



# Reading and Writing: The Autobiographical Connection

**T**he dominance of prose and poetry in the curriculum of the Seventh-day Adventist high school leaves little time for the study of autobiography. The neglect is puzzling because reading and writing autobiographies can open the eyes and hearts of many students.

In the summer of 1988, sponsored by a grant from the Council for Basic Education, I traveled through Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri interviewing retired employees of the Chicago Great Western Railway for an oral history project.<sup>1</sup> Everyone, I learned, had a story to tell. After spending six weeks on the project, I returned home with a wealth of experiences recorded on tape and the inspiration to create a reading/writing course, “The Art of Autobiography.”

## Finding Material

My students read two autobiographies and write a series of four- to seven-page autobiographical anecdotes inspired by these accounts.<sup>2</sup> High school students, unfortunately, tend to overlook their past as a source of insight about the present and the future and often moan that nothing worth writing about has ever happened to them. Most of what occurs in their lives may seem inconsequential: the first boyfriend or girlfriend, the birth of a sibling, a Pathfinder trip into the wilderness, or working with a parent to build a house or repair a motor. A well-chosen autobiography can inspire students to reflect on these experiences. Dennis Ledoux notes that students often discover meaning as they write their stories.<sup>3</sup> However, the teacher must first carefully choose autobiographies for the

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students to read. A good choice will provide positive models for a variety of writing assignments. Not all personal accounts offer the inspiration beginning writers need for writing their own stories.

I chose autobiographies that would convince my students that they, too, could write personal stories about experiences similar to the ones they read. One was James Hearst's *Time Like a Furrow*; the other was *Days of Rondo* by Evelyn Fairbanks.<sup>4</sup> Hearst grew up in a rural environment on a farm near Cedar Falls, Iowa; Fairbanks grew up in an urban setting in St. Paul, Minnesota. Both writers selected incidents from their lives rather than relating an entire life history. Hearst's volume may seem pedestrian, with its chapter titles such as: "Church," "Relatives," "Country School," and "The Grove," but the content resonates with the experiences of most students. Fairbanks' chapter titles are similarly unassuming: "God," "Orphans Are Made by Social Workers," and "Being Black in Minnesota."

As they read, students begin to see that if Hearst or Fairbanks can find meaning in such seemingly unimportant experiences, so can they. Every other fall semester since 1988, my students have created stories from the depths of their memories and their hearts—accounts that amuse and occasionally shock or sadden me and their classmates.

Two major factors influence the power and candor of students writing about their lives. First, a primary value of teaching nonfiction is the "directness and sense of honesty that comes with a single voice telling things as they are seen by that person." Second, students begin to copy stylistic features from the documents they are reading.<sup>5</sup>

In my course, I focus on six stylistic features present in the autobiographies we read in class and common to most narrative writing: The use of dialogue to replace some indirect discourse, the two-verb action pattern, the three-verb action pattern, the participial phrase placed where writers generally place it—at the end of the base sentence; the absolute construc-

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tion; and the appositive. These six elements enliven a narrative and create a sense of movement.

### **Sentence Structure for Narrative Writing**

Although they were published some 40 years ago, Francis Christensen's insights about sentence structure offer a model for teaching students how to write absolutes and what Christensen calls verb clusters.<sup>6</sup> The following examples taken from James Hearst, analyzed as Christensen advocated, illustrate two important types of sentences often found in narrative writing:

- 1 He put the saw in the box,
- 2 the teeth protected by an old horse blanket.

The structure labeled "1" can stand alone. Christensen identifies it as the **base clause**. The structure labeled "2" cannot stand alone and must be attached to a base clause. It has its own subject, *teeth*, and verb, *protected*. As an absolute, it modifies the verb *put* in the base clause by detailing exactly how *he*, the subject of the base, put the saw in the box.

What Christensen calls a **verb cluster** has a slightly different function. In a chapter entitled "Relatives," Hearst describes his hard-working father:

- 1 He could and did load twenty loads of hay a day,
- 2 standing on a swaying wagon and pitching the hay up to the end of a sixteen-foot rack,
- 2 at the same time building a

square, well-shaped load.<sup>7</sup>

Christensen's "verb clusters" are the traditional participial construction, but most of his examples—and Hearst's as well—place the participle after the noun or pronoun they modify rather than before it. Professional writers apparently find the post-modifier position more natural to English usage, although many grammar textbooks insist that the participial construction should precede the word it modifies.

To make my point, I use examples from various narrative writers and require students to diagram them as illustrated in the examples cited above. After some practice with sentences written by published writers, students are ready to incorporate similar structures in their own narratives.

### **Verb Action Patterns**

Another narrative structure also conveys the impression of movement. Two- and three-verb action patterns encourage students to select action verbs rather than statal verbs. In a chapter entitled "Dansk," Hearst describes a contest of strength between his father and a young Danish farmer: "Father and Soren **shifted** and **braced** their feet." The simple two-verb action pattern conveys an image of two men preparing for a struggle. A writer could use any number of verbs in a rapid-fire description of action, but the three-verb action pattern seems to offer a pleasing and resonant balance for a series of actions: "He [Hearst's father] **climbed up** on the load of logs, **took** the lines, and **spoke** to the horses."<sup>8</sup> When students have practiced writing sentences using the two- or three-verb action pattern, they are less likely to rely heavily on the soporific *to be* verbs. Students also need to practice sentences with appositives and dialogue, a more familiar topic in writing classes.

The purpose of this brief discussion is to illustrate one way—though by no means the only one—to develop students' awareness of structures that will enliven their narrative writing. Professional writers use absolutes, verb clusters, two- and three-verb action

patterns, appositives, and dialogue regularly. Beginning writers do not, but finding such structures in narrative writing and emulating them when they write their own life stories offers students ideas for practical application from the reading-writing connection.✍



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*Notes Toward a New Rhetoric: Six Essays for Teachers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 1-22; see also William B. Spivey, *Strengthening Student Writing: Resource Handbook* (Murrieta, Calif.: A.E.S.W. Seminars, 1993), p. 5. In his one- and two-day workshops offered at various locations around the country, Spivey has adapted Christensen's rhetoric and emphasizes teaching student writers to use the two- and three-verb action pattern, the appositive, dialogue, the absolute construction, and the verb cluster. Although Christensen's ideas about sentence and paragraph structure appeared more than 40 years ago, a Google search of his name reveals that contemporary scholars have adopted and adapted his analysis

7. Hearst, pp. 220, 59.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The project was called "The Chicago Great Western and Its Communities: 1930-1955."

2. Denis Ledoux, *Turning Memories Into Memoirs: A Handbook for Writing Lifestories* (Lisbon Falls, Maine: Soleil Press, 1993) offered me a rationale for my approach and is well worth reading for anyone wanting to develop a course in autobiography. Ledoux says that life stories "furnish us with the **reassurance** and the **guidance** we need to become adults and live full and happy lives" (p. 19). See also Hiller A. Spires, Josie B. Williams, Alecia Jackson, and Lois E. Huffman, "Leveling the Academic Playing Field Through Autobiographical Reading and Writing," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 42:4 (December 1998/January 1999), pp. 296-304.

3. Ledoux, pp. 116, 117.

4. James Hearst, *Time Like a Furrow* (Iowa City, Iowa: Iowa State Historical Department, 1981). The volume is currently out of print, but the Literary Estate of James Hearst has given me written permission to copy the book for classroom use; Evelyn Fairbanks, *The Days of Rondo* (St. Paul, Minn.: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990). Fairbanks' volume is still in print. I chose two Midwestern regional writers because their concerns relate well to the lives of my students, most of whom come from that part of the U.S. I recommend that teachers wanting to teach a course in autobiography turn to the local historical society for possible choices of works to be read in the classroom. The works are accessible and quite often reflect the interests and concerns of students who live in the region.

5. Leigh Howard Holmes, "Linkages of Non-fiction and Selfhood: The Places of Personal Essays," *English Journal* 91:4 (March 2002), pp. 64, 65; see also Miriam C. Dow, "Autobiography: A Course That Never Fails," *English Journal* 85:6 (October 1996), pp. 85-88. Commenting on her use of autobiography, Dow says, "Texts in Autobiography are examined for ideas for writing, not for themes, character development and symbolism. They are also examined for style" (p. 85).

6. For a detailed discussion of what Christensen calls the rhetoric of the sentence, see

