Chapter Three - Composing sentences and paragraphs

Each sentence you craft is like a necklace of beads or pearls.

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Writing a sentence is different from speaking a sentence, but no one ever told me that.

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They did not use metaphors like the stringing of beads and pearls that would have helped me to understand the process. I had some great teachers, but more attention was devoted to grammatical rules than the creation and arrangement of gems.

You may find that the strategies outlined in this chapter differ (like much of this book) from what you have been taught before. If you open your mind to these ideas, there is a good chance your writing will change dramatically in ways that are pleasing and satisfying.

Much of what you have been learning about synthesis will also pay dividends when it comes to sentences and paragraphs. You will ultimately download words, phrases and ideas from your brain and the mind-mapping software into a word processing document.

It is wise to delay this downloading until you have created good sentences and paragraphs in the mind-mapping software.

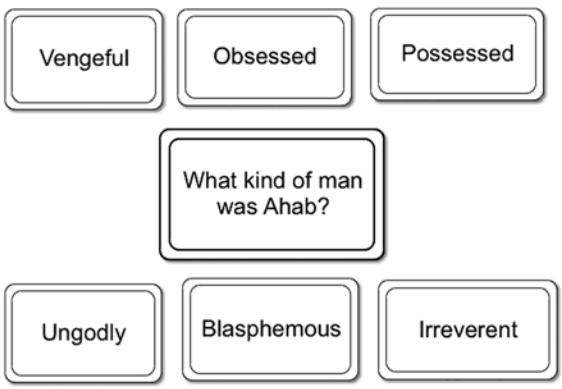
Choices in composing

What goes on in your mind when you start to write a sentence?

You have two main choices. You can simply unload a partially formed thought and worry about style later, or you can toy with the words that make up that thought in your brain for a while before unloading it.

Let's go back to our friend Captain Ahab for an example.

As you look at the character words in the mind map, some stand out in your mind as the most important. After your first brainstorming and listing of words, you have culled the list and substituted new words for some of the early words. This culling and substituting has left you with a half dozen words that capture what is — in your mind — most remarkable about Ahab.



You can begin six paragraphs now with very simple sentences.

"Ahab was vengeful." "Ahab was obsessed."
"Ahab was possessed." "Ahab was ungodly."
"Ahab was blasphemous." "Ahab was irreverent."

You enter each sentence in the mind mapping software with the character word it matches.

And then you start thinking about ways to expand and change those first sentences. At this point, you may look at SCAMPER and consider which strategies will be helpful at this point.

You COMBINE two of the sentences.

"Ahab was obsessed and vengeful."

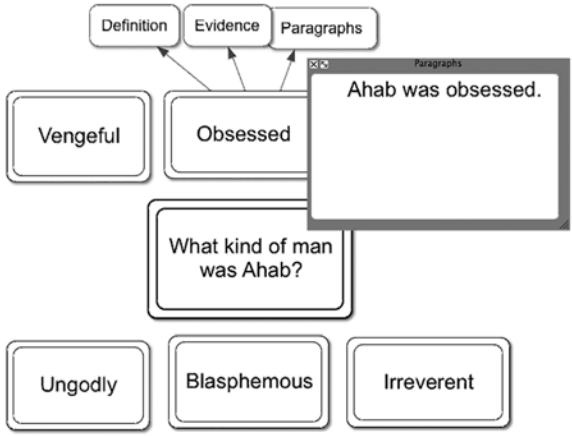
Then you realize he was obsessed with killing Moby Dick. You add that.

"Ahab was obsessed with killing Moby Dick."

And the vengeance?

You add that.

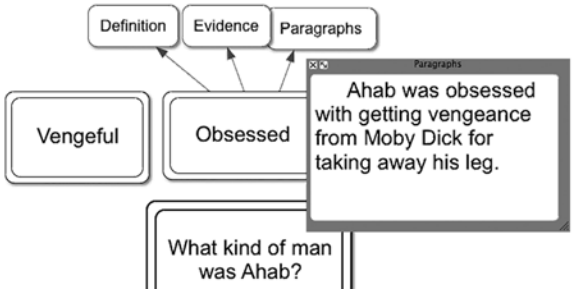
"Ahab was obsessed with getting vengeance from Moby Dick."



Why?

"Ahab was obsessed with getting vengeance from Moby Dick for taking away his leg."

You started with some very simple sentences and began changing them around, adding details and stringing the thoughts together like beads or pearls. You have an excellent start for a paragraph. You can



repeat the process for the other words, or you may feel eager to continue with "obsession" and "vengeance," expanding from what is now your topic sentence to a paragraph by explaining what you mean and providing evidence to support your claim.

A topic sentence is like a church spire. It must not stand alone. The sentences and the paragraphs that follow the first sentence will provide the foundation and the supporting structure to make your case.

You will want to define some of the key words in your sentence so that it is clear what you mean by "obsessed" or any similarly important words you may include in your other paragraphs.

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Most readers will understand what you mean by "vengeance," but some words have many complex meanings, and you will want to clarify those meanings in the context of *Moby Dick*. It may even be necessary to devote an entire new paragraph to this task.

In addition to defining "obsession," you will provide examples of Ahab's words and actions that will illustrate what you mean and will substantiate — prove — your characterization. By now you have already gathered a half dozen or more of these examples in your mind-mapping software.

They are waiting there for you, like beads in a tray for you to string them together in paragraphs that will follow your topic sentence.

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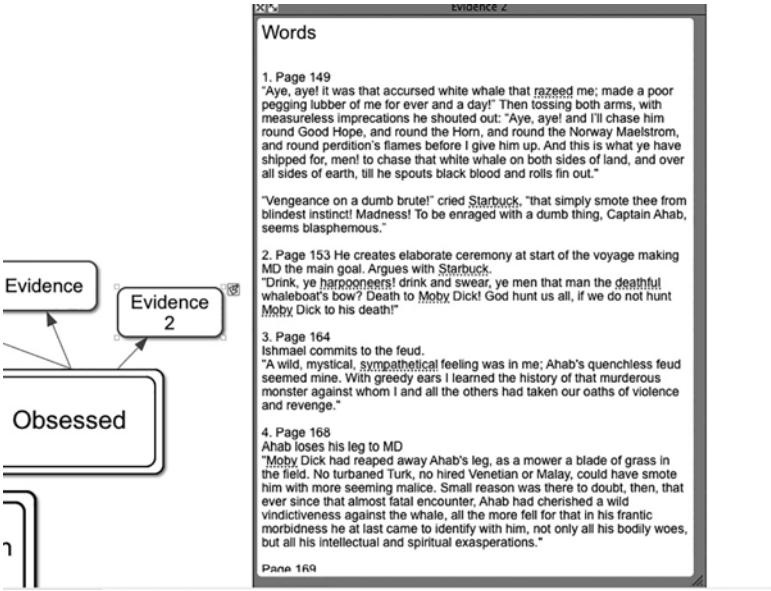
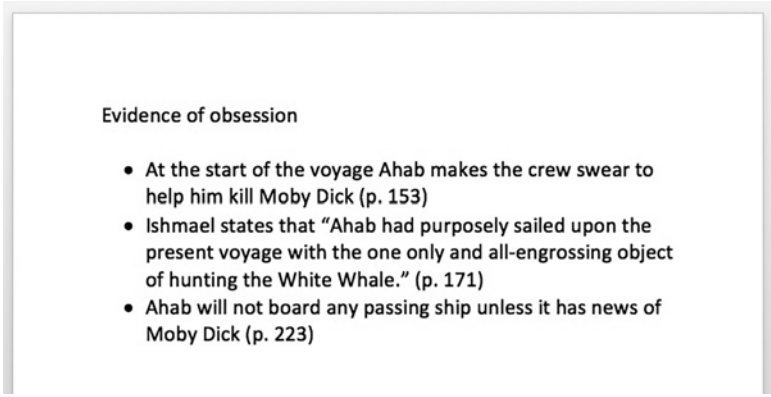
You may have reached a point where you will open a word processor so you can start laying out these elements in a somewhat linear fashion.



You can export the words and actions you have gathered in your mind mapping program to the word processor, or you may prefer to write some new sentences that compress the evidence into nuggets.

Melville devoted several pages early at the start of the voyage to a ceremony during which Ahab makes all of his crew take an oath to help him kill Moby Dick. Perhaps you pasted several paragraphs from page 153 into your mind mapping software. You don't really need all of that now. You are making a list of evidence to support the idea that he was obsessed.



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Once you have made a convincing list of 8-10 examples of Ahab's words and actions illustrating his obsession, you will set about turning these early statements into polished sentences and paragraphs. Up until this point it was fine if you wrote the list simply and crudely. The main goal was to gather and list the evidence. Now you will consider what Strunk and White once called *The Elements of Style* in their remarkable book first published in 1920. Their text remains a wonderful source for all writers, but as with all advice, theirs must be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. They can be a bit stuffy and limiting in their prescriptions.

This book makes no attempt to eclipse the suggestions in their book but recommends their work to all readers. Hopefully, you will develop a unique writing style not overly constrained by rules and conventions.

The focus here is upon the transition from idea processing to word processing and the composition of sentences and paragraphs that will do justice to the thinking that preceded them.

The Elements of Style

Because the effective creation and communication of ideas is the priority, there are six elements of style worthy of emphasis:

Flow—Impact—Clarity—Balance—Sufficiency—Coherence

Flow

As you turn your thoughts into a stream of sentences and paragraphs, you will make sure that they flow one to the next in a smooth manner, avoiding choppiness. This flow can be achieved by the skillful use of connecting words and phrases. As an example of how this is done, notice how the previous sentence refers to the first sentence with the words "this flow" and how this third sentence in turn refers to the second sentence with the phrase "As an example." There are many "bridging" strategies that you will employ to bring about the desired smoothness of transition.

Impact

You will select words and orchestrate your sentences so as to maximize the effect they will have upon your readers. The next chapter explores this challenge in considerable depth, showing how word choice is especially important. But impact also results from the timing and the unfolding of ideas, as you will want to build to a crescendo at times, make use of suspense when appropriate and employ dramatic effects to emphasize and support the points you are making.

Clarity

You will state ideas and list evidence in ways that are precise and unambiguous. In most cases, you will lay out your thinking in a bare-boned manner, keeping decoration, abstraction and complexity to a minimum. You can be convincing and persuasive with a "no frills" approach. You will keep it simple and unvarnished. Simple will oftentimes prove elegant.

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Hemingway's words are worth repeating here.

"All you have to do is write one true sentence.
Write the truest sentence that you know."

Hemingway was famous for writing simply, a style one can see practiced powerfully in his short novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Anita Shreve, a current American novelist, also writes simply and powerfully. Reading her most recent book, *The Stars are Fire*, influenced my writing of this chapter. When the main character visits her mother's home and kitchen, Shreve describes the room with simple, short sentences.

> Robebud cups on hooks. Colonial stenciling near the ceiling. A braided rug under the wooden table. The extra sink where her father washed up to get the fish stink off him before he went to his family. The rubber doorstop. The kitchen cupboard with the drawers that stick. p. 13

Many of Shreve's most powerful sentences contain fewer than a dozen words.

> He plays, and she drifts along the curvature of the earth.
> He plays, and her body is flooded with gratitude.
> He plays, and she understands that the end is coming.
> When he stops, she can't speak. p. 131

Flamboyance and grandiloquence almost never help a writer make a case, prove a point or win over a reader. Clarity will be mentioned repeatedly throughout this book.

One of the best ways to make simplicity and clarity an enduring past of your own style is to read and study the sentences of writers like Hemingway and Shreve.

Balance

As you present your ideas and the evidence supporting them, you will give due attention to all reasonable points of view. You will win the confidence of

your reader if do this well. Most important matters cannot be summed up in black and white. There is usually a mix of pros and cons to be considered.

Judicious thinkers and writers are comfortable communicating about several sides of an issue. While they will finally take a clear stand, they do not ignore or summarily dismiss other possibilities. They weigh the evidence carefully. They give all possibilities due consideration.

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Take the case of Captain Ahab's obsession, for example. While there is a mountain of evidence to support the view that he is obsessed and blasphemous, one could also build a case that he is in some ways heroic. Crazy though Ahab may seem, one might claim that Melville secretly views him much like Prometheus. Unhappy with Zeus hogging all fire for the gods, he steals it for the humans and ends up suffering terrible punishments. Ahab rages against the injustice he sees in God's world. He sees Moby Dick as God's instrument. It is an uncomfortable point of view, but Melville probably wanted us to view him with at least some compassion. It was rare for people to challenge God in this way during Melville's times. It remains a daring act to this day.

Smart thinkers and writers can manage complexity. They entertain it. They wrestle with it. They peer through the fog. They seek truth. They report what they find, even when some of their findings weaken their primary conclusion.

Sufficiency

In building a case or taking a stand, you will provide enough evidence to substantiate your position. This is a judgment call. How much is enough? There are no clear rules to guide you in deciding this. You may think of

the readers as your jury. "Beyond a reasonable doubt!" It is not a matter of amassing a long list. Several strong examples may suffice. One hopes for the convincing "smoking gun." In the case of Ahab, for example, three or four examples may be enough to demonstrate his obsession.

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Coherence

You will present your ideas and the information you have gathered in a well organized fashion so the logic is evident and convincing. It is a bit like building a house.

You must provide a strong foundation and a study superstructure. If you fail to provide the necessary "support beams," your argument and your conclusions will not stand up to scrutiny and review.

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