
Idea Exchange

This section represents a venue for sharing the work of our teaching peers. More to the point, what follows are suggestions for solving specific teaching problems. There is more than a small chance that some of these practical tips might be useful for those of us who teach. Should you wish more information on one or more of these tips, contact the author at the e-mail address attached to the tip.

I've told my students before that I have always wondered which parts of speech are most important. And I have heard it said often: nouns and verbs. But I'm a doubter. So with them I like to look at this song from the war of 1812. Through it, one can sing with one's own throat which parts of speech are more weighty than others by watching where one's own mind will go with different parts of speech to give the musical emphasis, and which parts of speech will be left without the stress; thereby one understands what others are doing with rhetoric, and where to go oneself, for power in language.

The song is written with what I call a triple meter. That is, the words go stress, unstress, unstress. And there is a pick-up note/beat "oh." Notice that every third word is stressed; in bold

below.

Oh, **say** can you **see**, by the **dawn's** ear-ly **light**, what so **proud-ly** we **hailed**.

Now, let's put new words in. For each, take a few seconds to scan the line so you know what words are going to be sung. Then sing it. As you sing it, circle the words for which you gave the emphasis in the same place as the bold words above. For an example, if the new words are: "Oh can you see, by the dawn's early light..." and you sang "**Oh** can you **see**", dragging the first two notes over the first syllable, then circle "Oh" and "see", but if you sang "Oh **can** you **see**", dragging the 2nd and 3rd notes over the second syllable, then circle "can" and "see" and so on. If we have 20 or so students, we can make a chart and see which words we are all choosing.

Here are our three new sentences with new words for you to sing and circle:

- a. Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light, how George saw a big bear as he ran through the forest.
- b. Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light, a bear ran through trees as he ran through the forest.
- c. Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light, a bear through the trees running fast in the forest.

What do you notice? Which words do you want to give the beat to? What part of speech are those words? When you are faced with extra notes to go over a certain number of syllables, and thus find it necessary to give extra notes to a certain syllable, what parts of speech do you tend to want to give those extra notes to?

One can make as many examples as one wishes—it's often fascinating to come up with new sentences to sing without bringing in one's own prophecies of what might happen with

them. However, have all the students do the exercise and chart the results.

There are other things besides parts of speech that one can learn from this sort of exercise. For example, how does changing the word “George” to “I” in example “a” change your singing, if at all? Why?

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[Intriguing follow up—watch Obama’s speeches. What is he doing, musically, sound-wise, emphasis wise, repetition-wise, with different parts of speech?]

Note: The Idea Exchange is now a regular feature of *The Minnesota English Journal*. Most teachers are astonishingly busy. Sitting down to write a long paper is out of the question for people with five or more preps per day. Thus, we want our readers to “think small” for a few minutes. Jot down on an e-mail message (or an enclosure in an e-mail message in “Word”) to the *MEJ* editor a teaching tip, an idea about teaching a piece of literature that has worked for you with a particular audience, a writing prompt you’ve used to generate discussion, a strategy for developing discussion on a piece of literature, a writing assignment (along with the context you’ve created for it), a research exercise, or an effective way of dealing with the writing process or revision or mechanics. Label your e-mail “The Idea Exchange” and address it to straits@mnsu.edu.

Thanks in advance for contributing your ideas to this enterprise.

Bill Dyer