Building Great Sentences: Exploring the Writer's Craft

Professor Brooks Landon, University of Iowa

NEW RELEASE!

Great writing begins—and ends—with the sentence.

Whether two words ("Jesus wept.") or 1,287 words (a sentence in William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*), sentences have the power to captivate, entertain, motivate, educate, and, most importantly, delight.

Understanding the variety of ways to construct sentences, from the smallest clause to the longest sentence, is important to enhancing your appreciation of great writing and potentially improving your own.

- Why do some lengthy sentences flow effortlessly while others stumble along?
- Why are you captivated by the writing of particular authors but not others?
- How can you craft sentences that reflect your own unique outlook on the world?

Get the answers to these and other questions about writing and style in **Building Great Sentences: Exploring the Writer's Craft**, a lively 24-lecture course taught by Professor Brooks Landon from the University of Iowa—one of the nation's top writing schools. You explore the myriad ways in which we think about, talk about, and write sentences. You discover insights into what makes for pleasurable reading. You also learn how you can apply these methods to your own writing.

More Than Just a String of Words

Building Great Sentences revives the sentence-oriented approach to studying writing. Unlike common nuts-and-bolts approaches to discussing writing, this course provides a greater context for what makes sentences great. You investigate how to recognize the mechanics of the sentences you read and write, you learn how language works on your thoughts and emotions, and you discover basic strategies to sharpen your ability to recognize great sentences and make your own everyday writing more effective.

More than just a string of words, "sentences are shaped by specific context and driven by specific purpose," notes Professor Landon. "No 'rules' or mechanical protocols can prepare us for the infinite number of tasks our sentences must accomplish."



Sentences have the power to both inform and entertain us.

Explore a Vast World of Sentences

Consisting of a subject, a verb, and sometimes an object ("The girl raised the flag."), the kernels from which sentences grow are called minimal base clauses. Adding modifying words ("slowly") or phrases ("because doing so would inspire her compatriots") creates larger sentences that lead towards great writing.

In **Building Great Sentences**, you delve into the ways that literary and popular writers work with these larger sentences (called cumulative sentences) and encounter the three distinct levels that enhance these sentence kernels by:

- Adding information and keeping a sentence moving in place ("She served the dessert, a French pastry affair, dripping with dark chocolate.")
- Moving a sentence forward with increased specificity ("He drove carefully, one hand on the wheel, the other hand holding a sandwich, a ham and cheese fossil, a strangely colored lump made days before by his sister.")
- Adding information and moving a sentence forward at the same time ("Big Al headed back into the bar, a demented grin twisting his scarred face, his bloodshot eyes narrowed to a fierce squint, looking around the dim and smoke-filled interior, scanning the terrified inhabitants for any of his tormentors.")

You also explore sentence constructions that make writing more complex and add exciting levels of suspense, and you see tactics that create balance and rhythm in sentences. Professor Landon makes these writing methods clear and easy to apply to your own reading and writing habits. Some of the many illuminating methods you come across are:

- Using a mirroring effect between words to suggest confidence ("Dryden's page is a natural field, rising into inequalities, and diversified by the varied exuberance of abundant vegetation; Pope's is a velvet lawn,

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shaven by the scythe, and leveled by the roller.")
- Using three phrases of parallel construction to create unity and emphasis in a sentence ("I came, I saw, I conquered.")
- Beginning each element in a series with the same word or words ("The reason I object to Dr. Johnson's style is that there is no discrimination, no selection, no variety in it.")
- Ending each element in a series with the same word or words ("Raphael paints wisdom; Handel sings it, Phidias carves it, Shakespeare writes it, Wren builds it, Columbus sails it, Luther preaches it, Washington arms it, Watt mechanizes it.")

Recognizing and appreciating these and other eye-opening aspects of sentences helps you understand the work that goes into creating an effective, pleasurable sentence. With the newfound knowledge gained from **Building Great Sentences**, you'll become more aware of why particular lines, passages, or phrases in the poems, novels, or articles you read so enchant you.

Learn from the Masters

Building Great Sentences draws abundantly on examples from the work of brilliant writers who are masters in the craft of writing, including Don DeLillo, Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion, and Samuel Johnson. Their novels, essays, and short stories are frequently cited to illustrate how sentences can tease, surprise, test, and satisfy you.

Whether an epic poem, an 800-page novel, or a passionate op-ed in a local newspaper, you've no doubt been captivated by a particular line, passage, or phrase in something you've read—but you can't understand why. With **Building Great Sentences**, you get the secrets you need not only to recognize great writing, but also to understand what exactly makes it so great.

You also investigate numerous instances in which an author's writing style reflects key points in the lectures. For example:

- The opening paragraph of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* reflects the author's "tough-guy" narrative style in its use of simple and direct writing.
- The lengthy sentences in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* demonstrate the importance of enhancing writing through the use of figurative language.
- The final sentence of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* displays just how much information can hide beneath the surface of sentences.

Professor Landon's animated readings of these and other examples (including some of his own sentences) help you grasp the various structures and rhythms of sentences. They also give you new ways to look at why these and other writing styles have delighted so many readers.

Avoid Dense Grammar

Building Great Sentences provides you with key insights into the craft of writing, but it never becomes a dull grammar lesson. Rather, the course is designed as a study of sentences within the larger framework of prose style and writing theory.



Prose rhythms affect how we react to writing styles.

Grammar is only used to address larger issues about writing; as you examine the rewards (and potential risks) of various sentence forms, you never become bogged down in a study of dense grammar.

You focus on the reasons why and how these various sentence forms use language to achieve particular goals, not on labeling parts of a sentence. A thorough and helpful study of what makes for elegant and effective writing, notes Professor Landon, cannot depend solely on grammar.

A Passionate Approach to the Craft

Professor Landon is the Director of the General Education Literature Program at the University of Iowa and the recipient of the school's M. L. Huit Teaching Award. Having regularly taught a sentence-based prose style course at the University of Iowa for more than 25 years, he is the perfect guide to take you into the intricate pleasures of great sentences.

Building Great Sentences stems from Professor Landon's passion for a sentence-based approach to writing, commonly overshadowed by more technical, theory-based approaches that ignore the pleasures of reading and writing.

You see that this countertraditional approach—emphasizing the pleasure of language and not the avoidance of mistakes—makes this course a unique way to experience and understand the pleasure that Gertrude Stein found in the sequences of words that constitute our sentences.

With its passionate approach to writing and reading, and its indulgence in the sheer joy of language, **Building Great Sentences** will change the way you read and write. It's a journey that gives you unique insights into the nature of great writing—it also teaches you how you can achieve some of this greatness yourself.

The Course Curriculum

1. A Sequence of Words

Building great sentences depends on more than just stringing words together. This lecture explores the definition of a sentence and introduces several assumptions on which the course rests, such as that a greater control of syntax is one of the most direct routes to improving writing.

2. Grammar and Rhetoric

Examine some of the key terminology used throughout the course and focus on learning how sentences work (their rhetoric) instead of merely labeling their constituent parts (their grammar).

3. Propositions and Meaning

A sentence may contain more propositions than are visible in the grammar and syntax of its surface language. Discover how the facts, ideas, and feelings in a sentence lie beneath its words and organization.

4. How Sentences Grow

Adding propositional content to a kernel sentence ("They slept.") moves sentences forward and enriches their meaning. Here are three types of strategies that give sentences more momentum and depth: the connective, the subordinative, and the adjectival.

5. Adjectival Steps

Professor Landon makes the case for using adjectival strategies to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of your sentences. Boiling down subordinate clauses to single modifying words allows you to pack more information into each sentence.

6. The Rhythm of Cumulative Syntax

Cumulative sentences lend themselves to writing moves that almost guarantee more effective sentences. Learn how these easy-to-write sentences take you through increasingly specific sentence levels and how they clarify and embellish preceding phrases.

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About Your Professor

Brooks Landon is Professor of English and Collegiate Fellow at the University of Iowa and Director of the university's General Education Literature Program. From 1999 to 2005, he was Chair of the English Department. Professor Landon earned his M.A. and Ph.D. from The University of Texas at Austin.

Since 1978, Professor Landon has regularly offered a prose style course focused on the sentence. He has also taught courses in nonfiction writing, contemporary American fiction, 20th-century American literature and culture, modern fiction, science fiction, hypertext fiction and scholarship, and electronic textuality.

Published widely in the fields of contemporary American literature and science fiction, Professor Landon is the author of numerous books, including *Science Fiction After 1900: From the Steam Man to the Stars*; *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Rethinking Science Fiction in the Age of Electronic (Re)Production*; and *Thomas Berger*.

Among his many awards and accolades are a University of Iowa M. L. Huit Teaching Award and an International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts Distinguished Scholarship.

7. Direction of Modification

Cumulative sentences also employ modifying words and phrases before, between, or at the end of base clauses. Investigate the benefits and potential risks of each of these placement options on the meaning of your sentences.

8. Coordinate, Subordinate, and Mixed Patterns

With your newfound understanding of the relationship between base clauses and modifying phrases, you examine the three major patterns of cumulative sentences and their effect on the base clause: coordinate (refining information), subordinate (providing new information), and mixed (combining the previous two patterns).

9. Coordinate Cumulative Sentences

This lecture elaborates on coordinate cumulative patterns, which pile up modifying phrases that point back to the base clause. It also emphasizes the importance of listening to how your sentences read as a means of tightening up their logic.

10. Subordinate and Mixed Cumulatives

Continuing the discussion of various cumulative sentence patterns, Professor Landon zeroes in on subordinate and mixed patterns, which offer more variety to sentences by adding specificity or tapping into the strengths of both coordinate and subordinate patterns.

11. Prompts of Comparison

Prompts like "as if," "as though," and "like" can prompt writers to look for metaphors, similes, or speculative phrases that add information, clarification, and imaginative appeal to sentences. Learn how writers forge emotional links with their readers by incorporating figurative language into their writing.

12. Prompts of Explanation

Prompts can also speculate about the unknown. Examine three major prompts—"because," "perhaps," and "possibly"—to use in your sentences, so you can reveal more of your thinking and strengthen the connection between you and your readers.

13. The Riddle of Prose Rhythm

Follow along with scholars and critics as they try to study, measure, and explain the mystery of prose rhythm. Learn to better recognize the distinctive rhythms that characterize your sentences by imagining their modifying levels as long or short bits of Morse code.

14. Cumulative Syntax to Create Suspense

Learn to start thinking about sentences as not just "loose" or "periodic" but as possessing degrees of suspense. Base clauses in a cumulative sentence can be moved about or split to increase or decrease the reader's suspense about how the sentence will end.

15. Degrees of Suspensiveness

In this lecture, you unpack the periodic/suspensive sentence, which suggests a greater degree of control over its material and, when used effectively, can generate interest by combining complex concepts with syntactical suspense.

16. The Mechanics of Delay

Look closely at four broad tactics to delay completing the base clause, two of which involve the manipulation of modifiers and two of which use initial clauses or phrases as either extended subjects or as modifiers. You also consider a possible fifth tactic that involves using a colon or semicolon.

17. Prefab Patterns for Suspense

Another option for adding suspense to sentences is starting them with certain prompts such as "if" or "since." This lecture illustrates the uses of these and other prompts and considers some reasons for making suspense a critical part of your prose style.

18. Balanced Sentences and Balanced Forms

Perhaps the most intense form of the periodic/suspensive sentence is the balanced sentence. Professor Landon points out that balanced sentences, in drawing their strength from the tension between variation and repetition, offer an advantage to writers comparing two subjects.

19. The Rhythm of Twos

Binary oppositions in balanced sentences lend confidence and conclusiveness to writing. With its mirroring effect, the duple (double-beat) rhythm gives balanced sentences the power to stay lodged in your mind.

20. The Rhythm of Threes

Three-part series bring an extended balance to sentences through the buildup of elements in threes. Delve into the unity, progression, and intensification at the heart of this syntactical form.

21. Balanced Series and Serial Balances

Sentence balance is an extension of the organizational constructs of human consciousness. Explore the prevalence of balanced rhythm in our speech and writing and look at numerous examples of sentence balance.

22. Master Sentences

The opposite of the minimal base clause is the master sentence: a very long sentence that can function in remarkably original and controlled ways. While no formula can anticipate the context and purpose of master sentences, you can construct effective ones by combining a number of the strategies from earlier lectures.

23. Sentences in Sequence

Move beyond the sentence and on to the impact of several sentences in sequence and see new possibilities of resonance and relationship among their rhythms and structures.

24. Sentences and Prose Style

How do our sentences fit into prose style? In exploring critical approaches to this issue, Professor Landon emphasizes that prose style can be seen as both a problem and a gift passed on from writer to writer.

Should I Buy Audio or Video?

While this course works well in all formats, the DVD features multiple sentence diagrams (some animated) that demonstrate sentence structure, on-screen quotations, definitions of key terms and style types, and more than 100 visual images to enhance your learning experience.

Frequently asked questions ...

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