

# Preface

---

*The Christensen Rhetoric Program: The Sentence and the Paragraph* is the parent of *The Christensen Method*, which is a revision rather than a replacement of the parent. The *Program*, published in 1967 by the late Francis Christensen, brought modern scholarship to bear on the task of teaching composition at the secondary and college level. It combined the revolutionary work of my husband with modern technology—the overhead projector, the teaching script, the student workbook, and the teacher’s manual, a technological format developed with the assistance of U. Harold Miles and Marilyn Martin Munson. The use of the *Program* has grown as teachers have become aware of its effectiveness in teaching students to write well. *The Christensen Method* is an alternative version of the program for teachers who do not have access to mechanical equipment or whose teaching style is enhanced by a single text containing the essentials for teaching effective writing: the concepts developed by Francis Christensen, with examples, explanations, and exercises that permit students to develop writing skills that are both sequential and cumulative.

Too often we who teach composition have almost no knowledge of how to go about our job: we have a reader and a handbook and are expected to produce miracles. Yet any improvement in composition attributable to reading will take longer than the time we have with a class; any improvement from a conventional study of grammar has yet to be demonstrated. Indeed, the studies of composition in the 1960s indicated that any improvement in student writing was “glacially slow”—and was achieved by adding more relative clauses and by making them longer. The studies in the 1970s have concentrated on sentence combining and have indicated that students can indeed be taught to make longer sentences. But the sentences so taught may be rhetorically inept, though grammatically “correct,” and by no means of the quality of writing we would like our students to achieve.

*The Christensen Method* is one outcome of a conviction that in our composition courses we do not so much teach our students to write better as simply expect them to write better. The solution proposed here challenges many of the assumptions that have governed the teaching of composition.

The most enervating of these is the assumption that writing cannot be taught at all—an assumption born of indifference or despair. The most prevalent is the assumption that there is no correlation between the student’s knowledge of grammar and his or her ability to write—a point of view supposedly substantiated by the fact that no such correlation has been established by controlled experimental studies. Yet it is folly to expect a valid correlation when no relation has been established and made the ground of the teaching in the classes studied; one might as well expect a correlation between ability to write and ability to type or to weave baskets.

In both schools and colleges, courses or units in composition are flanked by others in literature and grammar. And some teachers contend that writing can be taught only through literature while others contend that it can be taught only through grammar. But literature is usually taught as literature, even in composition courses, and grammar as grammar, even in composition courses. The profession has not discovered how to integrate these three areas of the English curriculum—how to make them interpenetrate and then supplement and enrich one another. Each goes its separate way, and all are the poorer for the separation.

This method attempts such integration. It is a program in composition, but it is a program in composition based on modern grammar. It is a program in composition, but a program in composition based on the practice of professional writers of unquestioned literary merit—based too on the practice of writers of fiction as well as nonfiction. The insight it affords into style extends beyond composition and helps make possible the close study of literature.

The method grew out of Francis Christensen’s inductive study of a large sample of contemporary prose, both fiction and nonfiction. This study suggested that the subordinate clause is far less important than we have taken it to be. The subordinate clause is the basis for the grammatical classification of sentences as simple, compound, and complex, and for the rhetorical classification as loose, balanced, and periodic. These classifications underlie most analyses of style and almost all teaching of composition.

And yet an analysis of the clausal structure of the sentences of a piece of writing tells almost nothing interesting about it (and leaves out most of what is interesting), and no one has ever worked out a satisfactory method of teaching writing by distinguishing between simple, compound, and complex or between loose, balanced, and periodic.

The inductive study of prose revealed as the most interesting and significant feature of sentences what is called in this method "free modifiers." These free modifiers, commonly called sentence modifiers, are the principal working unit of the professional writer. It is these modifiers, not subordinate clauses, that give the most useful options and make it possible to say much in little—to make writing concrete and specific without making it prolix, and to get the movement or rhythm that is the life of prose.

The purpose of this method is to teach the student how to use free modifiers in order to achieve true maturity in writing. It differs from any other program in composition in being based thus on the practice of professional writers. The illustrative sentences and paragraphs are not concocted ones. One criticism of available composition texts is that the material offered as models is so simple and so unreal that it repels students. All the illustrative material is drawn from professional writers, and the writers are identified. But students are not asked to imitate any sentence or any author. They are taught principles deduced from the practice of professional writers, and they are given an opportunity to put these principles to work in their own writing.

When he said that "those move easiest who have learned to dance," Alexander Pope was illustrating an idea that is easy to give assent to but hard to abide by—the idea that "True ease in writing comes from art, not chance." To paraphrase Pope, we might say that in writing the only true freedom comes from discipline. The exercises are designed to provide this discipline. The initial constraint that students or even teachers may feel is like the initial awkwardness in learning any new skill—such as handling a bat or tennis racket. What the professional who is teaching you tells you to do seems intolerably unnatural—until you get the feel of it and the act becomes unconscious. If at first the sentences seem different from what you are used to, look at the names of the authors used for the illustrations. This is the way those write who make their living and their reputations by writing.

This method is carefully articulated, and it is sequential and cumulative. It starts with four basic principles, proceeds to a review of the grammatical constructions used as free modifiers, and then, step by step, builds up the student's repertoire of constructions and sentence types, covering descriptive, narrative, and expository writing. Finally, it applies the same principles to the analysis and composition of the expository paragraph, giving teacher and student, for the first time, an understanding of the sentence-by-sentence structure of the well-written paragraph.

This careful articulation makes it advisable to follow the method in sequence. One difficulty in teaching composition, it has been maintained, is that the first theme precipitates all the problems a writer faces. In this method, until the section on the paragraph, the student is working only with sentences (though the teacher may, of course, have other writing going on at the same time). He or she advances at a steady pace, but the increments are small—the student is asked to learn only one new thing at a time. There is no repetition, in the usual textbook sense, but the lessons are sequential and what the student learns in each lesson he or she continues to practice, so that the program is cumulative. It becomes internalized as the student's own writing habits. Anyone who learns to use appropriately the full range of free modifiers will be a skillful writer.

This method is not a full course in composition. Of the three main divisions of rhetoric—invention, arrangement, and style (or, alternatively, discovery, organization, and expression)—its main concern is with style or expression. But whatever anyone has to say in writing he must funnel through his sentences and paragraphs. The nature and design of the program is such, however, that the concern for structure in the sentence and paragraph laps over and becomes an aid and guide to discovery and organization. Solving the problem of *how to say* helps solve the problem of *what to say* and in what order.

We have started with the sentence—specifically with the sentence in narration—first, in order to devise a sequential and cumulative program and, second, because of a difference in the modes of discourse. The sentence is the unit of grammar; within the sentence the base clause is the foundation to which free modifiers are added. In narration the working unit is the sentence; in exposition the working unit is not the sentence but the paragraph. It is natural to have a class start with a narrative base clause and from there work to build up the repertoire of free modifiers; it would be artificial to start the same way with the expository sentence. Moreover, an exact analogy between the structure of the sentence and the structure of the paragraph makes it necessary to start with the sentence.

There are other reasons for including narration and description, which are commonly overlooked today in our courting of exposition. The four modes of discourse can be reduced to two: representational and discursive. The first can be understood as picturing appearance (description) and picturing behavior (narration), the second (whether exposition or persuasion) as talking about its topics. The first is concrete, the second abstract. The modes are more commonly mixed than kept distinct. All may appear in a single sentence. The professional writer understands the differences and mixes the modes deliberately, interweaving description into narration and bringing in the representational to enrich writing whose intent is expository or persuasive. The amateur is almost certain not to understand the differences and he is almost certain to reverse the flow, talking about what he or she should be trying to picture and failing to substantiate his or her discursive prose with the concrete. By including both the primary modes, the method helps dissolve the ambiguity of writing expository essays about literature. The student will read better and he will write better.

In any course in composition the place for this method is obviously at the beginning, and it may well be given as much as half of the time, whether the course is one or two semesters or quarters. The work on the narrative and descriptive sentence should be followed by a few short papers using both but generally subordinating description to narration. The aim is not to produce short stories, playlets, or poems. The papers should, as far as possible, be based on immediate observation, avoid talking about the subject, and use diction that is concrete, specific, and metaphorical.

With the shift to the paragraph and discursive writing it is time to introduce the larger concerns of rhetoric—invention and organization and the concepts of the controlling voice and tone. Since invention is essentially investigation or research and since this takes much time, the class that has been put to work on such investigation from the beginning of the term will be ready at this point—their material collected, their writing skills honed—to make efficient use of the remaining time.

In preparing *The Christensen Method* for publication, I am indebted to the editors at Harper & Row; to Marilyn Martin Munson for her permission to use materials appearing in *The Student Workbook*; to John P. Landwehr and Edward J. Chute for their encouragement and help in the preparation of the manuscript; and to my students through the years—secondary, college, and university—on whom these materials have been tested.

Bonniejean Christensen

concrete  
picturing  
appearance  
behavior

abstract  
talking about