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Digital Diagramming: Adapting a Tried and True Pedagogy to a Digital Environment

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Digital Diagramming: Adapting a Tried and True Pedagogy to a Digital Environment

Narrative

With the move away from formal grammatical instruction in many US primary and secondary schools over the past thirty years, college writing teachers often find themselves dealing with student papers riddled with basic syntactic errors. Sentence diagramming, which requires students to parse a sentence into its most basic components, provides a method to assist students in mastering syntactic fundamentals.

The following exercise adapts this old pedagogy of diagramming sentences to a new technology, Prezi presentation software, in the hopes of increasing student comprehension of writing basics. Diagramming sentences, whether one is familiar with the rocket, tree, or another diagramming process, is a proven pedagogy that helps students sharpen their analytical skills. Martha Kolln and Robert Funk provide a rich portrait of traditional sentence diagramming in their textbook *Understanding English Grammar* (9th edition). That text provided the initial inspiration to adapt this established pedagogy for our contemporary digital environment.

The specific skill that students hone via this exercise is the identification of basic

"When Joseph R. Mallon Jr. bumps up against a complex problem, he thinks back to a lesson he learned in high school from the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception.

The Philadelphia-area school's Catholic nuns taught him the art of diagramming a sentence. Once all the parts of speech lined up, Mallon pulled clarity from the chaos. It's a process he uses today to tackle tough issues as chief executive and chairman of Measurement Specialties Inc.

"Sit down quietly. Take (the issue) apart into its component parts. Make sure all the components fit together well. They've got to be well chosen, fit together and make sense. There are few (business) problems that can't be solved that way, as dire as it might seem," Mallon said. "Sentence diagramming is one of the best analytical techniques I ever learned."
Investor's Business Daily 17 October 2000.

syntactic structures in order to increase successful manipulation of them. The overarching goal of this exercise is to improve understanding of fundamental syntactic structures in English so they may be used more effectively and with greater confidence. The main objective of this exercise is for students to learn to identify, analyze and manipulate basic syntactic forms and functions within their own writing. Finally, the hope is that Prezi provides a fun, interactive environment that encourages imaginative play with words.

After completion of this exercise, assessment measures may include a pre and post quiz over various structures or a pre and post comparison of a short writing assignment that includes the structures analyzed in the exercise.

What kind of paper or assignment is the exercise meant to accompany?

This fundamental exercise is appropriately matched with most types of writing assignments. In particular, it lines up with assignments in which transitions between sections, paragraphs, or

sentences are challenging or there is a strict word limit. For example, subordinate clauses

are often effective transition devices between paragraphs within an essay. Many students, however, have never actually identified or named this structure. Nevertheless, once they are able to identify and manipulate these clauses by learning to parse sentences, they can then use them more effectively to connect ideas between paragraphs. With regard to assignments with a strict word limit (e.g., a one page business memo of 250 words), this assignment helps students recognize excessive wordiness in their writing. By parsing a sentence, students come to understand the exact function of each structure in the sentence and the relationships between and amongst these structures.

What is necessary to do this exercise?

For this exercise, a computer classroom with Internet access and an overhead projector, as well as an instructor willing to consider using Prezi in a new way, is necessary. Prezi is a user-friendly presentation software that faculty and students can use in a variety of environments. It's also colorful, interactive and fun.

Instructors and students will also need to set up Prezi accounts. The free accounts offered by Prezi are sufficient for this exercise. If students are to work in groups, then an account can be set up for each group with all members (including the instructor) having access to the account. This permits students to log in at different times and for all to contribute to building the presentation-diagram. This also allows for the instructor to see who is contributing and who isn't.

If the instructor is not familiar with Prezi, then s/he can learn it from the video tutorials available through Prezi (www.prezi.com) or Atomic Learning (www.atomiclearning.com). These are user-friendly videos that allow one to pause and re-play as necessary. Also, this is a terrific opportunity for tapping into the Informational Technology (IT) sources on campus. Check with the IT office on campus for the name of someone who works with Prezi and is willing to answer questions. If the instructor has a student enrolled in the class who is familiar with Prezi, then we suggest that the instructor invite the student to offer the Prezi workshop to his/her classmates. This provides an excellent opportunity to flip the classroom in a positive way offering students the chance to learn from each other.

Why Prezi?

Because parsing sentences with traditional diagramming strategies, particularly tree diagrams, can become unwieldy, as the sentence grows more complex, we decided to explore digital options such as Prezi. As an interactive canvas, Prezi operates in a fluid, dynamic fashion, allowing students to zero in on a particular component of a structure while not losing sight of the entire structure. It allows the student to parse a multi-layered structure while efficiently highlighting a particular form within the sentence. The interactive canvas also allows for personalization of a diagramming project by allowing students to work through the syntactic structures in an order that reflects their personal grammatical knowledge, whether that is native speaker knowledge or second language acquisition knowledge. Because Prezi is colorful, interactive and fun, it appeals to visual and kinesthetic learners. One can also add audio commentary to a Prezi to assist auditory learners.

This does not mean throw away paper and pencil! Most students will work through the initial stages of any sort of diagramming using these tried and true tools first. Think of Prezi as animations of paper exercises. The benefits of creating a Prezi after the initial paper and pencil analysis are that Prezi allows for highlighting of troublesome structures in an interactive way and for being able to move between a particular structure in a sentence, such as a prepositional phrase, and the sentence as a whole. Finally, this interactive approach to syntax appears to help decrease student anxiety about diagramming. This anxiety has often interfered with students achieving success in this area. Other benefits are that Prezis can be saved and students can review them as needed. Students can also easily add to or adapt old material to future projects.

Time Commitment

For the instructor outside of class, the time commitment is approximately one hour to learn the basics of Prezi. Once prepared, approximately two one-hour class periods are necessary: one for the Prezi workshop to teach the class the software and one for the student presentations of their sentence analyses. Because time is often a factor in our classrooms, the number of students in the class impacts whether you want students to work individually or in groups for the presentations. The process runs smoothly when students work in groups or dyads, with one student managing the computer while the other student(s) present the analyses. Group presentations allow for less class time to be dedicated to the exercise. However, the down side to group work is whether or not all students have Internet and computer access outside of the classroom to produce the presentation.

Eight Parts of Speech for English

Nouns
Verbs
Pronouns
Adverbs
Adjectives
Prepositions
Conjunctions
Interjections.

Before the Prezi Workshop for Students

Before the Prezi workshop for students, the instructor should review the structures to be highlighted in the exercise with the class. Also, if this is to be graded, provide the students a rubric that details instructor expectations for the assignment. This might simply be a rubric based on the eight parts of speech or basic sentence, phrase or clause structures. Also, if the instructor is not conducting the workshop, be sure to meet with the individual who is to ensure coverage of all pertinent material.

Be prepared to spend a bit of extra time with prepositions as well as subordinating conjunctions. Prepositional phrases are often tricky because the same structure can function to describe a noun or a verb depending on its position in the sentence. For example, "The dog is sleeping on the porch." In this sentence, the prepositional phrase "on the porch" acts as an

Possible Basic Structures to Explore

Simple, complete subject
Simple, complete predicate
Prepositional phrase
Independent clause
Subordinate clause

adverb by telling the reader ‘where’ the dog is sleeping. However, we can move the same prepositional phrase so that the sentence reads, “The dog on the porch is sleeping.” In this sentence, the phrase acts as an adjective because it tells the reader ‘which’ dog is sleeping. Subordinate clauses often seem to be tricky because in “text talk” or “tweets” subordinate clauses are treated as complete sentences instead of a dependent structure. So a review of subordinate conjunctions is generally helpful.

Most Common Subordinating Conjunctions

after	how	till (or 'til)
although	if	unless
as	inasmuch	until
as if	in order that	when
as long as	lest	whenever
as much as	now that	where
as soon as	provided (that)	wherever
as though	since	while
because	so that	
before	than	
even if	that	
even though	though	

The Exercise

Choosing Sentences

Instructors may either assign certain sample structures to be used for practice in the workshop or have students write a series of sentences related to their current writing assignment: one simple sentence, one compound sentence, and one complex sentence. Ideally, one of these

sentences is a working thesis statement for an assignment or is meaningful to the students in another way. Another take is to have students identify sentences from previous assignments that were problematic and parse those.

Instructors may also want to start with structures smaller than the sentence such as a prepositional phrase or a noun phrase. However, if the class is more advanced, then introduce more intricate sentences. For example, have students choose from a list of sentences that open famous novels such as:

- Call me Ishmael. - Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851).
- Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. - Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).
- It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. - Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).
- riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs. - James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (1939).
- It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. - George Orwell, *1984* (1949).

The Prezi Workshop

1. Choose Template

In the workshop, have the students choose a Prezi template. Because the templates, themselves, can be distracting, instructors may wish to choose one template to be learned by all during the workshop. The one presented below is called “The Journey.”

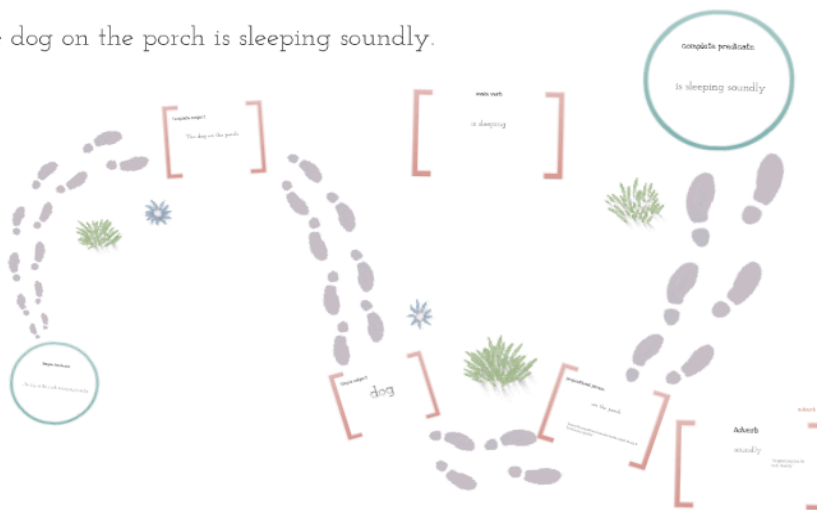
Begin by clicking in the Title Area boxes to add appropriate text for your assignment. For example, “Simple Sentence Digital Diagram” in the top text box with the simple sentence to be parsed in the text box below it.

Sample sentences

- The dog on the porch is sleeping soundly.
- The environmental efforts of the United States should be focused on the increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

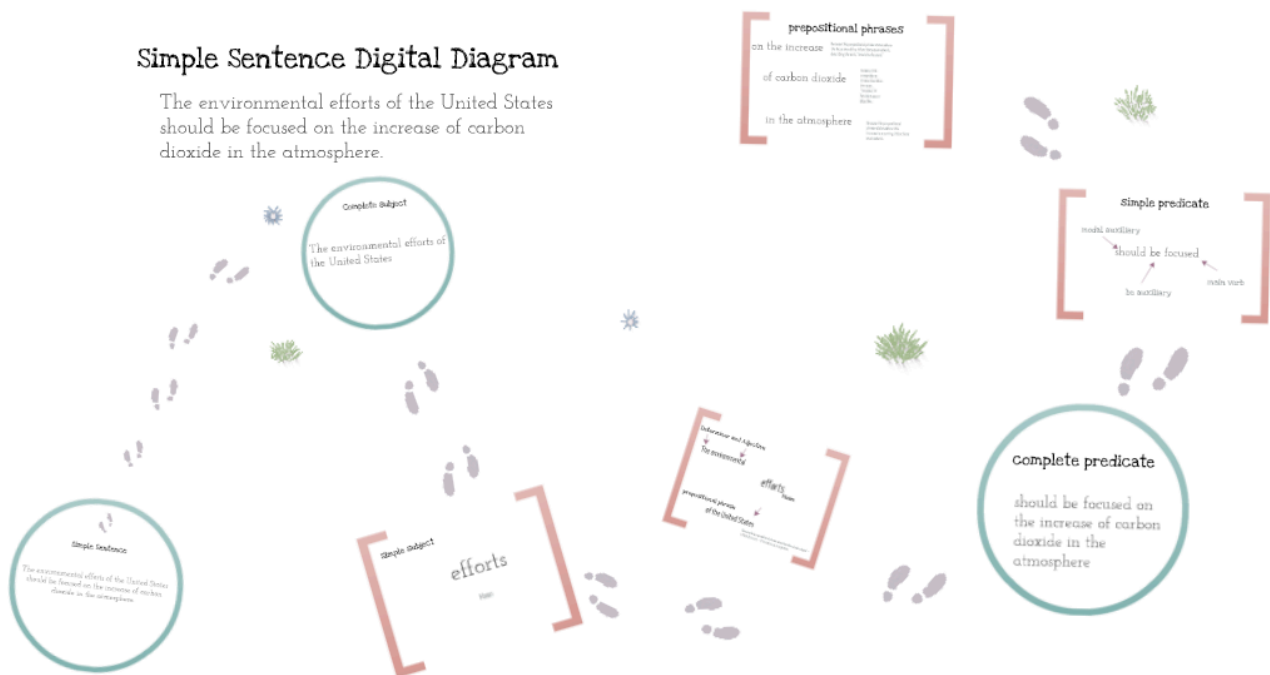
Simple Sentence Digital Diagram

The dog on the porch is sleeping soundly.



Simple Sentence Digital Diagram

The environmental efforts of the United States should be focused on the increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

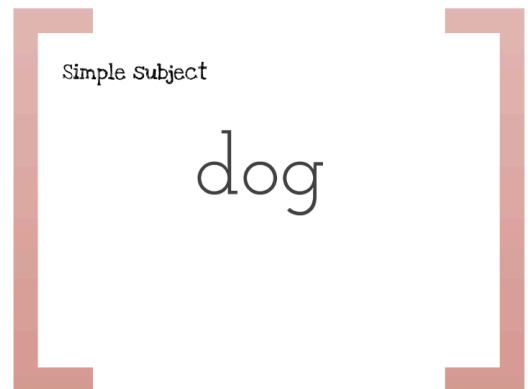


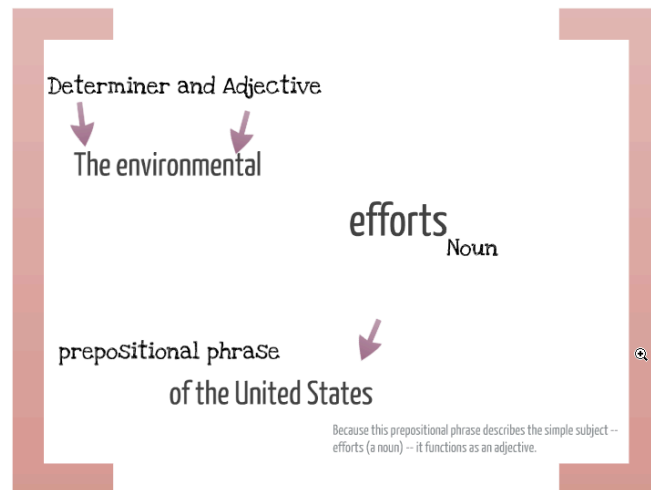
2. Fill the first frame of the template.

Once a template is chosen, students write the largest structure, such as a simple sentence, to be parsed in the first frame.



3. In subsequent frames, students parse the appropriate constituent parts of the larger structure. Below are sample ways to parse the complete and simple subjects of the two sentences from above.





4. After parsing the subject, students might then highlight the simple or complete predicate, including all modifiers.



complete predicate

should be focused on
the increase of carbon
dioxide in the
atmosphere

Simple predicate

modal auxiliary

should be focused

be auxiliary

main verb

prepositional phrases

on the increase

Because this prepositional phrase states where the focus should be, it functions as an adverb, describing the verb, "should be focused."

of carbon dioxide

Because this prepositional phrase describes the noun, "increase," it functions as an adjective.

in the atmosphere

Because this prepositional phrase states where this increase is occurring, it functions as an adverb.

Student Presentations

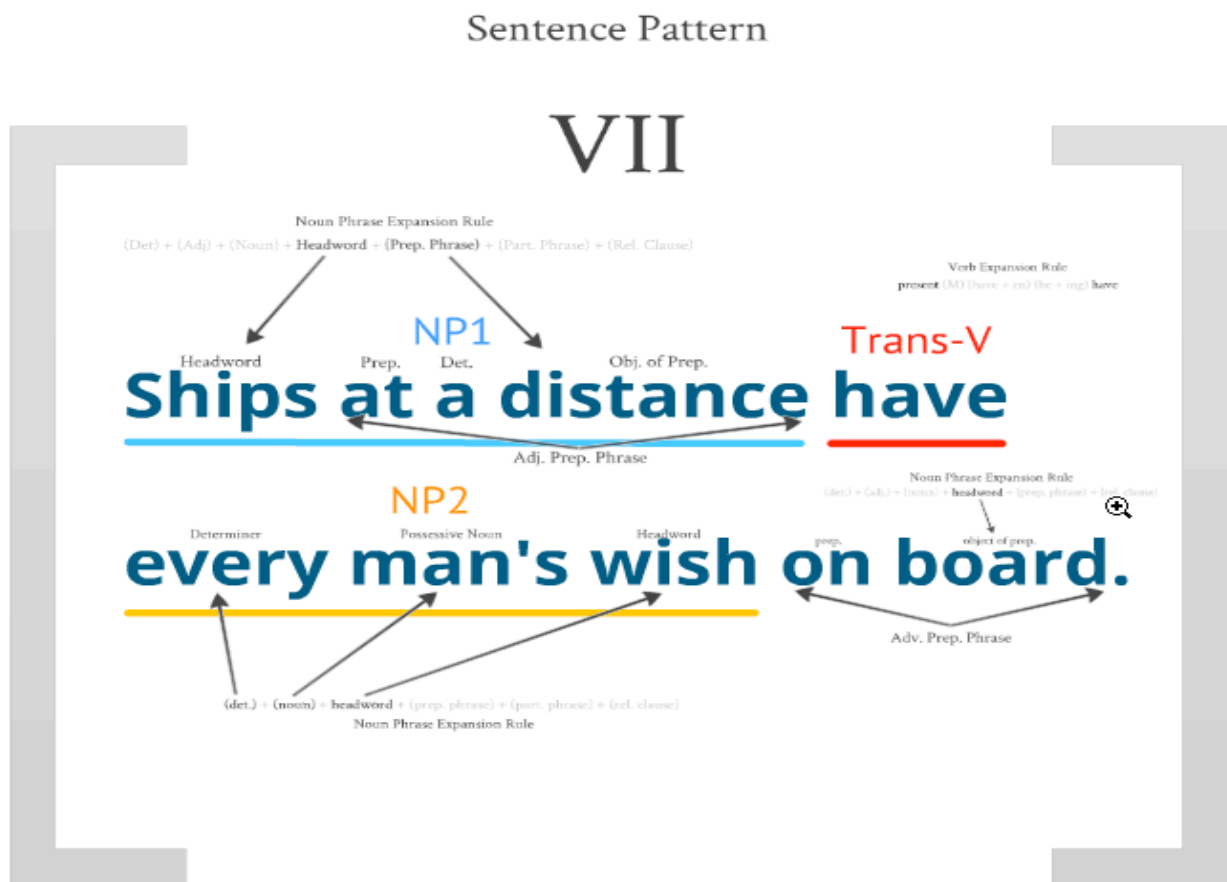
Prior to the student presentations, instructors should check that all of the technology involved is working properly, including the Internet connection, laptop, projector, and microphone, if needed. Don't hesitate to let a member of the IT office know what you are doing so that you can call on someone for back-up if you encounter technical difficulties.

Also, it is much more time efficient to have a single computer, which all students will use to present, instead of having students connect their own laptops to the projector. Because Prezi is web-based, student anxiety about their computers crashing or jump drives getting lost is eliminated. However, instructors need to make sure the Internet connection in the classroom is live and consistent.

Encourage student interaction with their peers during the presentations. Odds are that more than a few errors will occur in the student analyses. Pause and invite students to comment and assist in clarifying or correcting the errors. Walk softly at this stage as students can become terribly uncomfortable or embarrassed if the instructor does not

facilitate a positive environment for the exchange. These errors, however, often provide the richest learning interactions for all in the classroom. Also, remember that ambiguity often occurs in syntactic and semantic relationships. There just may be more than one way to analyze a particular structure. Encourage students to consider alternative views if actual ambiguity is involved, but carefully distinguish such ambiguity from a misunderstanding of a part of speech or a particular structure. Be sure to leave time at the end of each presentation for questions as well as follow up conversation when all have been completed.

At the conclusion of the student presentations, consider offering a more challenging structure or two that the class can work on together. Students are usually relaxed after their presentations and are willing to risk engaging in a more detailed analysis now they that have made it through their own work. For example, below, is a detailed analysis of the opening line of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, based upon the system of sentence analysis offered in the aforementioned Kolln and Funk text, *Understanding English Grammar*. This analysis includes identification of the noun phrases functioning as the subject and direct object, NP1 and NP2, respectively, as well as the type of verb used, transitive (Trans –V), along with applications of the Noun Phrase and Verb Phrase Expansion Rules. The sentence is what Kolln and Funk have labeled a Sentence Pattern VII, which contains a subject, transitive verb, and direct object.



Grading

The grading or assessment of the digital diagramming exercise should be based upon a clearly articulated rubric available to the students prior to the start of the exercise. In the rubric, be sure to clarify which structures the students are to identify in the presentation. For example, if the exercise is worth ten points total, then assign points for each structure to be explored: prepositional phrase for 2 points; subordinate clause for 3 points; independent clause for three points; complete subject in subordinate clause for 1 point; and complete predicate in independent clause for 1 point.

Also, if the students are working in groups, develop a peer evaluation in which students state their contributions to the process as well as providing feedback on the contributions made by their fellow group members.

Summing Up

Overall, the Prezi environment offers students an interactive format to learn the analytical thinking skills developed through traditional sentence diagramming on paper. Along with phrase, clause, or sentence level structures, this activity may be adapted to work with larger discourse structures as well. For example, it can be particularly helpful when students struggle with transitions between paragraphs. Students can type in the final sentence of a paragraph in one text box in a frame and the first sentence in the following paragraph in another text box within the same frame. Students can then insert a transition text box between the two sentences that clearly links them and write a transition based upon the key words of the preceding and proceeding sentences. Another example is using Prezi to track the development of a metaphor or a motif through a poem, designating the various elements with lines or arrows within or between frames. Whatever the discourse level, don't hesitate to break open the beauty of a string of words for your students using this innovative technology.

Enjoy exploring!

Respectfully submitted by Mary Lynne G. Hill, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English, St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas, with the generous assistance and feedback from her students Charles Lopez, Roxana Miranda, and Justine Hernandez.

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