

Transforming Views on Rhetorical Grammar

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Writing across the University of Alberta, 2024²
Volume 5, pp. 59-64
Published December 2024
DOI: 10.29173/writingacrossuofa78

Introduction

Yingdi Alexandra Ma wrote this paper for WRS 206. In this particular class, students were able to choose their own genre and topic for a final project. Alexandra chose to write a change-in-thinking type of story, in which she analyzed how she used to understand and think about grammar and how the course contributed to her change in thinking about grammar not only as a set of rules but also as a system of communication.

Keywords: communication, grammar, rhetoric, rhetorical grammar, sentence fragments



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My perspectives on rhetorical grammar changed during this course. I realized that rhetorical grammar is not just a set of rules to follow, but it is more than that. I actually felt the power of grammar, and how rhetorical grammar can construct the English language in a way that is clear and engaging to the audience. I also learned that grammar doesn't have to be as strict as I thought. The class activities and readings made me realize rhetorical grammar is the key to unlocking clearly written work. In this essay, I will tell the story of how our course activities changed my way of perceiving rhetorical grammar through the careful use of pronouns, avoiding empty modifiers, and using sentence fragments as embellishments that enhance humour.

In Exercise A, all the sentences started with “it” or “this.” By revising the beginning of each sentence and connecting them into a coherent paragraph, I actually saw and felt the transformative power of rhetorical grammar in clarifying sentences. Here is an example from the activity we did in class: “It seems academically respectable because it makes the study of English similar to that of Latin—for centuries the staple of English education.” In this activity, I observed that changing “it” to “The English language” made the sentence clearer. This showed me how meaning is affected just by making appropriate word choices.

Exercise A shifted my perspective on the strategic use of pronouns. Before doing this exercise, I never realized how vague “it” and “this” can be. I realized using “it” and “this” in the start of a sentence can cause confusion, just like if I say to my friend, “Give me this” without pointing what I want them to give me. Using Exercise A as an example, the transformation of sentences from starting with vague references like ‘it’ and ‘this’ to beginning with concrete subjects such as ‘The English language’ significantly enhanced clarity. This exercise made me realize that pronouns, when used thoughtfully, can dramatically alter the clarity and impact of our writing.

Exercise B was about reducing redundancy in a sentence. Here is an example: “Productivity actually depends on certain factors that basically involve psychology more than any particular technology.” By reading this sentence a few times, I realized unnecessary words could be removed without altering the meaning. Eliminating the words “actually,” “certain,” “basically,” and “any particular” enhances the clarity and concision of the sentence. By removing these words, the revised sentence, “Productivity depends on factors that involve psychology more than technology,” becomes clearer for the reader to understand, reducing repetition and enhancing the directness of the content. This exercise changed my view of empty modifiers. Before this exercise, I never realized the difference between empty modifiers in speaking and writing. In speaking, we use empty modifiers because they add rhythm to the conversation, along with body language and eye contact,

which convey additional meaning. However, in writing, these modifiers can dilute the message and reduce clarity, as the written word lacks the context of nonverbal cues of face-to-face interaction. Recognizing this difference has taught me to be more aware of using empty modifiers in my writing. Now, when I write, I see if I can make the sentences more concise by deleting additional words without changing the meaning.

In Exercise C, we focused on clauses and sentence types, which made me realize the power of sentence fragments and their potential to embellish meaning and tone. Here is one example from Hargreaves (an in-class handout): “Due to the requirement for constant nutritional supplementation equal to or greater than my current metabolic expenditure and the fact that I do not currently possess neither liquid nor solid forms of replacement media in my cubicle of employment, I am immediately forced to transport my physical entity to my place of residence using a vehicle powered with an internal combustion engine.” This sentence demonstrates a deliberately overcomplicated way of saying, “I am hungry, so I need to drive home and grab lunch.” However, the art of utilizing embellishments is where the humour is; therefore, we don’t have to reduce anything in the sentence because the originality of the embellishments contains the humour. Another example demonstrated by my instructor showed the powerful impact sentence fragments can have when used appropriately. My instructor effectively used sentence fragments to describe an endless journey: “[A fall] from heaven can feel like a month, a year, a trip that never ends, never slows down, never stops” (Chilewska, 2017). The repetition shows that although the sentence structure may deviate from prescriptive grammar, in rhetorical grammar, describing the length of the journey through three consecutive fragments emphasizes its continuity. This allows readers to truly feel the distance from heaven through the deliberate use of fragments.

The exercise on clauses and sentence types made me realize that the use of embellishments and sentence fragments illustrate deviations from prescriptive grammar, and this has the potential to enrich the text, adding humour or deepening sensational feelings for the readers. For instance, Hargreaves’ intentionally convoluted sentences added humour through this over-elaboration. Similarly, my instructor’s use of repetitive fragments in describing the feeling of eternity allows readers to experience the authentic sensation of endlessness. These two examples made me think about the potential of rhetorical grammar to add texture to writing when used in appropriate settings. While rhetorical grammar can be playfully manipulated to enhance storytelling and create humour, I also realized such creativity is context-dependent. In formal settings, such as scientific reports, clarity and objectivity are paramount, which means adherence to prescriptive grammar rules comes first. However, in more personal or creative contexts, utilizing rhetorical grammar, such as the use of fragments and embellishments, can add a unique voice to the writing. After

completing the clauses- and sentences- types exercise, I realized that knowing the context and having a balance between formality and creativity in language usage is crucial.

Laura Micciche's "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar" is a reading that appeals to me. Micciche argues in her piece that the traditional views of grammar as a set of rules for correct writing can alienate and stigmatize students, especially those labelled as "poor writers" under prescriptive grammar (720). Instead, Micciche advocates for teaching grammar as a rhetorical tool. Micciche also thinks that teaching grammar in the educational process should be about emphasizing its role in crafting effective communication. Micciche addresses the separation of grammar instruction from the teaching of writing in academic discourse, arguing that this division is unhelpful and outdated. She suggests that integrating rhetorical grammar into writing education can help students become more effective in communication and critical thinking. "Rhetorical grammar instruction, I argue here, is just as central to composition's driving commitment to teach critical thinking [...] as is reading rhetorically and understanding the significance of cultural difference" (Micciche 717).

Reflecting on the rhetorical grammar exercises in this class, I see how Micciche's perspectives apply in practice. From addressing the vagueness of pronouns to reducing redundancy in sentences to embracing the power of sentence fragments and embellishments under appropriate situations, I have experienced firsthand how rhetorical grammar works under different situations. The exercises conducted in class brought Micciche's perspectives into action by challenging the traditional boundaries of prescriptive grammar. I learned about the careful use of pronouns, the importance of cutting out unnecessary fillers, the strategic addition of embellishments when necessary, and the contextual use of sentence fragments, all of which have made my writing more engaging and expressive. Micciche's piece influenced how I view rhetorical grammar. Her argument for a more integrated method of teaching grammar, not as a series of rules but as a tool for effective communication, resonates with my own experiences.

To conclude, from our classroom activities and Micciche's enlightening perspective, I've journeyed from seeing grammar as a set of strict rules to recognizing it as a powerful tool for effective communication. This transition fundamentally changed how I approach writing. By engaging with pronouns more thoughtfully, minimizing redundant phrases to have clearer sentences, as well as adding fragments and embellishments when necessary, I've discovered the capacity of rhetorical grammar to convey ideas more effectively and engagingly. These changes in my writing practices reflect a broader shift in my understanding: grammar is not a barrier but a bridge to clearer writing. As I move forward, I'm equipped not only with a deeper appreciation of rhetorical grammar of the English

language but also with a renewed confidence in my ability to manipulate its structures to enrich my writing.

Works Cited

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