence-combining exercises really have?

These questions were put to rest once again and for all in 1973 with the publication of Frank O'Hare's research monograph Sentence-combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction. This study, which was the spark that ignited the sentence-combining boom of the late 1970s, showed beyond a doubt that sentence-combining exercises, without any grammar instruction at all, could achieve important gains in syntactic maturity for students who used them. Testing seventh graders, O'Hare used sentence-combining exercises with his experimental group over a period of eight months without ever mentioning any of the formal rules of TG grammar. The control group was not exposed to sentence-combining at all.

O'Hare's test measured six factors of syntactic maturity and found that "highly significant growth had taken place on all six factors" (55). His experimental group of seventh graders, after eight months of sentence-combining, now wrote an average of 15.75 words per T-unit, which was 9 percent higher than the 14.4 words per T-unit Hunt had reported as the average of twelfth graders. The other factors were similarly impressive. Just as important as the
maturity factors, though, were the results of a second hypothesis O'Hare was testing: whether the sentence-combining group would write compositions that would be judged better in overall quality than those of the control group. Eight experienced English teachers rated 240 experimental and control essays written after the eight-month test period, and when asked to choose between matched pairs of essays, chose an experimental-group essay 70 percent of the time. The results suggested that sentence-combining exercises not only improved syntactic maturity but also affected perceived quality of writing in general.

The O'Hare study focused interest in sentence-combining, which had been associated with Mellon's complex directions, as a pedagogic tool. A follow-up study by Warren E. Combs found that the gains in writing quality that were produced by O'Hare's methods persisted over time and were still notable as long as two months after the sentence-combining practice had been discontinued. Textbooks began to appear using sentence-combining exercises, notably William Strong's *Sentence-Combining: A Composing Book* in 1973, which used "open" exercises, and O'Hare's own *Sentencecraft* of 1975. There remained now only one important question about sentence-combining: Was it useful for first-year students in college, or were they too old to be helped by the practice it gave? There was no doubt that it worked at the secondary-school level, but an article by James Ney in 1976 describing his attempts to use sentence-combining in a first-year class cast doubt on the technique's usefulness for eighteen year olds. Some teachers who had tried small doses of sentence-combining in first-year classes anecdotally reported no noticeable change in student writing.

Were college students too old for syntactic methods? This last question was answered in 1978 by the publication of the first results of a large and impressively rigorous study conducted under an Exxon grant at Miami University of Ohio by Donald A. Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg. This college-level study used ninety of William Strong's "open" exercises and others created by the Miami researchers. These "open" exercises, some of which were lengthy and gave considerable stylistic and creative leeway to students, gave no directions on how best to complete them, and thus there was no "correct" answer or combination. Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg's experimental and control groups each consisted of six sections of first-year college students, and their experiment was conducted over a fifteen-week semester (245–48). The Miami researchers found that their experimental group, like O'Hare's, evidenced both statistically meaningful gains in syntactic maturity and a gain in overall quality of the writing they produced. Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg's sentence-combining group moved during the experiment from a high-twelfth-grade-level of syntactic ma-
turity to a level approximating high-sophomore- or junior-level college writing skills. In addition, their experimental group showed statistically significant gains in three qualitative measures of general essay quality: holistic, forced-choice, and analytic (Morenberg, Daiker, and Kerek 250–52).

The late 1970s, just after the Miami experiment, were the high-water mark for sentence-combining. The literature grew so fast it was difficult to keep up with it; Daiker and his colleagues hosted an entire large conference devoted to sentence-combining at Miami in 1978 and another in 1983; scores of normal-science experiments were conducted using it in classrooms across the nation during the early 1980s. The lesson of sentence-combining was simple but compelling; as O'Hare said, “writing behavior can be changed fairly rapidly and with relative ease” (68). The result: Sentence-combining was a land-rush for a time. Between 1976 and 1983, there were no fewer than 49 articles in major journals about sentence-combining and hundreds of papers and conference presentations. The success of the method provoked nasty quarrels about who “owned” it or had a moral right to profit from it. Revisionist narratives about development of the technique were published. Everyone, it seemed, wanted a piece of the pie now that it had been proven so tasty.

With the potency during the early 1980s of the movement toward empirical research—a movement that had been materially strengthened by the popularity of some of the sentence-combining research—we might expect that sentence-combining would have continued as a potent force in the developing field of composition studies. The research was there; the pedagogy was usable by almost any teacher and provided results that could be seen impressionistically as well as measured; the method had powerful champions. It had been long assumed that sentence-combining could be a useful part of a complete rhetoric program, but by the late 1970s, the venerable Kellogg Hunt was suggesting that sentence-combining was so useful that it should take up all class time in a first-year course, that “in every sense, sentence-combining can be [a] comprehensive writing program in and of itself, for at least one semester” (“Anybody” 156).

Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair.

The counterforces
In an astonishing reversal of fortune for sentence rhetorics, the triumphalism, the quarrels, and the debates of the early 1980s—now mostly forgotten—died away after 1983 or so. The articles on sentence issues fell away radically, and those that were written were more and more about applications to learning disabilities, or English as a second language, or special education. Erstwhile syntactic
rhetoricians turned to other issues. The devaluation of sentence-based rhetorics is a complex phenomenon, and we need to approach it with circumspection. Let me first try to establish the reality of what I’m calling the “erasure of the sentence” in clearly numerical terms. Table 2 lists raw numbers of books and articles appearing in general-composition journals about the three sentence rhetorics discussed in this essay.

While I can’t claim that this chart, which I derived from a combination of ERIC searching and my own research, is exhaustive or even directly replicable, the numbers themselves are less important than the trends they show. And these numerical trends strongly match our intuitive sense of what has been going on. We see, starting with Christensen’s first articles in the early 1960s, a strong interest in sentence-writing that was mostly taken up with generative rhetoric and imitation during the early period of the New Rhetoric, say, 1963–1975. After 1976, the interest in Christensen begins to peter out as sentence-combining gathers momentum; a truly extraordinary burst of activity occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But after 1984, general articles on sentence-combining died out, and more and more of the essays published had to do with use of sentence-combining in classes in English as a second language or with behaviorally disordered or autistic students; an ERIC search shows only three essays published on general-composition sentence-combining after 1986. The few general articles that were published after 1986 came more and more to be critical, but even the criticisms died away. After the mid-1980s, the sentence rhetorics of the 1960s and 1970s were gone, at least from books and journals.3 Shirley Rose’s 1983 article on the history of sentence-combining, which probably felt when she wrote it like a historical background to a vital part of the field, now looks more like the *ave atque vale* of the field to sentence-combining.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Christensen</th>
<th>Imitation</th>
<th>Sentence-combining</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960–1965</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1966–1970</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>1971–1975</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>1976–1980</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981–1985</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986–1990</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991–1998</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
What iceberg did this Titanic meet? It was not a sudden ending, certainly; there had been criticisms of sentence rhetorics going back to the 1960s. There had been some sentence-combining studies reporting equivocal results. There had been arguments over the differences between Christensen’s “syntactic fluency” and Hunt’s “syntactic maturity.” And there had been ongoing questions about the meaning and validity of T-units and the relationship between syntactic maturity and holistically rated writing quality. But all of these had been essentially in-house issues, methodological or pragmatic, mostly waged in the pages of Research in the Teaching of English. By the early 1980s, sentence rhetorics had been criticized by some theorists for over fifteen years—but finally the criticisms were coming to bite.

That this devaluation of sentence rhetorics took place slowly meant that it was not noticeable as such by most people in the field. But once noted, it stands out as quite an extraordinary phenomenon. The story of sentence rhetorics is analogous, perhaps, to that of the U.S. space exploration effort of the 1960s. John F. Kennedy determined in 1961 that we would beat the Russians to the moon, and as a result of amazing effort, technological breakthrough, heart-rending sacrifice, and incalculable spondulix, Apollo 11 landed on the Mare Tranquilitatis in 1969. We went back a few more times, put up flags, drove about in dune-buggies, collected dusty gray rocks, and came home. We had seen what it had to offer. And after a while, we did not go back any more.

Similarly, in the early 1960s, a few scholars in composition determined to update the ages-old notion that students needed to be able to write good sentences before they could write good essays. Through new discovery, imaginative application of literary ideas, grammatical theory, and empirical research breakthroughs, methods and measurements were evolved that could determine whether student writers were writing better sentences. Teaching methods relating to the measurements were tested, and they succeeded, repeatedly and incontrovertibly, in producing better sentence writers. In addition, researchers determined that there was indeed a correlation between sentence skill and general perceived writing skill, discovering repeatedly that experimental sentence-writing groups were also holistically rated better writers. The techniques were honed and refined for different levels, and they finally appeared in easily usable textbooks available to all. We had said we wanted newer and better teaching techniques, and the sentence rhetorics of the 1960s and 1970s provided them. And, as a discipline, we then peered quizzically at what we had wrought.
frowned, and declared that no, this was not what we had really wanted. We had seen what it had to offer. And after a while, we did not go back any more.

To understand the reasons for the erasure of sentence rhetorics, we need to look at the kinds of criticisms that were leveled at them almost as soon as they demonstrated any success. It will become apparent, doing this, that sentence rhetorics were not dragged under by any sudden radical uprising in the early 1980s, but rather finally succumbed to an entire line of criticism that had been ongoing for at least fifteen years. The reasons for the erasure of the sentence are multiple and complex, but as we look back over the varied critiques of syntactic rhetorics that were leveled beginning with Johnson, I think we can induce some general themes—themes that I would argue represent an important, if sometimes tacit, set of underlife definitions for composition studies in the past two decades.

The first and most obvious of the lines of criticism that would engulf sentence rhetorics was what we might call anti-formalism—the idea that any pedagogy based in form rather than in content was automatically suspect. Some part of this anti-formalist position is a result of distrust of traditional textbook pedagogies, what we might call the reaction against rhetorical atomism. For much of rhetorical history, and certainly for all of the history of composition, the pedagogical method of taking discourse apart into its constituent components and working on those components separately had been accepted almost absolutely. In American composition-rhetoric, this meant the familiar textbook breakdown of the “levels” of discourse—the word, the sentence, the paragraph, the essay. The great difference between the early New Rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s and the work that came after it is largely found in the New-Rhetoric acceptance of atomistic formal levels up until the late 1970s and the later rejection of them. The first exposition of this point was by James Moffett in his classic 1968 book *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, in which Moffett surveyed sentence rhetorics (including Christensen and early [Mellon] sentence-combining) and concluded that teachers must “leave the sentence within its broader discursive context” (186).

Teachers can help students relate to syntactic options only in the context of a whole discourse, Moffett believed, and thus a teacher can only help a student “if the units of learning are units larger than the hindsight sentence.” He criticized traditional writing pedagogy for moving from “little particle to big particle” toward the whole composition. “For the learner,” Moffett wrote, “basics are not the small-focus technical things but broad things like meaning and motivation, purpose and point, which are precisely what are missing from exercises” (205). This was a line of attack that came to be heard more and more often.
We first see it in responses to Francis Christensen’s work, which began to draw criticism almost as soon as it was formulated. The ink was hardly dry on the large and ambitious Christensen Rhetoric Program, Christensen’s expensive boxed set of workbooks and projector overlays, when the first serious critique of his theory was published in 1969. Sabina Thorne Johnson, in an article called “Some Tentative Strictures on Generative Rhetoric,” admitted that Christensen offered “a revolution in our assessment of style and in our approach to the teaching of composition” (159), but she also had some important reservations about the generative nature of the cumulative sentence. Johnson’s critique was essential: “Christensen seems to believe that form can generate content (Program, p. vi). I don’t believe it can, especially if the content is of an analytical or critical nature” (159). Johnson went on to criticize Christensen’s reliance upon narrative and descriptive writing for his examples and as the basis for his theory, complaining that narrative and descriptive skills seldom carry over to exposition. She initiated a line of argument against syntactic methods that later came to seem conclusive: that students need training in higher-level skills such as invention and organization more than they need to know how to be “sentence acrobats.”

Christensen himself died (of natural causes) shortly after Johnson’s article appeared, and the attack on his theory led to a colorful exchange between Johnson and Christensen’s widow Bonniejean that can be surveyed in back issues of College English. This debate was joined by A. M. Tibbetts, who made several telling points. Although Christensen is useful in the classroom, said Tibbetts, the claims he made for his system are simply “not empirically true as stated” (142). It is true that pattern practice with cumulative sentences can help students learn to use free modifiers, Tibbetts concluded, but that is only one of the skills writers need. While he admitted that Christensen’s method produced clever sentences from students, Tibbetts complained that that was part of the problem. “What we are generally after in expository writing,” Tibbetts warned, “is accuracy rather than cleverness” (144). He rearticulated Johnson’s reservations about the formal generativity of the Christensen rhetoric program. Christensen’s theory, argued Tibbetts, is not designed to teach young people how to do the most valuable things any grammar-rhetoric should be designed to teach—how to think; how to separate and define issues; how to isolate fallacies; how to make generalizations and value judgments—in brief, how to express the truths and realities of our time and how to argue for improvements. He criticizes, as did

Students need training in higher-level skills such as invention and organization more than they need to know how to be “sentence acrobats.”
Johnson, Christensen's “fiction fallacy,” as he calls it: the idea that students should learn to write like Welty and Faulkner. Narrative and descriptive writing, Tibbetts claims, require no logical analysis and lead to “arty, false descriptions of adolescent mental states” (143). If you want nothing but “sentence acrobats,” Tibbetts warned, “you are likely to get what you deserve—dexterous rhetorical acrobats who dexterously tell untruths” (143).

W. Ross Winterowd, no enemy to linguistic issues in composition, also questioned Christensen's work in 1975, when he pointed out that Christensen rhetoric exercises “take sentences out of the living content of the rhetorical situation and make them into largely meaningless dry runs” (338). Although he was himself trained in linguistics, Winterowd had deep reservations about large claims made for formalist “technologies”:

I can envision no “technology” of composition, no effective programming of students for efficiency in learning to write—nor would most composition teachers want such efficiency. From my point of view, “efficient” exercises in sentence-building, for instance, are downright morbid because they miss the point concerning the creative act of producing meaningful language in a rhetorical situation. (90)

And when James Moffett reacted to the formalist orientation of early sentence-combining, his Parthian shot—“It’s about time the sentence was put in its place” (187)—could have been the watchword on syntactic rhetorics for a whole group of theorists whose work was gaining power.

The two loci classicci of this anti-formalist position were the papers given at the second Miami sentence-combining conference in 1983 by Donald Murray and by Peter Elbow (their invitation by the Miami group seems in retrospect not unlike Brutus's decision to allow Antony to speak at Caesar's funeral). Murray’s essay is one of the wildest and most subtle he ever wrote, an almost unreadable melange of brainstorming lists, poem drafts, and endless badly combined sentences that commit formal mayhem on sentence-combining while never mentioning the technique, inviting students to write as badly as he does here in order to learn to write well. Elbow was much more open in his challenges to the formalist assumptions of sentence-combining, and he deserves to be quoted at length:

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I think sentence-combining is vulnerable to attack for being so a-rhetorical—so distant from the essential process of writing. In sentence-combining the student is not engaged in figuring out what she wants to say or saying what is on her mind. And because it provides prepackaged words and ready-made thoughts, sentence-combining reinforces the push-button, fast-food expectations in our culture. As a result the student is not saying anything to anyone: The results of her work are more often “answers” given to a teacher for correction—not “writing” given to readers for reactions. (233)

Though Elbow followed up this frontal barrage with a quick statement that these were his misgivings in their most extreme form, the remainder of his essay is a careful assessment of the dangers of making sentence-based work any very important part of writing instruction. Believing that “every one of our students at every moment is capable of generating a perfectly intelligible, lively sentence,” Elbow says that the way to bring student skills out most usefully is “by leaving syntax more alone—that is, by learning to do a better job of writing down words in the order in which they come to mind” (241). Indeed, the whole thesis of Elbow’s essay is that students do better and are truer to their own language when they leave their syntax alone. Elbow’s final word on form-based work is that it is not, cannot be, genuinely generative. “[Sentence-combining] gives the wrong model for generating by implying that when we produce a sentence we are making a package for an already completed mental act” (245).

The second strand of criticism leveled against syntactic rhetorics is related to anti-formalism; we might call it anti-automatism or anti-behaviorism. This set of critiques was based in the idea that pedagogies that meant to tap into non-conscious behavioral structures and to manipulate them for a specific end were inherently demeaning to students. The debate on behaviorism had been raging since the 1950s, of course, but it was given new impetus in composition in 1969 with the notorious publication of Robert Zoellner’s “Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition” in College English. Zoellner’s open plea for consideration of behavioral aspects to writing pedagogy struck a powerful nerve; College English printed no fewer than eight passionate rejoinders to Zoellner in 1969 and 1970. Behaviorism in psychology was the subject of deep distrust on the part of most humanists, and any proposal for pedagogical uses of it was bound to be regarded with suspicion. It was here that syntactic pedagogies were problematical, because they all used exercises to build “skills” in a way that was not meant to be completely conscious. These skills would then be on tap for all conscious student-writing purposes. What most syntactic theorists wanted from their pedagogies was a systematic and intense
exposure of student writers to models and activities that would not only teach them “correct structure,” but would rather, as W. Ross Winterowd suggests, “activate their competence” in language so that it “spills over into the area of performance” (253). Effective generation, imitation, or combination would be praised, and incorrect syntactic manipulation could be corrected and criticized. But for many critics, the behaviorist, exercise-based formats of these pedagogies were deeply troubling. They were perceived as a-rhetorical, uncreative, and in some senses destructive of individuality.

Imitation exercises in particular were perceived as actively insulting to the creativity of student writers. Probably the most controversial of the syntactic methods in the 1970s, imitation exercises seemed to ask their team to play defense from the beginning. Objections to imitation were made on several grounds, and most theorists who discussed imitation even in the 1970s felt compelled to defend their interest in it. Frank D'Angelo claimed in 1973 that popular feeling against imitation existed because it was perceived as drudgery, “dull, heavy, and stultifying” (283), and spent his essay explicating how imitation was actually close to invention. But the complaint about drudgework was only a part of the reason that imitation was a pedagogy besieged from its inception.

The main reason for the unpopularity of imitation was that it was perceived as “mere servile copying,” destructive of student individuality and contributory to a mechanized, dehumanizing, Skinnerian view of writing. The romanticism of the age, seen clearly in much of the anti-Zoellner criticism, would grow more and more potent as the 1970s segued into the 1980s. Teachers and theorists reacted against any form of practice that seemed to compromise originality and the expression of personal feelings, and imitation exercises were among the most obvious indoctrinations to “tradition” and “the system.” As a result of this fear of loss of individuality and originality in student writing, those who recommended imitation were fighting a battle that they were the first to join and, ultimately, the first to lose.

Although imitation's defenders sought to clear it of the charges of automatism leveled against it by the age, arguments against imitation never disappeared, even during its heyday, since it was the most overtly anti-romantic of the sentence-based writing pedagogies. D'Angelo noted in 1973 that imitation connotes counterfeiting and stereotyping in most people's minds, when it should connote originality and creativity. William Gruber, whose essay is titled
“Servile Copying’ and the Teaching of English,” knew that imitation was distrusted by many teachers when he argued that imitation does not affect creativity. Gruber argued that imitation exercises liberate students’ personalities by freeing them of enervating design decisions, at least temporarily. Without knowledge of what has been done by others, he claimed, there can be no profound originality: “Self-expression is possible only when the self has a defined area to work in” (497). But Gruber admitted that imitation “seems, I suppose, an ‘inorganic’ way of teaching writing” (495) and that his students initially seemed suspicious of it. “The greater part of students' mistrust of imitation . . . seems to derive more from emotional factors than from intellectual ones: for they grew up during the sixties, and they seem either to balk at any extreme formalization of the process of education, or to want one instant set of rules for all writing” (496). Gruber was indeed up against the powerful psychological backwash of the 1960s, as were, eventually, all proponents of sentence rhetorics.

The problem was in the exercises. Critics pointed out that sentence-combining exercises were quintessentially exercises, context-striped from what students really wanted to say themselves. James Britton and his colleagues called such exercises “dummy runs,” a term Britton’s group evolved to describe tasks unrelated to the larger issues of creative composing in which a student is “called upon to perform a writing task in order (a) to exercise his capacity to perform that kind of task, and/or (b) to demonstrate to the teacher his proficiency in performing it” (104–05). And, as early as 1968, James Moffett was defining exercises as the central definition of old and discredited pedagogy:

An exercise, by my definition, is any piece of writing practiced only in schools—that is, an assignment that stipulates arbitrary limits that leave the writer with no real relationships between him and a subject and an audience. I would not ask a student to write anything other than an authentic discourse, because the learning process proceeds from intent and content down to the contemplation of technical points, not the other way. (205)

Moffett was primarily attacking the old workbook “drill and kill” exercises that had stultified students since the 1920s, but he reports here on a keen resentment that had been building against all pedagogies based in the older ideas of exercises as “mental discipline.” The wholesale (and heartfelt) assault on the teaching of grammar in composition that had been set off by Richard Braddock,
Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer’s *Research in Written Composition* in 1963 was a related phenomenon. Many teachers had simply come to disbelieve in the efficacy of any exercise-based teaching. By 1980, this attack on the “from parts to the whole” tradition associated with exercises and textbooks had become much more general. Despite the flashy research claims to the contrary, many people felt that syntactic rhetorics were really not that much different from the old-time “grammar workbook” exercises whose usefulness had been aggressively challenged.

The final line in the congeries of criticisms that brought down syntactic rhetorics was anti-empiricism. Now we are in complex territory, and I must be careful to limit my claims. The empirical-research strand in English studies had existed since the 1920s, when educational psychometricians first began to try testing classroom pedagogies against one another. Modern empirical research in composition, however, was much newer, dating back primarily to the potent critiques of Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer in *Research in Written Composition*, which had pointed to serious methodological problems in most extant English research and laid the ground for defensible studies. In 1966, Braddock had founded the journal *Research in the Teaching of English* to publish the newer and better work he envisioned, and most compositionists cheered. For the next two decades the empirical strand in composition waxed powerful, with syntactic methods as its first great success and with the cognitive psychology-based research associated mainly with Carnegie-Mellon as its second. In the Big Tent atmosphere of the New Rhetoric era of the 1960s and early 1970s, there was a general air of good feeling produced by the vision, widely shared, that all—rhetoricians, process-based teachers, linguists, stylisticians, experimenters, psychologists—could work together to reform and improve the teaching of writing; workers in different vineyards need not be enemies. Once sentence rhetorics began to get serious ink in the late 1970s, however, a number of teachers looked at them more closely and began to feel some discomfort, especially with their pre- and post-test scientism, their quantifications, their whole atmosphere of horse race experimentalism. This discomfort was not eased by the huge success of sentence-combining, with its Huntian movement toward a possible pedagogical hegemony. So in the late 1970s, we see the first serious signals of an open anti-empiricism movement within the coalescing field of composition studies.

Once sentence rhetorics began to get serious ink in the late 1970s, however, a number of teachers looked at them more closely and began to feel some discomfort, especially with their pre- and post-test scientism, their quantifications, their whole atmosphere of horse race experimentalism.
Anti-scientism and anti-empiricism were not completely novel in the field, of course. We saw a sort of prequel to the movement in the point-counterpoint debate about psychology and invention heuristics in 1971 and 1972 between Janice Lauer and Ann Berthoff. In its modern form, however, the movement probably begins with Susan Wells’s and Patricia Bizzell’s work in the late 1970s. Wells looked carefully at Christensen’s work, arguing that it was empiricist in both method and epistemology, with an asocial contemplation of static phenomena at its center. The natural attitude for a student doing Christensen exercises, said Wells, is

minute and unquestioning attention to his or her own perceptions, passive receptivity to the messages of sensation, and the desire to work in isolation. . . . These characteristics amount to a sort of contemplation. . . . Contemplation is not distinguished by its objects, but by the relation of thinker to thought, and Christensen’s rhetoric enforces a contemplative relation. (472)

And, in an important essay in 1979, Pat Bizzell made the point, which she and others would sharpen over the next decade, that cultural and community traditions would be “as important—if not more important—in shaping the outcome of our debate, as any empirical evidence adduced and interpreted by the competing schools of thought” (768).

This humanist- and theory-based criticism found its first voice in the late 1970s and early 1980s in attacks on the most obvious and successful empirical research going: syntactic pedagogical research. We can see echoes of the anti-empirical position in some of the arguments I’ve mentioned against generative rhetoric and imitation, but the real edge of this criticism was directed at sentence-combining, whose basis in quantitative methods was almost total. One criticism resulting from this reliance on empiricism was that sentence-combining was a practice without a theory, a method without a principle, an ars without an exercitatio. As Winterowd complained in 1975, “in our self-made ghetto, compositionists have neglected theory, opting to concern ourselves with the pragmatics of everyday teaching” (90–91). James Kinneavy brought this complaint down to specifics in 1978, noting that “…few efforts have been made to place sentence-combining into a larger curricular framework,” and that it still awaited a philosophic rationale (60, 76). This lack of a general theory was not seen at first as a particular problem, since the new research strand of sentence-combining was so novel and powerful that it submerged other questions. But by 1983, when Miami held its second sentence-combining conference, the problem of theory had become obvious to many participants. The book that emerged from that conference, Sentence Combining: A Rhetorical Perspective, is
a fascinating collection, the last major statement made by the discipline about sentence rhetorics, and as a collection it shows clear awareness of the changing weather around sentence rhetorics.

By 1983, it was no longer enough to report that sentence-combining “worked” if no one could specify why it worked. Stars of the 1978 Miami conference Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams were back, this time with more questions than answers. “Sentence-combining is at this moment operating at a very crude level of sophistication,” they claimed, “... interesting theoretical speculation about sentence-combining has been very infrequent” (“Some” 100–01). Kenneth Dowst, in his essay “An Epistemic View of Sentence-Combining: Practice and Theories,” takes on directly the popular perception that sentence-combining was “a practice devoid of a theory” (333). After examining the relation of sentence-combining to epistemic rhetoric, Dowst comes to the conclusion that sentence-combining has a theory, but that it is “a theory that many teachers are finding problematic and many students inadequately relevant. To wit: formalism” (333). The connection with formalism is not the only one possible, says Dowst, but other connections, to rhetoric or epistemic theory, “remain only to be enacted” (333). Despite the hopes expressed at the 1983 conference, they never were. And in the increasingly theoretical world of composition studies post-1985, practice without theory was increasingly associated with the lore-world of earlier composition and condemned.

Another criticism was that sentence-combining represented methodological hegemony of a kind destructive to a truly humanistic epistemology. Michael Holzman, in his “Scientism and Sentence Combining” in 1983, dry-gulches sentence-combining with such energy that he almost appears paranoid about its possibilities. After slashing and burning all the research findings down to the affirmation that “sentence-combining exercises do appear to help students learn how to combine sentences (although this skill deteriorates rapidly)” (77), Holzman makes his central claim for an end to “scientistic” research. “The humanities are the sciences of man,” he writes, “... It would be a serious mistake to allow the fascination of methodologies for social scientific research to bring us to doubt that literacy is primarily a humanistic attainment” (78–79). Holzman’s fear—that the clear-cut successes of the sentence-combining research might slant the whole evolving discipline of composition studies away from traditional humanistic/rhetorical lines and into the camp of social sciences and psychology—was beginning to be widely shared in the early 1980s and came to its real fruition four years later, with the wholesale reaction against cognitive approaches and empiricism in general that marked the be-
ginning of the Social-Construction Era. The best-known example of this methodological critique was Stephen North’s famous chapter on the experimentalists in his *Making of Knowledge in Composition* in 1987, which calls out the Miami researchers in particular for criticism (although not as harshly as it does some other experimentalists).

The result of all of these lines of criticism of syntactic methods was that they were stopped almost dead in their tracks as a research program and ceased being a popular teaching project just a little later. The degree to which the attacks succeeded can be seen in the curious growth of the truly lore-oriented conception that “research has shown that sentence-combining doesn’t work.” When preparing to write this essay, I asked a number of friends and colleagues in composition studies what had ever happened to sentence-combining. At least half of them replied that it had lost currency because it had been shown not to work, not to help students write better. So far as I can determine, this is simply not true. Outside of a few essays, including Marzano’s and Holzman’s, that really did take a slash-and-burn attitude toward reporting balanced opinions of the research, I can find no work that genuinely “disproved” the gains created for students through sentence practice. It is true that Lester Faigley showed, in two essays in 1979 and 1980, that Hunt’s concept of syntactic maturity did not correlate with generally perceived writing quality (“Problems”, “Names”). But Faigley himself did not question the holistic quality gains of the sentence-combining students, stating that the answer must be that sentence combining and generative rhetoric “affect some part of the writing process more fundamental than the enhancement of syntactic maturity” (“Problems” 99).

Warren Combs and Richard Smith published an essay in 1980 that reported that students would write demonstrably longer sentences if simply told to do so by the teacher (“Overt and Covert Cues”), but their experiment was short-term, and they specifically stated that their “findings in no way call the efficacy of SC [sentence-combining] instruction into question” (35). It is true that the Miami group’s last report, which appeared in the non-mainstream *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, found that absent other writing work, the gains made by the sentence-combiners were self-sustaining, but that the advantage that the experimental group had shown over the control group disappeared after two years. The control group, in other words, caught up to the sentence-combiners after twenty-eight months. This shows, as the Miami researchers comment, that
the sentence-combining practice “simply accelerated the positive changes that would have occurred after a longer period of normal maturation and experience” (Kerek, Daiker, and Morenberg 1151). In other words, syntactic gains, if not practiced, only persisted for two years. But by this criterion, if our methods in any given first-year composition course don’t measurably put our students ahead of other students forever, they don’t work and are not worth doing. That’s a high hurdle for any pedagogy to clear. There were, finally, a few articles published with “Questions” in their titles: Mary Rosner’s “Putting ‘This and That Together’ to Question Sentence-Combining Research” in 1984 and Aviva Freedman’s “Sentence Combining: Some Questions” in 1985, but these essays were concerned with specific queries about technical style and abstracting ability. Neither questioned the general writing success of students using the technique.

It really does seem that the current perception that somehow sentence rhetorics “don’t work” exists as a massive piece of wish-fulfillment. Leaving aside the question of syntactic fluency or maturity entirely, the data from holistic and analytic general essay readings are unequivocal. George Hillocks, reviewing the research in 1986, looked closely into all the major sentence-combining research and found many lines of inquiry that needed to be followed up. But after his careful dissection, he still concluded his section on sentence rhetorics with a quote that recognized the value of the technique: “Even with so many questions left unanswered, one is tempted to agree with Charles Cooper (1975c) that ‘no other single teaching approach has ever consistently been shown to have a beneficial effect on syntactic maturity and writing quality’ (p. 72)” (151). In other words, if people believe that research has shown that sentence rhetorics don’t work, their belief exists not because the record bears it out but because it is what people want to believe.

*Why* we want to believe it is the interesting part.

So what was it that erased the sentence, wiped what had been the “forefront in composition research today . . . at the cutting edge of research design” in 198012 off the radar screen of composition studies? What reduced it from a vital, if unfinished, inquiry into why a popular stylistic method worked so well to a half-hidden and seldom-discussed classroom practice on the level of, say, vocabulary quizzes? It was not, as we have seen, that sentence rhetorics were proved useless. Neither was this erasure the simple playing out of a vein of material before the onslaughts of the normal scientists who followed the major researchers of sentence rhetorics. If the last important work in sentence-combining, Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg’s *Rhetorical Perspective*, shows any-
thing, it is that many of the most interesting questions about sentence rhetorics were still being raised and not answered.13

I think that we have, to a large extent, already seen what it was. The sentence was erased by the gradual but inevitable hardening into disciplinary form of the field of composition studies as a subfield of English studies. The anti-formalism, anti-behaviorism, and anti-empiricism that marked the criticism of sentence rhetorics can be found in some earlier writers and thinkers in the older field of composition, but not with the hegemony they gradually achieved as disciplinary structures were formed after 1975. These three attitudinal strands are hallmarks of English studies and not of works in the other fields—speech, psychology, education—from which composition grew after 1950. Departmental structures are lasting and durable, and as it became apparent that composition studies as a field would almost universally find its departmental home in the same place its primary course identity—first-year composition—resided, cross-disciplinary elements in the older composition-rhetoric world were likely to fade. The graduate students after 1975 who would make up the core of composition studies were, for better or worse, English graduate students, and they would go on to become English professors.

On a sheer demographic basis, it is not strange to see many default attitudes based around English departments—textuality, holism, stratification by status, theory-desire, distrust of scientism—gradually come to define composition studies. However complex the feelings composition people had and have about English departments, such departments are usually our native lands. Even if we reject much of the culture, we still speak the language. And one result of the increasing English-identification of composition studies has been a gradual movement away from connections that had helped define an earlier, looser version of composition that arose in the 1950s. We have dropped much of our relationship with non-English elements—with education and with high school teachers, with speech and communications and with oral rhetoric, with psychology and with quantitative research.

This is not the place for a complete discussion of the changing demographics of composition studies as it became a clear subfield of English. In this article I wanted to show, in a very delimited instance, evidence of the movement’s power and potency by examining one part of its effects. When a phenomenon is hard to see or define, looking at what it has done may point to important realities about it. In this case, as in a tornado documentary, the

The sentence was erased by the gradual but inevitable hardening into disciplinary form of the field of composition studies as a subfield of English studies.
effects exist as a trail of destruction. There was indeed much destruction in the
wake of the disciplinary formation of composition studies, but since most of it
was destruction of things few people after 1980 had ever believed in or fought
for, the destruction was not noticed by many. Who remembers
a vital NCTE College Section? Who mourns for the Four Com-
munications Skills or the modes of discourse? But we should
remember that swept away with the modes and the five types
of paragraphs were other, newer, and potentially more valuable things. The loss
of all defense of formalism has left some curious vacuums in the middle of our
teaching. Rejection of all behaviorist ideas has left us with uncertainties about
any methodology not completely rationalistic or any system of pedagogical re-
wards. Distrust of scientistic empiricism has left us with few proofs or certain-
ties not ideologically based. More has been lost than sentence-combining here,
but it seems somehow part of human nature to forget about the preterite. Many
people still professionally active today have deep background as generative
rhetoricians or imitation adepts or sentence-combining pioneers, but they have
lost most of their interest; they do not do that much anymore. They have cut
their losses and gone on. We all must.

Notes

1. C. S. Baldwin’s terms, clearness and interest, were not used in his earlier text-
book, A College Manual of Rhetoric, in 1902, which adopted Hill’s version of
Whatley’s terms. They are found in his later text, Composition: Oral and Written,
from 1909.

2. These numbers do not include conference papers at the two Miami sentence-
combining conferences, which became 45 separate essays in the two proceeding
books.

3. Notice I’m not claiming that sentence rhetorics were gone from teaching. Anec-
dotal evidence seems to suggest that some teachers have continued to use sentence-
combining and Christensen rhetoric even absent any mention of them in books or
journals. They have thus become part of what Stephen North calls teacher lore. But
isn’t it ironic that such techniques, which made strong moves toward grammatical
analyses and empirical proofs, have ended up as lore, which North defines (23) as
being driven by pragmatic logic and experiential structure?

4. William Strong attempted to respond to Murray and Elbow in a heart-breaking
piece with which the 1983 Miami conference (and collection) closes. Strong has
read their papers, and his essay is an attempt to explain to them, and to the world
at large, that sentence-combining is both more and less than they think and fear.
Called “How Sentence Combining Works,” Strong’s essay admits that sentence-combining is not, cannot be, “real writing,” and that it cannot and should never take the place of naturalistic experience. Still, though, Strong will not admit that sentence-combining is a-rhetorical or non-naturalistic, and he believes that “the language in sentence combining often triggers metalinguistic thinking beyond its own discursive content” and “helps students transfer power from oral language performance to writing” (350). Strong’s is an extraordinary rhetorical performance, struggling at the end of the Era of Good Feelings for tolerance from a group that was moving inevitably away from him. But finally, his plea for compromise and understanding fell on stony ground. Composition studies after 1980 did not like or trust exercises. Any kind of exercises.

5. Today, more than fifteen years after the first cannonades were fired at the various movements associated with the term “process,” we are used to thinking of our world as “post-process” and of “expressivism” as a devil term and a dead letter. As an intellectual field, we have managed with considerable success to marginalize that movement, at least insofar as it existed as ongoing intellectual or non-pedagogical discourse. Its greatest champions—Moffett, Britton, Garrison, Emig, Murray, Macrorie, Stewart, Rohmann—have died or retired, leaving Peter Elbow nearly alone to carry the banner. Many people see expressivism today—not unlike sentence-combining, ironically—as a hoary pedagogical survival, exercitatio with ars, old-time staffroom lore and instructor prejudice, the body still moving after the head has been cut off. It is difficult, on first consideration, to imagine the writing-process movement as a potent destructive force, or to think that we, in our shining theoretical plumage, are still living in the backwash of its great primary act of pedagogical creation/destruction: the wreck of formalism in all its versions.

But the powerful revolutionary doctrine of the process movement was, finally, terribly simple. It wished to do away with whatever was not authentic in writing and teaching writing. Its great enemy was modern composition-rhetoric, that huge carpetbag of textbook nostrums about modes and forms and methods and sentences and rules and paragraphs and vocabulary and punctuation and exercises and unity and coherence and emphasis. If rhetoric was a fox that knew many small things, process was a hedgehog that knew one great thing: you learn to write by writing and rewriting things important to you with the help of a sympathetic reader/teacher. Everything else is, finally, flummery. Formalism and atomism were huge and inescapable parts of modern composition-rhetoric, and the writing process movement laid down a constant challenge to them from 1960 onward. If, as was the case, formalism or atomism were charges that could be applied even to New Rhetoric ideas such as syntactic rhetorics, then applied they must be. Sadly, regrettfully applied, yes, since many sentence-combiners had been friends. But when you build a set of positions based completely on authenticity and anti-formalism, you cannot easily choose some formalism you will be friends with.
Max Morenberg of the Miami sentence-combining group certainly had no doubt who had burnt his topless tower. In two conference presentations, in 1990 and 1992, he surveyed the wreckage and protested against the attitudes that had wrought it. His somewhat bitter titles tell the story: In 1990 he delivered “Process/Schmocess: Why Not Combine a Sentence or Two?” and in 1992 he delivered “‘Come Back to the Text Ag’in, Huck Honey!’” Both blamed dichotomizing process/product thinking for the demise of sentence rhetorics. Unfortunately, Morenberg never published either talk outside of ERIC.

6. This whole argument can be seen most easily in Winterowd’s Contemporary Rhetoric (99–103), along with Winterowd’s thoughtful commentary on it.

7. Only a few people saw then that this movement would a few years later in 1987 enlarge the criticism to include the equally powerful cognitive-psychology strand of research; in retrospect it seems clear that the real relation between sentence research and cognitive research lay in their common nemesis. The enlarging reaction against quantitative research would eventually come to include all but the most narrative and humanistic qualitative research as well, and the results would, in the end, be the same: the effective ending of whole lines of research within mainstream composition studies. Of course, much research is still carried on, but it tends to be reported at NCTE and American Educational Research Association, rather than at CCCC. See Charney for the reaction of many researchers to this movement within composition studies.

8. As late as 1981, even such a noted practitioner of theory as the late James Berlin was co-authoring purely practical essays on sentence-combining containing such statements as, “In sum, the ‘sentence skills’ unit should not be relegated to a few hours devoted to ‘style,’ but should be seen as central to some of a writer’s major concerns” (Broadhead and Berlin 306).

9. In my “Composition Studies and Science,” published just a month before Holzman’s essay, I made almost the exact plea for the primacy of humanities-based (which I called rhetorical) inquiry over social-science inquiry. Although I made my own howlers in that piece (lumping Pat Bizzell in with all other Kuhn-quoters as an advocate of empirical science!), I was not, I hope, slanting evidence as obviously as Holzman seems to do in his condemnation of sentence-combining, whose whole train of successes he dismisses with a sneer.

10. Faigley’s and Holzman’s work led to Forrest Houlette’s 1984 article on reliability and validity in external criteria and holistic scoring, a piece that seems to suggest that neither criterion can be considered empirically dependable under all conditions without the context of the other. This was the level of epistemological humility syntactic research had reached by 1984: There was no longer any dependable way to determine what writing was actually good.
11. Richard Haswell and his co-authors recently mentioned the study of Combs and Smith as a rare example of replication of research in composition studies (5), and in terms of careful numerical enumeration of syntactic growth, this is true. But Combs and Smith studied their students over a much shorter period (six days) than did O’Hare or the Miami researchers and made no attempt to cover holistic writing-quality issues. (There is also some evidence that the overtly cued students [those told that their teacher would grade long sentences more favorably] simply began to string long sentences together in a few simple ways, since their T-unit numbers went up but their clause numbers did not [see pp. 33–35].)

12. This rather embarrassing quote is from my dissertation, written in 1979 and 1980. It’s humbling to watch your own doxa turn into historical grist.

13. Janice Neuleib suggested, after hearing an earlier version of this paper, that another possible reason for the decline of sentence-combining was not that all of the research had been done, but that all of the impressive and groundbreaking research had been done. No one is much interested in the quotidian mopping-up work of normal science, especially in social science-based fields. The specialized and smaller scale studies that were called for (but not done) after 1983 were not career-makers. Although I thought at first that this idea might be too cynical, I have been gradually forced to admit its possibility.

**Works Cited**


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