

CHAPTER 2

Levels of Generality

Base Clause with Final Free Modifiers

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In the preceding chapter on the rhetoric of the sentence you were introduced to the four principles on which this course is based: addition, direction of movement, levels of generality, and texture. Now we are going to take a closer look at the third of these principles, levels of generality, since much of the remainder of this book depends on your being able to recognize when an author has downshifted to a lower level of generality. We examine a familiar sentence:

She met him at the appointed time in the Plaza lobby, a lovely, faded, gray-eyed blonde in a coat of Russian sable.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

The base clause of a narrative sentence, as we saw in Chapter 1, is likely to be stated in general terms, in abstract terms, or in plural terms. In this sentence the base clause is stated in general terms; the pronoun *she* is a general term, telling us little about the person involved. With the base clause stated, the forward movement of the sentence stops. The writer, instead of going on to something new, shifts to a lower level. That is, he shifts from *she* to the more specific *blonde* and adds the needed modifications to *blonde*. This can be visualized better with the aid of an analysis.

- 1 She met him at the appointed time in the Plaza lobby,
- 2 a lovely, faded, gray-eyed blonde in a coat of Russian sable.

This analysis shows the base clause at level one and the free modifier at level two. Our second-level element, *a lovely, faded, gray-eyed blonde in a coat of Russian sable*, is designed to give us something specific about the woman, the *she*, a general term, in the base clause.

Fitzgerald might have given us this information in another way, in two separate sentences.

She met him at the appointed time in the Plaza lobby. She was a lovely, faded, gray-eyed blonde in a coat of Russian sable.

In this version the first sentence is narrative; the second is descriptive. But Fitzgerald, as do many modern writers, prefers to intermingle narration and description. He does this by keeping the narrative line in the base clause uncluttered and flowing smoothly, adding the descriptive material in a free modifier.

Of course, the author can provide us with more than one element at the same level of generality. When this occurs, we have a sentence which contains **coordinate elements**—more than one element at the same level of generality. This is the case in the sentence by E. B. White that we have already looked at.

We caught two bass, hauling them in briskly as though they were mackerel, pulling them over the side of the boat in a businesslike manner without any landing net, and stunning them with a blow on the back of the head.

E. B. WHITE

The base clause is only four words long—*We caught two bass*. The verb *caught* is general; it merely states a fact. The author then provides three verb phrases to tell us specifically the manner in which the fish were caught. In doing so, he has shifted to a lower level of generality and has gone back over the same ground at this lower level. This can be visualized if we analyze the sentence to show this lower level:

- 1 We caught two bass,
- 2 hauling them in as though they were mackerel,
- 2 pulling them over the side of the boat in a businesslike manner without any landing net, and
- 2 stunning them with a blow on the back of the head.

Here the same sentence is repositioned to show the base clause and the three free modifiers. Each of the three modifiers tells us something specific about the way the fish were caught; thus each is at the second level of generality. Each, of course, is subordinate to the first-level element, but all are coordinate with each other; that is, all three are at the same level of generality.

We can think of these three modifiers as three items in a series, each separated from the other by a comma, except that between the last two we also find the conjunction *and*. Notice that the conjunction does not go with the last second-level element. It is placed at the end of the next-to-last element; actually it belongs to neither, but stands between the two.

In order to read a cumulative sentence, you must learn to recognize the signposts that signal subordination and coordination. You should be able to see that the first second-level element shows you how the fish were caught and so is subordinate to the base clause. But then you must be able to see that the next two free modifiers also have *-ing* words as their headwords and also show how the fish were caught; that is, you must be able to see that they are coordinate with the first free modifier and have the same function.

Base Clause with Final Free Modifiers

Let's look at some sentences that have final free modifiers added to them. Each base clause is marked level 1. The free modifiers that modify the base clause can be marked level 2; the free modifiers that modify a level 2 can be marked level 3. You can fill in the level numbers and discuss in class any matters that strike your attention.

EXERCISE A

1. 1 He stood at the edge of the packed dooryard in the flat thrust of sunrise,
 - looking at the ground washed clean and smooth and trackless,
 - feeling the cool mud under his toes.

WALLACE STEGNER

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 - looking at the ground washed clean and smooth and trackless,
 - feeling the cool mud under his toes.

WALLACE STEGNER

2. 1 The voices made a single, steady noise in the room,
— a noise without words,
— rising and falling but still steady,
— coming at a man like waves and washing upon him.

A. B. GUTHRIE

3. 1 Letting in a clutch is a negative, hesitant motion,
— depending on delicate nervous control;
1 pushing down the Ford pedal was a simple, country motion—
— an expansive act,
— which came as natural as kicking an old door to make it budge.

E. B. WHITE

Base Clause with Initial and Final Free Modifiers

Once you locate the base clause, final free modifiers are easy to identify: they follow. Initial free modifiers are equally easy to identify, once you locate the base clause: they come before. Remember that initial free modifiers may be set off by punctuation, but they are not always; they are free by their position in front of their base clause. The following sentences have both initial and final free modifiers. The base clauses have been marked level 1 for you. Make your analysis of each example and determine the level numbers. Be ready to discuss in class the reasons for your choice, and any other matters about the examples that interest you.

EXERCISE B

1. — Across his nose,
— from right to left,
1 he dragged the sleeve of his Davy Crockett jerkin,
— leaving the mica-like trail of a snail on his cuff.

WRIGHT MORRIS

2. — Slenderly,
 — languidly,
 — their hands set lightly on their hips,
- 1 the two young women preceded us out onto a rosy-colored porch,
 — open toward the sunlight,
 — where four candles flickered on the table in the diminished wind.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

3. — Then
- 1 I saw a dark muzzle and the shadow of horns,
 and
 — then,
 — with a clattering on the wood in the hollow box,
- 1 the bull charged and came out into the corral,
 — skidding with his forefeet in the straw as he stopped,
 — his head up,
 — the great hump of muscle on his neck swollen tight,
 — his body muscles quivering as he looked up at the crowd on the stone walls.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

(Notice in the Hemingway sentence that there is a coordinate conjunction. It is not part of either construction, but stands between them, and is therefore placed on its own line.)

Base Clause with Medial Free Modifiers

So far we have examined sentences with free modifiers in the initial and final positions. Now let us examine a sentence with modifiers in all three possible positions.

Stretching away, the cotton fields, slowly emptying, were becoming the color of the sky, a deepening blue so intense that it was like darkness itself.

EUDORA WELTY

The base clause is *the cotton fields were becoming the color of the sky*. This sentence has a free modifier in each of the three possible positions. For our initial modifier we have *stretching away*, for our medial

modifier *slowly emptying*, and for our final modifier *a deepening blue so intense that it was like darkness itself*.

A sentence such as this presents a special problem. How can we analyze this sentence to indicate that *slowly emptying* appears in the middle of the base clause? The problem is solved in the following manner:

- 2 Stretching away,
- 1 the cotton fields, / , were becoming the color of the sky,
- 2/ slowly emptying
- 2 a deepening blue so intense that it was like darkness itself.

The initial modifier is no problem. But notice what we have done to the main clause. It appears on one line as before; however, we have indicated the presence of a medial modifier by inserting a slash mark between the two commas that enclose the medial modifier. Notice also that this slash mark is repeated after the number 2 just below the main clause. And finally, notice that there is no comma after the medial modifier, *slowly emptying*, because punctuation remains with the base clause to enclose the slash mark.

Punctuation of medial free modifiers varies greatly. Besides pairs of commas, authors use pairs of dashes and sets of parentheses. Whatever the punctuation used, in an analysis it should remain with the base clause to enclose the slash mark that indicates the presence of a medial modifier.

Our last second-level element presents no problem. It is a final element and is placed after the medial element. All of the added elements are at the second level of generality, although not all are subordinate to the same part of the base clause. Both the initial and medial modifiers give us details concerning *the cotton fields*. The final modifier gives us a quality of *the color of the sky*.

This sentence presents no special problems because there is only one medial modifier. What would we do, however, if we had a sentence with more than one medial modifier? Here is such a sentence, one by Wallace Stegner:

The hunter moved his shoulder under the weight of the ducks, his mind full for the moment with the image of his father's face, **darkly pale, fallen in on its bones**, and the pouched, restless, suspicious eyes that seemed always looking for someone.

WALLACE STEGNER

The base clause is *the hunter moved his shoulder under the weight of the ducks*. The final free modifier begins *his mind full*. . . . But we also have a pair of medial modifiers, both of which are in bold type. They are different from the medial modifier in the preceding sentence in that they interrupt the second-level element rather than the base clause; however, we treat them as we would treat any other medial modifier. This sentence would be analyzed as follows:

- 1 The hunter moved his shoulder under the weight of the ducks,
- 2 his mind full for the moment with the image of his father's face, / , and the pouched, restless, suspicious eyes that seemed always looking for someone.
- 3/ darkly pale,
- 3/ fallen in on its bones

The medials are shown to modify *his father's fall*. As before, we have a slash mark enclosed by commas, except that this time it is at the third level of generality, and each number 3 is followed by a slash mark. The first third-level element is followed by a comma, a separating comma, used to separate the third-level elements. The second third-level element is not followed by a comma, since the comma that would follow has been used to enclose the slash mark at the second level of generality. (It might be pointed out that

the commas after *pouched* and *restless* are separating commas, separating coordinate embedded adjectives.)

So you see that the presence of more than one medial modifier presents no special problem as long as the medial modifiers are coordinate. But what happens if the medial modifiers are subordinate, rather than coordinate? Here is such a sentence:

Mr. Kettledrum, a gaunt, grizzled man of middle-age, with a beaked nose and a drooping moustache, which was dyed henna-colour from excessive use of tobacco, **looked down at her with his sharp twinkling eyes.**

ELLEN GLASGOW

In this sentence the parts in bold type make up the base clause. The rest of the sentence consists of three medial modifiers. But these medial modifiers are not at the same level of generality. Only the first medial modifier, *a gaunt, grizzled man of middle-age*, is a second-level element. The next one is at a third level of generality, since it gives us a detail of the grizzled man of middle-age. The last medial modifier operates at the fourth level of generality, since it gives us a detail of the drooping moustache.

1 Mr. Kettledrum, /, looked down at her with his sharp twinkling eyes.

2/ a gaunt, grizzled man of middle-age,

3 with a beaked nose and a drooping moustache,

4 which was dyed henna-colour from excessive use of tobacco

Here the base clause has been placed all on one line at the first level. The presence of medial modifiers has been indicated by the usual slash mark enclosed by commas.

At the second level we find the first of our medial modifiers, *a gaunt, grizzled man of middle-age*. We have indicated that it is a medial modifier by placing a slash mark after the number 2.

We then place our third and fourth levels of generality in their proper places. Notice that we do not use slash marks for either one. The prepositional phrase *with a beaked nose and a drooping moustache* follows the first medial modifier, *a gaunt, grizzled man of middle-age*; it is not placed within it. The slash mark is reserved for elements that fall within other elements.

And, finally, notice that there is no punctuation at the end of our fourth-level element. The comma that would normally follow has been used to enclose the slash mark in the base clause.

EXERCISE C

Now let's look at a few more examples of sentences with medial modifiers. They are first presented conventionally but with the medials in boldface, and then presented for analysis. You may supply the level numbers. Remember that a number for a medial is followed by a slash.

1. Granmom's eyes, **worn bits of crazed crystal embedded in watery milk**, widened behind her cockeyed spectacles.

JOHN UPDIKE

1 Granmom's eyes, /, widened behind her cockeyed spectacles.

— worn bits of crazed crystal embedded in watery milk

Analyzing Levels of Generality

Once you identify the base clause—or base clauses—of a sentence, you should be able to analyze the levels of the free modifiers. There is room for difference of interpretation. For instance, the Hemingway sentence above (number 3, Exercise B) can be leveled differently if you want to consider the initial *then* in front of each base clause to be so closely attached that it is part of its base clause. If you do that—a matter of what seems logical to you, a user of the language—what was before an initial free modifier, *with a clattering on the wood in the hollow box*, now becomes medial:

- 1 Then I saw a dark muzzle and the shadow of horns,
and
- 1 then, / , the bull charged and came out into the corral,
- 2/ with a clattering on the wood in the hollow box
- 2 skidding with his forefeet in the straw as he stopped,
- 3 his head up,
- 3 the great hump of muscle on his neck swollen tight,
- 3 his body muscles quivering as he looked up at the crowd on the stone walls.

Summing Up

In this chapter we saw how writers can intermingle narration and description by stating the narrative line in the base clause and adding descriptive material in free modifiers. Free modifiers in initial, medial, and final positions shift meaning to lower levels of generality. We saw how to recognize the signposts signaling subordination and coordination which help us to analyze the levels of free modifiers. Possible differences of interpretation exist because often the grammatical, rhetorical, and logical systems are working in different ways. That's fine—human beings do not all perceive everything alike, and there will be differences in the way we analyze our examples. Just try to be able to explain why you choose to level an example in a particular way.

EXERCISE D

Try your hand at analyzing the following sentences by using numbers to indicate the various levels of generality. You will need to rewrite them and to indent. There is usually one line provided for each base clause and each free modifier. For long constructions you may want to indicate only their opening and closing words or phrases. Remember that the separating commas between coordinate adjectives do not mark free modifiers (as after *pouched* and *restless* in the Stegner sentence on page 21 and below, after *pale* in number 3 and *slow* in number 6).