

The Writing Revolution

A Guide To Advancing Thinking Through Writing In All Subjects and Grades (also called The Hochman Method)

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Foreword By Doug Lemov

A few years ago our family spent a couple of months in London. My kids were 13, 11, and 6 at the time and I had work there so we decided to take the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to live in one of the world's great capitals. We paid regular visits to the British Museum, combed through the food stalls at Borough Market, and traced on foot the remains of the city's medieval wall. There were day trips to Bath and Cambridge. We even had a *local*—pub, that is, which really should go without saying.

It was an incredible experience, thanks in no small part to what I learned at a lunch I had with one of the authors of this book before we left. I'd read an article about Judith Hochman's work at New Dorp High School in *The Atlantic* a year or two before and it had stayed with me. Hochman espoused embedding writing instruction in content. She thought sentences were overlooked and rarely taught. She thought syntax, "syntactic control," was the link to unlock the connection between better writing and better reading. She believed in the power of deliberate practice to build reading skills. Her work was technical and granular. And the results were hard to ignore. It was the kind of thing I was drawn to.

A friend had connected us and I drove down to meet her—with what soon revealed itself as typical graciousness she had invited me to her home near New York City—and the result was one of the most memorable days of my working life. I remember scratching notes furiously on page after page of my notebook, trying to capture everything she observed—about writing, its connection to reading and thinking, and about why so many kids struggled to learn it. Over and over Hochman would hit on an idea that had been swirling in my head in inchoate wisps and put it into a clear, logical formulation of practice. Here was the idea you were fumbling with, described perfectly; here was how you'd make it work.

I couldn't write fast enough, but I remember thinking that when I got home, I would read everything she'd written. This, however, turned out to be the only disappointment. There wasn't, until now, any place where the ideas Hochman had talked about were written down in one cohesive place for a reader like me. I was left with the observations in my notebook, the hope that Hochman would someday write the book you are now holding, and her sentence expansion activities.

It was these activities that were the gift that transformed our trip to London. Hochman had spent about 20 minutes riffing on the idea the day we met. The sentence was the building block of both writing and thinking, the "complete thought," we agreed, but if you looked at the complete thoughts students produced in their writing they were too often wooden, repetitive, inflexible. If the task of wrestling ideas into written words was to memorialize thinking, students—at least most of them—did not often have control of a sufficient number of syntactic forms and tools to capture and express complex thoughts.

They could not express two ideas happening at once, with one predominating over the other. They could not express a thought interrupted by a sudden alternative thesis. Their ideas were poor on paper because their sentences could not capture, connect and, ultimately, develop them. That last part was the most damning of all. One way to generate complex ideas is to write them into being—often slowly adding and reworking and refining, as I find myself doing now as I draft and revise this foreword for the 10th or 20th or 100th time. Because students could not say what they meant, and because, as a result, they did not practice capturing and connecting complex ideas with precision in writing, they had fewer complex ideas. Or they had ideas like the sentences they wrote: predictable; neither compound nor complex. What might have been a skein of thought was instead a litter of short broken threads, each with a subject-verb-object construction.

Hochman's solution was regular intentional exercises to expand students' syntactic range. You could ask them to practice expanding their sentences in specific and methodical ways and they'd get better at it. Crucially, she pointed out, this must be done in a content rich environment because, "the content drives the rigor." Sentences needed ideas pressing outwards from inside them to stretch and expand their limits. Only rich content gave them a reason to seek and achieve nuance.

One example of a Hochman sentence expansion exercise was called *Because, But, So*. The idea was deceptively simple: You gave students a sentence stem and then asked them to expand it three different ways—with the common conjunctions *because, but, and so*. This would help them to see each sentence as constantly expandable. And it would, as Hochman writes in this book, "prod them to think critically and deeply about the content they were studying—far more so than if you simply asked them to write a sentence in answer to an open ended question." It would build their ability to conjoin ideas with fluidity. It would help them to understand, through constant theme and variation, the broader concepts of subordination and coordination.

I want to pause here to digress on the seemingly underwhelming concepts of coordination and subordination. I will ask you to stifle your yawn as I acknowledge that they are easy to dismiss—ancient, faintly risible, uttered once long ago by acolytes of sentence diagramming in the era of chalk dust. They smack of grammar-for-grammar's sake, and almost nobody cares about that. Teachers instead seek mostly to simply make sure the sentences work and dispense with the parsing of parts. It is so much simpler to tell kids to go with "sounds right" (an idea that inherently discriminates against those for whom the sounds of language are not happily ingrained by luck or privilege) or to make the odd episodic correction and not worry about the principle at work.

But coordination and subordination are in fact deeply powerful principles worth mastering. They describe the ways that ideas are connected, the nuances that yoke disparate thoughts together and out of the tension between or among them create ideas. It is the connections as much as the ideas that make meaning. To master conjunctions is to be able to express that two ideas are connected but that one is more important than the other, that one is dependent on the other, that one is contingent upon the other, that the two ideas exist in contrast or conflict. Mastering that skill is immensely important not just to writing but to reading. Students who struggle with complex text can usually understand the words and clauses of a sentence; it is the piecing together of the interrelationships among them that

most often poses the problem. They understand the first half of the sentence but miss the cue that questions its veracity in the second half. And so without mastery of the syntax of relationships—which is what coordination and subordination are—the sentence devolves—for weak readers—into meaninglessness. For weak writers it never occurs at all.

For weeks I reflected on the power of these simple activities for teachers and students, but my reflections were not limited to my role as an educator. As a father I was intrigued as well, and I suppose this is the truest test of an educational idea.

Fast forward to London some months later, where I found myself for three months essentially home schooling the Lemov children, those regular and long-suffering subjects of a thousand of their father's teaching ideas. To keep them writing and thinking I had them keep journals and in those journals I found myself using and adapting Hochman's exercises. They were the perfect tidy wrap summation to a long day out exploring.

Here are some early *Because, But, So* exercises I rediscovered a few weeks ago in my then-11-year-old daughter's journal.

I gave her the sentence stem: "The Great Fire of London burned 4/5 of the city."

She wrote:

- The Great Fire of London burned 4/5 of the city, because at the time, citizens didn't have the knowledge or equipment to stop the fire before it spread.
- The Great Fire of London burned 4/5 of the city, but London survived and thrived.
- The Great Fire of London burned 4/5 of the city, so many people had to live in temporary homes until the city was rebuilt.

After a visit to the Museum of Natural History she wrote for the sentence stem, "The length of T-Rex's arms is surprising":

- The length of T-Rex's arms is surprising, but this may have been a mid-evolutionary stage and had they lived for another million years their arms might have disappeared altogether.

A few weeks later I gave her this sentence stem: "Farleigh Hungerford Castle is now in ruins."

She wrote:

- Farleigh Hungerford Castle is now in ruins because of weathering and age.
- Farleigh Hungerford Castle is now in ruins, but it is arguably even more interesting now (while in ruins) than ever before.
- Farleigh Hungerford Castle is now in ruins, so you are able to use some imagination when envisioning the castle at its peak.

We made these exercises a part of our daily lives, and as we did so their confidence and the range of syntactical forms my kids used in expanding their sentences grew, as did the ideas they developed and encoded in memory.

Another sentence expansion activity Hochman proposed to me in her living room—and describes at long last in this outstanding book—is deliberate practice using appositives, brief sometimes parenthetical phrases that, like the phrase you are reading, rename or elaborate on a noun in a sentence, and which can be surprisingly complex. Mastering this idea allows students to expand ideas within a sentence, adding detail, specificity, or nuance in a manner that subordinates the additional information to the overall idea of the sentence. With appositives mastered students can link more things into the dance of interrelationships within a sentence, reducing the redundancy and disconnectedness of multiple repetitive sentences, and the Lemov kids reflected on their travels through the music of appositives as well.

After a visit to Cambridge and its historic university I asked them to use Hochman’s appositive exercise with the sentence: “In Cambridge the ‘backs’ are in fact the ‘fronts.’” You may not understand that sentence at all—it refers to the fact that when you punt down the River Cam, you face what are called the backs of the historic colleges but this name is ironic because the buildings were mostly built to be seen from the river sides—the backs. My daughter’s sentence expansion captures this with a smooth elegance that supersedes my own description above. She wrote:

- In Cambridge, *a small town with a world renowned university*, the backs, *the sides of the colleges that face away from the street and therefore onto the river*, are in fact *the elaborate entrances*, the fronts.

I put the appositives she added in italics. Note here a few things that are interesting about this sentence from a teaching and learning perspective:

1. It includes three different appositives which my daughter used to expand her description of Cambridge, turning it from a sentence whose meaning was locked in code—what the ‘backs’ and ‘fronts’ meant is very specific to Cambridge—and unlocked it for readers less familiar with the subject. This form of explication is common to papers written in academic discourse and is a key academic skill. But even so the three appositives are surprisingly complex.
2. The second appositive, which explains what the phrase ‘the backs’ means, is in fact a compound appositive. First she includes the idea that the backs are the sides of Cambridge’s colleges that face away from the street. The phrase stands up as an appositive by itself, but then she adds—via subordination, a second appositive explaining that the backs are also the sides of the buildings that face the river. Necessity is the mother of invention. In her effort to explain what she knows and enrich the sentence sufficiently she’s expanded her range, experimenting with a doubly complex form of appositive.
3. The third example is even more interesting. In it, my daughter has reversed the common order of appositive formation. Normally the noun in a sentence is followed by an appositive phrase that expands upon it. But here she has instead put the appositive in front of the noun: the sides

of the colleges that face away from the street and therefore onto the river, are in fact *the elaborate entrances, the fronts*. She has flipped the form and is again experimenting with her growing proficiency. No grammar lesson in the world could socialize her to understand and apply compound appositives and inverted appositives, but there she was within just a few weeks crafting carefully wrought sentences.

As our time in London went on I began experimenting with new sentence expansion activities and they became a bit of an adventure for my kids—could they express an idea that mattered and also meet the challenges of construction I set for them?

Could they, after visiting Kew gardens, write a sentence about medicinal plants, starting with *surprisingly* and another sentence using the word *medicinal* and some form of the word *extract* (i.e. extracting, extraction). Could they write a one sentence description of the view from Primrose Hill starting *standing atop* but *not* using the name Primrose Hill?

In this sense our time in London was an exploration of the power of several themes that you will find constantly referred to in this book. Hochman and Wexler’s study of these themes will be immensely useful to you as an educator, I believe.

The first theme is the idea that if we want students to be great writers we have to be willing to sometimes teach writing through intentional exercises. Writing responds to deliberate practice and this concept is demonstrably different from mere repetition of an activity, which, as Hochman explains, is how many schools attempt to teach writing. Let me restate that in the plainest terms: Merely repeating an activity is insufficient to get you better at it. This is why you are still as poor a driver today as you were when you were 24. You drive to work every morning without intentional focus on a specific aspect of your craft. You don’t get feedback. You don’t even know what the skills of driving are really. And so you never get better. You get worse, in fact.

Research—particularly that of Anders Ericsson—tells us that for practice to improve skills, it has to have a specific and focused goal and must gradually link together a series of smaller goals to create linked skills. It must also be structured in awareness of cognitive load theory—it has to be difficult, to pose a real challenge but not be so difficult that learners engage in random, non-productive guessing to solve problems and not so difficult that the brain shuts down. As cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham points out, the brain learns best when it is challenged in a manageable amount. Finally deliberate practice requires all-in focus, and that is maximized in a short and intense burst. This book’s proposal of sequences of adaptable high-quality exercises that can allow for deliberate practice should be adopted immediately by nearly every school.

Second is the idea that writing, thinking, and reading are indelibly linked. They are the three tasks of idea-formation and so there is far-reaching power for all of these domains in focusing on the craft of formation. “I write,” Joan Didion famously observed, “to know what I think.” Related then is the idea that revision is not especially separable from writing. This much I know as a professional writer: As soon as this sentence emerges on your laptop screen you are planning its revision, and helping students to

master this hidden phase of writing is necessary to ensuring that students develop refined ideas not just hasty ones. This book's study of revision's wherefores and why's will be invaluable to schools.

Third is the idea that there is a scope and sequence to all this. The numinous task of writing can in fact be taught step by step with a bit of intentionality if you have Hochman's wisdom and knowledge to guide you. Now you don't have to invent it. The tasks and activities are outlined and organized for you here. You can move directly to execution.

Fourth is the idea of *embedded in content*. Writing is a learning activity as much or more than a discrete subject. It operates in synergy with ideas—the need to express them is after all the reason for being for what is otherwise an unnatural and artificial activity. This book will help you to make every classroom in your school “writing intensive” and therefore learning intensive. If I could wave a magic wand over America's schools and cause one change that would drive the most demonstrable improvement to learning and achievement I would almost certainly wave that wand and conjure up small bursts of intense, reflective, high-quality writing in every class period or every hour across America's schools.

Perhaps last is my own lesson from London. That writing, when taught well, is a joy. You build something real and enduring every time and this is a source of pleasure. As is the unexpected form it takes. Successful writing gives its practitioner the mystery and satisfaction of constant invention and construction. When you look at the page and wonder, *Now where did that idea come from?* you know you are doing it right; you know your mastery of the craft itself is now guiding you. In that sense this is a magical book, one that can help you achieve a sea-change in the minds of the students in your classrooms.