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Place Name Grammar: An "OFF-Day" Classroom Lesson

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Relationship of words in place names, or in other words the syntax of place names, offers the Language Arts teacher a profit filled lesson for those irrational school days just before a holiday or between Thanksgiving and Saturday when students are simply not predisposed to follow a unit developing lesson. Place names, like any other phrase, have grammatical relationship; and this relationship often explains the puzzle of why one phrase differs from another. Place phrases are part of each of us; we identify with the places we know and know of, therefore it can be interesting to compare place name formation.

Williamsport, Bloomsburg, Harrisburg and Lewistown share the fact that "s" links the two halves of the place name. Though these words share an "s" linking letter, the "s" does not necessarily stand for the
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The Active and Passive Voices in Topic/Comment Progressions

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When I was in graduate school at Berkeley back in the early 60s, we had a professor who disallowed the passive in papers submitted to him. Our joke was that we were in the only class in the country where a voice was a four-letter word.

One still finds admonitions against the passive in most composition textbooks, although they are usually qualified by a sentence like, "Use the passive only when it is appropriate," the question of when that is being begged.

In an article entitled "Actively Teaching the Passive Voice," (TETYC May 1989) Karen Scriven tried to answer the question of when the passive is appropriate by invoking the "given-new" and "topic-comment" theories of text cohesion. She wrote, "Passive sentences have . . . [a] vital stylistic justification. Readers expect the information in the subject position to be the topic or theme of the discourse. Without the passive, the writer may have trouble meeting this reader expectation" (92). She didn't, however, suggest teaching strategies for dealing with this situation.

For those new to such matters as topic/content ordering within sentences, good discussions can be found in William Vande Kopple's "Functional Sentence Perspective, Composition, and Reading," CCC 33 (Feb. 1982); George Dillon's Constructing Texts (Indiana U.P. 1981, Ch. 5); and Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartik's A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (Longman, 1985, Ch. 18). Vande Kopple has also returned to the subject in "Themes, Thematic Progressions, and Some Implications for



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In its simplest manifestations, topic/comment theory says that the head of the sentence, usually the noun phrase but sometimes a left-branching modifier, is its topic, and the rest of the sentence, usually the predicate, is comment on that topic. As Dillon writes, "We may think of the Topic as the standpoint that defines the background and the foreground -- not the target of attention, but where attention is directed from" (105). In the following paragraph, we can study the pattern of topic and comment by noting the roles played by sentence subjects and the objects of introductory prepositional phrases (topics) and by direct objects (in the comment sections); I have underlined all topic sections:

If authority is the initiate actions and vouch for their rightness and success, it must have a rationale that backs its claim to assent. As Plato put it, each law must have a preamble, a statement that walks before the law, justifying and explaining it. This rationale includes an account of reality, an explanation of why some acts are preferable to others, and a vision of a worthwhile future toward which men can aspire. Put differently, the rationale consists of a more or less coherent body of shared memories, images, ideas, and ideals that gives to those who share it an orientation in and toward time and space. It links past, present, and future into a meaningful whole, and ties means and ends into a continuum that transcends a narrowly pragmatic or expediential calculation. Authorities at once personify or incarnate this rationale, this conception of legitimacy, and are justified by it. Without such rationales, or "stories, authority dissipates, leaving a vacuum to be filled by power. As Henry James put it, morality becomes police.

John Schaar, "Reflections on Authority"

The topics of the sentences clearly show the progression of thought in the paragraph:

authority
it (authority)
law
rationale
rationale
it (rationale)
authorities
rationales/authority
morality

One notices that Schaar does not, rightly, concern himself with the composition teacher's ancient injunction to "vary your subjects," the last thing one wants to do if one has cohesion in mind.

Experiments with simple texts have shown that scrambling the order of topics from sentence to sen-

tence (producing disorganized texts) or moving topic material into the predicate and comment material into the subject position of sentences (producing poorly focused texts) significantly degrades the ability of readers to remember the content of texts (see Dillon and Vande Kopple in CCC). However, perhaps the most interesting thing about these discussions of text coherence and cohesion among linguists is that the words "active" and "passive" never come up. Why not?

The reason is that, from the point of view of both cohesion and coherence, writers must make their most important decisions before they get to the verb, when they decide what to put in the topic portion of the sentence and, by implication, what they will reserve for the comment section. And the nature of that topic, and even more importantly, the nature of the grammatical subject will usually determine whether the verb is active or passive or neither. To see what I mean, read this short text, in which you will find two passives:

In the 1920s and 30s, some European military theorists believed that future wars could be won by air power alone. They argued that bombing would drive people mad, and they convinced most airmen of their thesis. In 1941, Germany put this theory into practice when it tried to subdue England from the air, and later in the war, England and the United States tried to do the same to Germany. The air attacks were made by brave and selfless crews, but they were never as effective as had been predicted.

In the first sentence, it seemed to me important to begin with a topic that framed the entire subsequent discussion, "In the 1920s and 30s, some European military theorists." And with "theorists" as subject, an active-voice verb was most likely to follow, since people tend to do things. In the noun clause, however, my second framing concept, "future wars," produced a passive. Had I chosen to make "air power" the topic, an active-voice verb would have resulted. In the passage by Schaar above this sentence appears: "Authorities at once personify or incarnate this rationale, this conception of legitimacy, and are justified by it." Here, the subject produces both an active and a passive verb. In none of these cases was the important decision made at the verb slot; the subject dictated the voice of the verb.

You can easily see the same operations in effect in the first clause of the last sentence of the passage, where the voice of the verb is determined by whether one uses "air attacks" or "crews" as subject. The passive in the reduced clause at the end is also determined by the subject, but it is also a function of my unwillingness to repeat the word "theorists" in this spot because, by this point, my focus has shifted from what theorists

had once believed to the results of actual attacks. Had I wanted to mention the theorists again, an active verb would have resulted.

Since every native speaker of English commands the ability to produce either active or passive voice as required, the only reason for teaching the grammar of these voices would seem to be to enable writers to make the conscious choice about which to use. But here we encounter two objections: first, neither voice carries with it any special value, and second, which one we use in a given clause is determined by another factor that does carry with it a value, the value of the text coherence and, thus, readability. Accordingly, if we teach sentence focus -- the desirability of keeping the topic in the subject position in so far as possible -- we will accomplish the end of teaching the appropriate uses of active and passive.

The passive voice and the verb "be" are brothers under the skin in this discussion and in teaching sentence focus. Notice their appearance in the following paragraphs:

In this final chapter I will explore some of the implications of the preceding chapters for teaching. Although many of the chapters offer pedagogical suggestions, my purpose is to show what these suggestions have in common and how they add up to sound practical advice for teachers. I will use examples of student writing and of teacher-student writing conferences to clarify and illustrate the suggestions I discuss. My focus will be on the teaching of writing to unskilled writers, particularly at high school and college levels.

My major argument can be simply stated: This book's meaning for teaching is that we need to place a greater priority on teaching for meaning. Foremost among the reasons for that necessity are two important relationships between speaking and writing.

James L. Collins, "Speaking, Writing, and Teaching for Meaning"

If we look at the principle subjects and verbs here, we find these:

I will explore
many of the chapters offer
my purpose is
I will use
My focus will be
My major argument can be stated
this book's meaning is
two important relationships are

When Collins uses "I" or "chapters," he gets the active voice. When he uses a noun preceded by a possessive or an abstract noun, he gets either "be" or the passive. One can see that in several sentences the "my" +

subject is intended to avoid overusing "I." Rewriting to tighten the passage and combine sentences would have accomplished the same purpose without the resulting weak verbs -- e.g., "To clarify and illustrate my suggestions, I will use examples of student writing and writing conferences, focusing on work with unskilled high school and college writers."

Studies of speech and writing have shown that academic writing differs from dyadic speech in, among other ways, employing nominalizations and abstract subjects in preference to personal and concrete ones. This feature results, naturally, in an increased incidence of passives and "be" verbs, for, as Donald C. Freeman has written in "Linguistics and Error Analysis: On Agency," "Abstractions have far fewer, if any, opportunities to be agents [while]... human beings are the best agents of all" (in Donald McQuade, ed., The Territory of Language [SIU Press 1986], 170).

Inadvised passives are thus to be expected in the work of writers gradually adapting their styles to what they perceive as the discourse of the academic community. Mimicking the writing they are exposed to, they will naturally seize upon its most obvious features, one of which is the preference for abstract over concrete or personal sentence subjects. Students in this transitional phase can readily be taught to follow several principles:

--Make what you are talking about the subject of your sentence and don't worry about repeating it in subsequent sentences.

--When possible, prefer a personal subject to an abstract one; for instance, words such as "one" or "the reader" will often serve well when an abstraction is being discussed.

--Avoid using a possessive before an abstract word in the subject position; if you can say "I think" instead of "my feeling is," do so.

--Try to remember that actions are always performed by humans; think what actions are involved in what you are writing about and try to use as your sentence subjects words referring to the humans performing those actions.

Exercises in employing such principles in revision passages are generally effective in showing students how to avoid the worst excesses caused by trying to produce an academic or pseudo-academic prose. This approach obviates the need to teach the grammar of the active and passive voices.