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## A Tutorial Focusing on Concrete Details: Using Christensen's Levels of Generality

Jane Bowman Smith

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John came into the Writing Center “clueless.” The comment on his paper read: “A fine idea in response to the assignment. Can you be more specific? Add details!” As we talked, it was clear that John wanted to revise his paper but was unsure of how to proceed. He did not understand how his teacher could like his idea but still expect more of the writing itself; “style” and “texture” were foreign concepts. Details, to him, were the facts one needed to support or prove one’s opinion, and he believed he had already provided these facts in his paper.

Many students come into our Writing Center with similar difficulties. While many teachers begin their writing courses with an assignment that demands description or narration, these are not the easiest modes for all writers. Students like John can have trouble with personal or experiential assignments, particularly in creating the sensory details their teachers expect. Understandably, students believe the purpose of all their writing is transactive: they expect the teacher to want information. As a result, they confuse the teacher’s desire for *detail* with a need for *facts*. The problem for the tutor in the writing center, then, is twofold: how do we explain the purpose of the assignment and the teacher’s expectations as a reader? Secondly, how do we help them create the kind of sensory details that their teachers expect? The student’s natural response to a suggestion that he/she “add details” is to pad paragraphs by adding more facts. As Richard Ohmann warns, however, “piling on the details . . . may create a superficial kind of interest, but no gain in insight” (395).

“Knowing how to be specific,” says Susan Peck MacDonald, “is a very complex skill, while the advice we give in textbooks and in class is overly simplistic” (195). For the purposes of this paper, I would like to make a distinction between “facts” and “details.” John preferred the word “facts” and usually used it as we discussed his writing. While I never asked him outright to define “fact,” he seemed to use it as a synonym for “data”: something that supported the generalization of his paragraph and was connected to his main idea logically. These facts were not narratively or chronologically interconnected; each existed separately from the others. As John saw it, facts were abstract, a means to make an intellectual argument. John did not understand what I believe his teacher meant by “detail,” a sensory recreating of experience narratively interconnected with other details in the text. David Gasvoda’s definition is particularly useful: “detail [is] an element that increases the complexity of the representation of one’s subject matter” (23). John used the terms “fact” and “detail” interchangeably, but I saw this as part of his problem. He viewed what should have been two different uses of his own experience as the same.

\* \* \*

John had brought a copy of the assignment to the Writing Center: he had been asked to reveal something of himself to the teacher, something he wanted the teacher to know. In my view, the key phrase was “use concrete details that allow the reader to ‘see’ what happens.” In quickly reading John’s paper, I could understand the teacher’s suggestion that he add details and the grade of “C-.” What John had clearly failed to grasp was that his teacher had expected either descriptive or narrative writing that would allow the reader to enter the writer’s experience; John had responded to the assignment primarily with a logical, analytical sort of essay. And in spite of good organization and a clear focus, the paper was “thin,” lacking in sensory details.

In *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*, Francis Christensen suggests that “teachers can use this [i.e., his] structural analysis of the paragraph to *Generate* paragraphs of greater depth” (57). His method is particularly useful for working with description and narration and has been part of our classroom pedagogy for twenty years. I believe it is worthwhile, however, to make use of Christensen’s method in a different context, in the context of a writing center tutorial aimed specifically at the problem of generating and adding details to a descriptive or narrative paper. This method is particularly useful one-to-one because a tutorial allows discussion of purpose and the differences between analytical and experiential writing.

John was a good potential candidate for successful use of Christensen’s analysis: he had already established a workable focus in the paper and could use Christensen’s method to add to what he had. Having worked with John

before, I knew he had a penchant for procedures that he saw as logical, that gave him fairly quick results. I believed he would see an immediate benefit in the use of Christensen's method: he could employ it both for analysis of his own paragraphs and also as a means of generating details. He would be able to see how specific or general his own paragraphs were and also at what point his writing switched to a new idea—or to several ideas. But the real advantage of using Christensen's method was that we could discuss details in a richer and more complex way. The details John generated could be analyzed in terms of the greater insight they allowed both John, as the writer, and his reader.

John's subject matter was potentially rich, but he had presented a "skeleton" rather than a complete paper. He described each of his divorced parents' treatment of him as a child and how his perceptions of their relationships with him had changed as he matured. As a boy, he had preferred his mother's lack of discipline, but later he came to appreciate his father's more demanding expectations. The following paragraph is typical of the paper:

When I was about seven or eight, my mother spoiled me rotten. I did anything I wanted; I ran around town getting into trouble with the police. I got caught by the police three or four times for such things as egging a police car, spray painting a school building, and dropping logs and boards down the chimney of someone's house. I was also accused by the fire department for setting a fire in the woods near my house. Yes, I confess I did it.

When I asked John what he saw as the strengths of the paragraph, he said, "I proved I was spoiled by listing all the stuff my mother let me do." His answer suggested his motive as he wrote the original: to provide factual information that supported his opinion. In the context of this assignment, however, John's purpose should have been different. His teacher was not looking for "proof"—unconnected statements of fact. She wanted a narrative with sensory details that interconnect, allowing the reader to participate in the writer's experience.

As we discussed how the paragraph might be improved, however, John seemed unable to re-enter the "story" of his past. He only generated further facts, all of which seemed interchangeable:

- \* she gave in when I whined about things
- \* she let me stay out as late as I wanted
- \* she bought me stuff
- \* while my sisters had to help around the house, I could get away with murder

While these facts supported his generalization, John's list was not in itself very interesting. Despite what his teacher had said, adding this to the paper

would not really address its problem: the reader would still feel left out of the picture. John needed to create more complexity by developing the stories that were hidden behind these bare facts.

To move him away from his “listing” strategy, I briefly explained Christensen’s theory of paragraph development: that a paragraph develops one idea, often expressed in a topic sentence, and that a paragraph is formed by adding related sentences to this sentence. John understood this immediately, since he already wrote in this way. However, Christensen states, each sentence has to be clearly connected to the one before and after it; the connection could be either co-ordinate or subordinate. In Christensen’s terms, a co-ordinate sentence is on the same level of generality as the one before. A subordinate sentence is at a lower level of generality, is *more* specific than the sentence before, and develops some aspect of the prior sentence in more detail (56-57). As a means of analyzing paragraphs, Christensen suggests the use of numbers to demonstrate each sentence’s “levels of generality” (61). It was subordinate development that I wanted John to practice, believing it would help him shift from an “informational purpose” to a “narrative” one, as he connected the sentences chronologically.

After some coaching, John analyzed the above paragraph in this way:

1. When I was about seven or eight, my mother spoiled me rotten.
2. I did anything I wanted; I ran around town getting into trouble with the police.
3. I got caught by the police three or four times for such things as egging a police car, spray painting a school building, and dropping logs and boards down the chimney of someone’s house.
4. I was also accused by the fire department for setting a fire in the woods near my house.
5. Yes, I confess I did it.

The “1” is the topic sentence of the paragraph and the most general sentence. The “2” suggests that the second sentence is less general than the first. John saw this sentence as being a development and explanation of the concept of his being spoiled. The third sentence is even more specific; John uses several facts to develop the second sentence’s more abstract concept of “getting into trouble.” The fourth sentence, however, is not a development of the third. Rather, it co-ordinates to the third sentence as it presents new information. It suggests both a different agency with which John got into trouble and a different activity rather than a modification of what is discussed in the third sentence. The final sentence, then, develops the fourth sentence at a more specific level.

Using Christensen's method effectively in a tutorial is not simply a matter of determining the levels of generality in the writer's paragraph, however. Analyzing the way in which the sentences related to one another and were developments of or modifications of one another allowed me to question John about the purpose and significance of the facts he had included in his paper. I asked him questions such as, "Why do you think that fact is important? What does it say about the way you were at that time?" When I asked John why he had chosen these particular facts, he said that he had included only the most outrageous things he had done. His purpose had been to show how he had just "fallen into stuff" with no sense of responsibility. When I noticed that the second sentence of the paragraph suggested that he had operated "on his own," I asked if he had done all these things by himself. This question surprised John. He had not realized that the paragraph would give someone this impression. My confusion as a reader motivated him to rewrite the paragraph.

As John began to think about the purpose of each detail, he realized that he wanted to emphasize that he had done things without thinking about the outcome. This helped him to rewrite the paragraph. He chose to use numbers as he wrote, to remind himself, as he told me, to keep developing the prior idea:

1. When I was about seven or eight, my mother spoiled me rotten.
2. During this time I hung around older kids who were ten or eleven years old.
3. By hanging around these kids I got into some trouble with the police.
4. I got caught by the police, along with some of my friends, for egging a police car.
5. We used to egg cars all the time, but that one night was our last, when we hit the police car.

There are problems with John's revised paragraph: he is still analyzing his experience rather than telling the story of what happened. He also repeats "police" ineffectively. Most frustratingly, he quits writing at the most dramatic point of his story—most readers would want to know what happened when they egged the police car! But he has begun to develop one idea, to create a narrative thread which was lacking before. (Unfortunately, John was satisfied with the revision as it was, so I never learned the full story of that fateful night.)

Our discussion of the details in the revised paragraph and their relationship to one another helped him to understand that he wasn't simply being spoiled, but was suffering from a combination of lack of parental control

and the bad influence of older children. He realized that he continually got caught when he misbehaved, even though it was not by his mother, and that he was always with older boys. The reader can begin to understand the scene and enter into the life of a young boy trying to act tough enough to be accepted by the older crowd. Our discussions of the way these details worked enabled John to do more than simply add density to his paper. It led to an insight about his apparent need for a steady older influence in his life. He used this when he began to revise the section of the paper that dealt with his father's strictness and attempt to instill self-discipline in him.

The original paragraph showed John's father's use of sports to cut back on John's "running wild," but John's response to this is not made clear:

During my years in high school, my dad encouraged me to wrestle, play football, basketball, and baseball. If I wanted to continue to participate in sports, I had to make good grades. Right after school I always had some kind of practice, and then I would come home and do homework.

In discussing the significance of and purpose for these facts in the paragraph, John realized that he was not making his point. It was not clear that *he* was making the choice to do the work; the paragraph was ambiguous. He extensively revised this paragraph:

1. My father got custody of me at the end of fourth grade and held me back a year.
2. He also got me interested in sports about that time.
3. I can remember coming home from practice after school and sitting in my room doing homework to the sound of kids playing in the neighborhood.
4. If I wanted to participate in sports, I had to make good grades and do all my homework.
5. Being involved in athletics helped me stay out of trouble because it took up all of my spare time.
5. With the combination of sports and my father's discipline I learned responsibility.

John was able to describe the cause-effect relationship here as he had not in the first draft of the paragraph. Although he deleted some facts—he no longer names all the sports he played, for example—he has added much more significant details: the nice contrast of "doing homework" and his friends' "playing in the neighborhood," for example. I also liked the way he at first maintained the ambiguity of the original paragraph: "If I wanted to participate in sports, I had to make good grades..." *could* have been pressure from the father alone. But at the end of the paragraph, he resolves the

ambiguity. He states, "I learned responsibility"—and he puts this statement last, to emphasize it. Clearly, he understands the significance of the details he has provided. The structure of the paragraph and the placement of its details suggests that he is writing deliberately, making conscious choices and creating intentional effects.

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John was proud of the eventual results of his efforts; he finished revising the paper on his own and dropped by the Center to tell me later that the experience of revising "hadn't been as bad as he thought it would be." He had also enjoyed what he saw as a "challenge" of Christensen's method, to develop further details out of the sentences that came before. For students like John who do not seem to think naturally in narrative, I suspect the demand for "lower levels of generality" allows a re-entry into the experience, a more sensory recalling of the past. The use of Christensen's method in a tutorial situation in which I could discuss the details he generated encouraged John to deal more directly with the complexity of his subject, making it less one-dimensional. Yet it allowed him to do it one step at a time. And in his case, discussing the purpose of the details he had chosen allowed him to see a new aspect of the situation he was describing, rather than simply an easy, one-sided view.

There is at least one other benefit to using Christensen in the writing center. Students are often unable to step back from the immediacy of a tutorial to analyze what is going on and to understand *how* they are being helped. The questions I have used in the past to elicit details ("And then what happened?") are easily forgotten. The student is too focused on the task at hand to be aware of the method that I use to draw out the details that are needed. The student, although improving the one paper we work on, may not remember how we did it so that he or she can do it again the next time. Christensen's method, however, is easily taught in the writing center and is remembered by students. John plans to use it for other papers, he told me, and was pleased to report that his teacher had liked his revision—and had boosted his grade to a "B."

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66 *The Writing Center Journal*

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