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Theatre 157
Fall 2004

Writing About Musicals: Sentences and Style Explanation

I tailored this assignment very specifically to the texts in my course, which was a survey of Hollywood musicals, but the principles underlying it could be useful in most any course. In preparing the readings for the class, I came across a review of *Singin' in the Rain* written by Roger Ebert, with a syntax, vocabulary, and overall style quite different from some of the analyses on my reading list written by academics. I thought this could give an opening for a fruitful and fun exercise looking at writing at the sentence level.

Originally, I had intended this exercise to lead into the essay assignment on *Singin' in the Rain*, which fell midway in the semester. However, at the time, I decided to instead have a prewriting exercise requiring the students to create a shot table (a breakdown of the shot composition and content for every shot in a sequence, in this case the number "You Were Meant for Me") that provided the basis for the essay. Since my students ranged from fairly to very strong writers, I bumped this assignment until later in the term, as they were preparing the final research papers.

I told them ahead of time that we'd be doing something special in class that day, and that they should bring their copies of *The Everyday Writer*. I broke them into groups of three for *Part 1*, and they were allowed to use *The Everyday Writer* to help them answer the questions. I felt this was appropriate, as in my view the point of the exercise is not to have them demonstrate that they have memorized every fine point about punctuation or syntax, but that they can recognize differences in usage and – most important – that they would then have practice at using a reference book to find out what's going on.

Instead of collecting their written answers, we went around the table and had the groups take turns answering the questions. This way, I was able to make sure that every student participated at least once. For Questions 2 and 4, we had a volunteer write the answers on the board. For Question 9, I wrote the sentence on the board in numbered sections, so we could look at it in segments and put it back together.

We ran out of time to work through *Part 2* completely, but we were able to get a good deal out of it. Instead of breaking into groups again, I had them go around the table reading the sentences out loud (one to a person). We only got through Question 2, but they really did pick up on Ebert's simple, declarative sentences and his avoidance of specialized jargon. Having been delighted a week earlier by Ebert's reductive explanation of the theme and title of *Saturday Night Fever* (i.e. "It's Saturday Night, and you've got the fever!"), the students found this part of the exercise as amusing as it was useful.

Writing About Musicals: Sentences and Style

Part 1: Sentences: Length and Structure

Go around your group reading both paragraphs out loud once, taking turns sentence by sentence. If you misspeak or skip words, go back to the start of your sentence and try again – take care to enunciate and hear the syllables, words, patterns, and rhythms.

After you have read both paragraphs out loud, work together to answer the questions on the following page. If you have questions, ask each other – and ask me!

Paragraph #1

Despite its knowing, satiric references to movie production in 1927, *Singin' in the Rain's* condensed account of the simultaneous arrival of sound and musicals, like other popular histories of the film medium that tell a comparable story, has the additional effect of making the musical genre seem to transcend its industrial origins in the studio system. Sound technology was surely an indispensable condition for the musical's emergence as a major genre, and musicals just as surely played a crucial role in the industry's conversion to sound. However, forgotten or downplayed in this abbreviated tale of the musical's origin is how the introduction of the new technology was equally instrumental in the process by which the five major studios (MGM, Paramount, Warner Bros., Fox, and RKO) achieved their control of filmmaking in the United States through vertical integration of production, distribution, and exhibition. These five companies maintained their economic dominance of the industry until the federal government successfully forced them to spin off their theater chains, beginning in 1948. When that happened, the economic conditions of film production altered since the studios lost their most consistent source of income – theater holdings in large numbers – which provided their economic incentive for maintaining production facilities in Los Angeles on a large scale.

— Steven Cohan, "Introduction: Musicals of the Studio Era," pp. 5-6

Paragraph #2

It is tempting to try to interpret *Singin' in the Rain* in terms of the political climate in which it was made: to note, for example, that the story hinges on the thwarting of a plot to blacklist Kathy Selden, launched by an informer and enforced by using the media to pressure a weak-willed studio, which ultimately puts profit before principle, until finally the situation is resolved and virtue triumphs in a wishful happy ending. Or perhaps the "Singin' in the Rain" dance sequence represents Kelly's determination to be optimistic in a miserable political climate, insisting that he may have behaved in an unorthodox, uninhibited way, but that basically he is joyous and generous and American whatever the law may think as it holds him in its disapproving gaze. Perhaps.

—Peter Wollen, *Singin' in the Rain*, p. 51

Part 1: Sentences: Length and Structure (continued)

Questions

1. Was one of the paragraphs more difficult to read out loud? What exactly tripped you up? What in the other paragraph made it less difficult?
2. How long are the sentences? Have each member of your group take a couple and count the exact number of words.

Paragraph #1

Sentence 1:
Sentence 2:
Sentence 3:
Sentence 4:
Sentence 5:

Paragraph #2

Sentence 1:
Sentence 2:
Sentence 3:

3. How do the writers vary sentence length? How does this relate to what they are trying to communicate?
4. Identify at least five different ways that commas are used in *Paragraph #1*.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
5. What other punctuation mark could Peter Wollen use instead of a colon? Discuss why this would be better or worse (or not make much of a difference).
6. What is the effect of the dashes in the last sentence of *Paragraph #1*? What would be lost if the dashes were replaced with commas?
7. Circle all the verbs in the first two sentences of *Paragraph #1* and the first sentence of *Paragraph #2*. Which paragraph has more verbs circled?
8. Compare also the kinds of verbs circled. How do the paragraphs use verbs differently? (Think about active vs. passive, forms of "be," verbs vs. nouns, etc.)
9. Re-write the third sentence of *Paragraph #1* so that it contains all the same words, but so that the subject comes before all the parts of the verb in the main clause.

Part 2: Sentences: Content and Context

Let's take turns reading these paragraphs out loud, sentence by sentence. Then take a few minutes to note answers to the questions individually – and prepare to share!

Paragraph #3

Kelly was the mastermind behind the final form of the "Singin' in the Rain" number, according to Wollen's study. The original screenplay placed it later in the film and assigned it to all three stars (who can be seen singing it together under the opening titles). Kelly snagged it for a solo and moved it up to the point right after he and young Kathy Selden (Reynolds) realize they're falling in love. That explains the dance: He doesn't mind getting wet, because he's besotted with romance. Kelly liked to design dances that grew out of the props and locations at hand. He dances with the umbrella, swings from a lamppost, has one foot on the curb and the other in the gutter, and in the scene's high point, simply jumps up and down in a rain puddle.

—Roger Ebert, review of *Singin' in the Rain*, *Chicago Sun-Times* Web site

Paragraph #4

The structure of the piece is one of escalation in the dynamics of movement, as it progresses from the initial still moment on the porch, through the saunter and the vamp, to the song itself, inaugurated first by an acrobatic leap, then falling back to a stroll, and eventually building again into the dance. The dance too becomes increasingly athletic and vigorous, ending with the whirling dance and the wild stomping and splashing, to conclude suddenly with a freeze and a quiet coda as Kelly exits. The movement in the sound is from dialogue to wordless singing along to the vamp and then the song itself, with the lyrics. Shot five functions as the transition into the dance, and the song ends, leaving dance music and tap, which builds in prominence and volume before there is a final reminder of the song and mood music to end.

— Peter Wollen, *Singin' in the Rain*, pp. 27-28

Questions

1. Pick one thing that each paragraph expects you to know (or not to know). What does this tell you about its expected audience?
2. Find the three words in each paragraph you consider least likely to be used by the other writer in the rest of his piece on *Singin' in the Rain*. (Be prepared to argue for your decisions – we will take a vote!)
3. Circle the subjects and underline the verbs in each sentence (only main clauses). How similar is the sentence structure in both paragraphs? Why did the writers use these structures? And, if they are very similar, what do you make of that?
4. What is each paragraph trying to describe? Who does a better job of describing it – and what, specifically, in their sentences leads you to that conclusion?