

SIN AND SYNTAX

LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS

CREATED BY CONSTANCE HALE,

TO BE USED IN CONJUNCTION WITH

SIN AND SYNTAX: HOW TO CRAFT WICKED GOOD PROSE

(THREE RIVERS PRESS, 2013)

A NOTE TO YOU.

Are you a teacher trying to help struggling writers perk up their prose? Would you like to learn a little about language yourself as you put together lesson plans for your wards?

Touché to you! This suite of lesson plans complements my book, *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wicked Good Prose*. Whether or not you actually use the book in the classroom, the idea is to share presentations, exercises, and writing prompts that I have developed for workshops all over the country. Some of these exercises and prompts appear in the book as "catechisms." Others I have road-tested with students of varying ages and levels of accomplishment.

The lessons are organized to correspond to chapters of the book, but there is also some introductory material at the beginning of each lesson to give you some room to play before you jump into heavy grammar. Depending on how your classes are organized, you can stretch the lessons out for an entire year, or compress them into a semester or even a quarter. You might want to focus on the first two parts ("Words" and "Sentences") if syntax is your focus. If you are working with accomplished writers at a more advanced level, you might want to skip right to the third part ("Music"). In some cases, I have given different iterations of exercises for different age levels. When there are handouts (or keys to answers), they are collected at the end of the chapter.

I include some additional reading, especially on verbs, from *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch*. (All page numbers I give will refer to the most recent editions of my books.) I also offer links to related as posts and essays I've written for Web sites.

I am humbly submitting all this to you. You teachers are doing yeoman's work and deserve unending praise. I am not a full-time teacher and have never had to work with core curricula or state or federal guidelines. *You* are the one to figure out how best to use this material; I just hope it makes your job a little easier.

One caveat and three pleas: This is a labor of love. I chose to self-publish these lesson plans to keep the cost low for teachers. It has been lightly edited. So please be charitable when you see typos or infelicities.

Please send me your corrections, your own ideas, or your feedback on this material. My goal is simply to be as helpful as I can to everyone genuinely trying to teach others to write in a more sophisticated fashion. And to have a little fun in doing so.

Please feel free to Xerox pages for your students, but please ask other teachers to download their own copies. This material is copyrighted, and the slight fee is intended to cover some of my hard costs.

Please encourage your students or colleagues to visit www.sinandsyntax.com and/or follow me on Twitter and Facebook. I'm trying to build a community of those who care about language.

If you would like to receive an occasional dispatches on teaching writing, send me an email and join my "Miss Thistlebottom? NOT!" mailing list. (The name of the list makes reference to Ted Bernstein's apocryphal grammar teacher, who taught by the book and missed all the important stuff.) You'll also hear from other teachers with stories to tell.

Enjoy, and keep in touch!

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PART ONE

WORKING WITH WORDS

WEEK ONE A WHOLE NEW WAY WITH WORDS

Reading

For students:

Sin and Syntax: "Introduction" and "Words"

"Got Style?" on my Web site: <http://sinandsyntax.com/blog/got-style/>

For teachers:

Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch: pages 260-262 and "Epilogue" (also titled "Got Style?")

"Cool Tools" section of www.sinandsyntax.com, with lists of books on grammar, usage, and style

Lesson and discussion

I launch my classes by setting a tone that is friendly and fun. I want to help students relax—because most of us feel oddly anxious about grammar—and I want to explore their ideas about what grammar is. I tell my own story of growing up speaking Hawaiian creole and standard English and the kind of linguistic schizophrenia that induced.

I try to get students talking about what they think grammar is and is not, and whether we need it to be good writers, by reading this quote from Joan Didion: "Grammar is a piano I play by ear, since I seem to have been out of school the year the rules were mentioned. All I know about grammar is its infinite power." We discuss their response to the quote. Do they, like Didion, feel that they were absent the day/month/year the rules were taught? Can they remember when and how in their lives picked up grammar (or not)?

For older students, I also explore whether or not they speak or study other languages, and how that influences their understanding of English. I welcome the sharing of jokes, embarrassing stories, or secret anxieties. Sometimes I invite students to scribble "grammar gaffes" or examples of "scrambled syntax" on a white board, black board, or giant Post-It. I save these and come back to them at the appropriate time in the course.

Another class discussion might focus on "Cool Tools" for the writer, starting with dictionaries. We talk about how important a good dictionary is, because it contains reliable information and also usage notes. I bring in a few dictionaries to compare, and we take a look at the Microsoft Word dictionary and Dictionary.com. We compare how those stack up against the entries in a bound dictionary published by one of the most reputable publishers (Merriam-Websters, American Heritage, Random House, Oxford). We deconstruct a good dictionary entry, noting the information it contains about parts of speech, etymology, usage, and definitions. We also talk here about thesauruses, visual dictionaries, and other books and online resources that help us be precise in the words we choose. (Good resources for this discussion include posts on www.sinandsyntax.com under "Cool Tools." I am a fan of the "Word of the Day" (<https://www.visualthesaurus.com>), which is produced by linguists at Thinkmap. And I am a fan of a couple of online tools for those who are visual learners: Thinkmap's subscription-only thesaurus, and Visuwords' free online graphical dictionary (<https://www.visuwords.com>).

I like to dedicate another discussion to the idea of usage, defining it and exploring how it differs from grammar. We can use some of our good dictionaries to read the definitions of *grammar*, *syntax*, *usage*, and *style*. I point out that many people confuse usage errors—or spelling and punctuation errors—with grammatical errors. A useful resource might be the posts on grammar, style, and usage at www.sinandsyntax.com. The opening to Chapter 11 of *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* (pages 260-262) is another good resource. And I'm a big fan of Grammar Girl (<http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar>.)

I also like to discuss slang (which I much enjoy, but students think they must avoid) and jargon

(which I do not enjoy, but students sometimes think is acceptable.) For a starting point on these subjects, try pages 21-22 and 225-226 of *Sin and Syntax*.

At last, it's time to introduce the parts of speech. I share the notion that words fall into different categories or buckets—and that some words fall into more than one. *Sin and Syntax* recaps this on page 12, and *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* recaps some of the history on pages 90-92, which I reproduce in part here:

The “parts of speech” may have been dreamed up by the ancient Greek Dionysius Thrax, who counted eight discrete categories: *adverbs, articles, conjunctions, nouns, participles, prepositions, pronouns, and verbs*. But Romans had no use for articles, so they scrapped them and added interjections. Early English grammarians adopted the Latin list, then added and subtracted elements, eventually folding articles into the adjectives category and ditching participles. We were left with our Magic Eight: *nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections*.

Students may have learned the parts of speech from TV. *Schoolhouse Rock!* debuted on ABC-TV in 1973 and has been periodically revived ever since, “being, singing, feeling, and living” most recently on YouTube. Then again, you might have learned your parts of speech from ditties like this:

A *noun's* the name of any thing
Like house, or garden, boat or swing.
Instead of nouns you may prefer
The *pronouns* you, or I, or her.

Adjectives tell the kind of noun
As great or small or black or brown.
Verbs tell something to be done:
To read or count, sing, laugh or run.

The song goes on to define adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections.

Unfortunately, some words still don't fit neatly into this syntactical blueprint. A language shifts over time, much as the foundation of a house can settle and require recarpentering.

We'll get to the resettled and sometimes haphazard elements in later lessons.

In-class exercises

1. As an introductory exercise in the first class, I ask students to pick three words to describe themselves to the rest of us. As we go around the room, we note the words that people have picked in common. (These often include “male,” “female,” “writer,” and “student.”) We do some brainstorming to find less generic, more precise words. We talk about precision, but also about denotation and connotation—about how certain words are packed with rich associations. (I use the example of “mango” and “peach,” from the introduction to “Words,” to illustrate. (Something like “Grandmother” and “Nana” and “Abuelita” would work well for younger kids.)

2. For younger students, when discussing dictionaries and thesauruses, we create teams and have each team look up certain words for denotations (using a dictionary) and synonyms (using a thesaurus). Then we brainstorm for different connotations of those words.
3. For older students, we explore how certain words that are often used casually may have quite particular meanings (some examples might be *aggravate*, *decimate*, *nemesis*, and *terrorist*) that give the words particular nuance). We also explore word pairs that are often used interchangeably by writers who don't know better. This leads to a discussion of usage—how it changes over time, when there are reasons to insist on proper usage, when we might let usage be loose (examples might be *aggravate v. irritate*, *careen v. career*, *medium v. media*, and *compare to v. compare with*).
4. **ADVANCED.** This letter, from the first edition of *Sin and Syntax* offers some subversive fun to more advanced students in identifying nouns. In it, Cyan Inc., the company that produced the adventure-game-to-end-all-adventure-games, *Myst*, showed a better sense of words—and humor—than most PR types, avoiding the knee-jerk tendency to drown crucial words in a tide of filler. The letter landed on the desk of an editor at *Wired* magazine back in the early days of the Web. The press release focused all attention on a few key nouns (i.e., the names of the products being hawked) and poked fun at meaningless PR. (If all press releases were so funny, editors might actually read them.)

Dear Mr. Frauenfelder,

Blah, blah blah blah blah Cyan blah Blah blah *Myst* blah Blah. BLAH! Blah blah
 blah blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah: blah
 blah. Blah blah Cyan blah blah blah blah blahblah blah blah *Myst* blah
 blah. Blahblah *The Manhole Masterpiece Edition* blah blah *Cosmic Osmo and the
 Worlds Beyond the Mackerel*.

The Manhole Masterpiece Edition blah blah blah blah blah blahblah blah
 blah blah blah blahblah blah. Blahblah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blahblah;
 blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah *The Manhole Masterpiece Edition*, blah
 blah blah blah blah blahblah blahblah.

Cosmic Osmo and the Worlds Beyond the Mackerel blah blah blah blah
 blah blah blah blahblah blah blah blah, blah blah. Blah blah! Blah blah blah &
 blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah blah blah. Blah, *Cosmic Osmo and
 the Worlds Beyond the Mackerel* blah blah blah blah blah blah blah
 blah blah blahblah. Blah blah.

Blah blah Cyan blah blah blah blah blah blah blahblah blah—blah blah.
 Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blahblah.

Regards,
 Rand Miller & Robin Miller
 Founders

P.S. Blah blah blah blah Blah blah: blah blah blah!

Homework

Let's add some ads into the mix. Find three ads that depend on *words* for their success, and bring them in to class. Find ads that use as few words as possible and yet exploit each one.

(Example: "got milk?") [NEED SUPER CURRENT ONES]

Thesaurus love. Are the words students chose in the first class to introduce themselves generic and somewhat vague (e.g. "writer") or are they specific and precise (e.g. "novelist," "poet," "journalist," "compulsive scribbler")? Are they nouns? Adjectives? Verbs? Go find a good Roget's-style thesaurus and look each word up. Can you find even more precise words that give someone a much clearer picture?

Loosen up. Have a little fun with slang and jargon. Take something you've written recently (it would be great if it were a piece of formal writing or an academic paper!) and revise it using as much slang as you can. Or write an email to your teacher or boss using formal language, then write the same email to a friend or colleague in informal language. Or think of two people who work together and rely on professional argot or jargon, then write a dialogue in their lingo. As an example of a writer having fun with Jargon, here is no doubt apocryphal conversation between the economist and techno-utopian advocate George Gilder and an engineer, captured (or improvised) by the journalist Po Bronson in a 1996 profile in *Wired*:

Every time Gilder meets an engineer, they go through this sort of cascade of language syntax, negotiating like two modems, trying to find the most efficient level of conversation they can hold. It ends up sounding like the dueling banjo scene from *Deliverance*:

George: "Hi, nice to meet you. Hey, that's a sweet access router over there. Wow, both Ethernet and asynchronous ports?"

Steve: "Yeah, check this baby out - the Ethernet port has AUI, BNC, and RJ-45 connectors."

George: "So for packet filtering you went with TCP, UDP, and ICMP."

Steve: "Of course. To support dial-up SLIP and PPP."

George: "Set user User_Name ifilter Filter_Name."

Steve: "Set filter s1.out 8 permit 192.9.200.2/32 0.0.0.0/0 tcp src eq 20."

George: "00101101100010111001001110110000101010100011111001."

Steve: "."

George: "Really? Wait, you lost me there."

WEEK TWO: NOODLING AROUND WITH NOUNS

Reading

Sin and Syntax, "Nouns."

New York Times Opinionator, "Desperately Seeking Synonyms":

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/02/desperately-seeking-synonyms/>

Sections of *Vex*, *Hex*, *Smash*, *Smooch* (as noted).

Lesson and discussion

Nouns are the cornerstones of writing, and along with verbs, key components of every sentence. Nouns transform people into characters, places into scenes, tangible things into metaphors, and ideas into themes. So, what is a noun? Let's start our exploration by reading the definitions of nouns in *Sin and Syntax* (page 11) and *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch* (page 29).

Depending on the age and grammatical comfort level of your students, this discussion is all about definitions. One way to help younger students define nouns is to bring in buckets labeled "common nouns" and "proper nouns." Read a story at their age level, and write the nouns on index cards. Have the students drop the cards in the right buckets. For older students, define nouns by closely reading the passage by Paul Theroux, from *Pillars of Hercules*, on page 13. Discuss common nouns and proper ones, generic nouns and specific nouns, abstract nouns and concrete ones. How many proper nouns are there in the Theroux passage? Why are they effective? Do you notice compound nouns, some of them open (bus ride) and some of them closed (daylight)? Would you agree that Theroux exploits nouns to create this scene?

In-class exercises

1. Almost every English sentence contains at least one noun. They are indispensable when it comes to portraying a character or painting a scene. The Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman opens his book *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* by creating an indelible image of the cell in which he was imprisoned for criticizing the official cruelty of his country's military. He does most of it through nouns. (See the Handout.) Have students group the nouns in two ways. First, have students group them into the four noun classes:
 - a. People: guard, guards
 - b. Places: cell, corridor, house
 - c. Concrete things: door, arms, body, knees, ceiling, walls, names, messages, floor, mattress, blanket, shoulders, crack, air, watch, cigarette, wife's lighter, gold Rolex watches, Dupont cigarette lighters, Argentine security forces
 - d. Intangible things: luck, encouragement, vestige, testimony, time, semi-penumbra, semi-air, temptation, obsession, sensation, freedom, entire universe, Time, time, Time, existence, duration, eternity

Then have students group them as common nouns (*arms, knees, cell*) and proper nouns (*Rolux, Dupont, Argentine*) and nouns that carry ideas and abstractions (*freedom, eternity, time*). Nouns can buttress good scene descriptions. Both Theroux and Timerman lean hard on nouns, but their passages are quite different.

2. Use the blackboard or some other surface (I sometimes just my outstretched arms) to talk about the three parallel spectrums, or axes, of nouns. The first spectrum is between common, generic, basic nouns and proper or precise nouns (which includes brand names!). The second is between abstract, general, and vague nouns and concrete, specific, narrow nouns. The third is between nouns that are literal and nouns that are figurative.

Take the example of *house*, on page 15, and mark where various nouns fall on the spectrum. Take the example of *boat*, from “Desperately Seeking Synonyms,” and do the same, going from common to proper, abstract to concrete:

- a. Abstractions: *vessel, vehicle, mode of transportation, means of navigation.*
 - b. Commonplace: *boat, ship, seacraft.*
 - c. Proper: *Boston Whaler, Duck Boat, HobyCat, Hokule'a, Titanic, Sunfish, U.S.S. Kentucky.*
 - d. Precise: *canoe, skiff, yacht, yawl, aircraft carrier, amphibious landing vehicle, barge, battleship, dinghy, dugout, junk, outrigger, rowboat, trimaran, scow.*
3. Flower power: Read this passage (one of my favorites) by Susan Orlean to show how great writers use nouns to create images and metaphors in description:
“An orchid’s appearance is ravishing. One species looks like a German Shepherd with its tongue hanging out. One looks like an octopus. One looks like a human nose. One looks like a pair of fancy shoes. One looks dead. There are species that look like butterflies, bats, ladies’ handbags, swarms of bees, clamshells, camels’ hooves, squirrels, nuns wearing wimples, and drunken old men. The smallest orchids are nearly microscopic, and the biggest ones have masses of flowers as large as footballs. The petals of some orchids are as soft as powder; others are as rigid and rubbery as inner tubes. They can be freckled or mottled or veiny or solid, their colors ranging from nearly neon to spotless white. Some look like the results of an accident involving paint.
—Susan Orlean “Plant Crimes,” from *The New Yorker*,
as reprinted in *Vex, Hex*, page 287
4. Identify the nouns in the passages given on the handout. Identify common nouns and proper nouns, specific nouns and which generic ones.
5. Get gritty with the grammar, reviewing the chapter’s “Cardinal Sins,” or various problems that crop up with nouns, especially these:
- a. Abstractions: Take a look at the paragraph about GreenTree Nutrition (p. 21.)
Have a good laugh.
 - b. Noun piles and purple prose: See the examples on page 180. Encourage students to collect ridiculous descriptions from restaurant menus, like these desserts from a trendy San Francisco restaurant:
 - Tellicherry Black Pepper Banana Caramel Pot de Creme with chocolate earthquake cookies
 - Warm Valrhona Chocolate-Cardamom Souffle Cake with snicker doodle cookies.
 - c. Lack of imagination (*boat, house*).
 - d. Euphemism: Examples on pages 27-29. Here’s one: After Justin Timberlake ripped Janet Jackson’s bodice off during the halftime show of the 2004 Super Bowl, exposing her right breast, Timberlake’s press agent issued this statement: “I am sorry if anyone was offended by the wardrobe malfunction.”
 - e. Redundancy (*wide range, acute crisis, free gift, true facts, convicted felon, limited lifetime guarantee*).
 - f. Redundant pairs, or “doublets”: *last will & testament; excitement and enthusiasm; effectiveness & efficiency.*
- (Another source of examples of redundancy—with a linguistic/historical explanation of why they are so frequent in English—is *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch*: pages 72-73 and 76-78.)

6. Use the attached handout to show how student can develop an eye for circumlocution, fogginess, noun pileups, and endless abstraction.

7. **ADVANCED:** Nouns and scene, nouns and theme. Have students read the Timerman passage one more time, and lead a discussion about how nouns can set tone and style. Notice that most of Timerman's nouns are unadorned, naked, stripped of attention-grabbing adjectives. They are as hard as the cell itself. The scene is painted plainly through *the cell, the floor, the mattress, a blanket*, as is the narrator, with his *arms, body, knees, shoulders*. Timerman chooses mainly common, generic nouns. In a few strategic places, and well into the description, Timerman adds capitalized words that signal some hard information—*Rolex watches, Dupont cigarette lighters, Argentine security forces*. These proper nouns give the piece an eerie specificity, though not enough to detract from the sense that the main character is less Jacobo Timerman than Everyman.

In a piece so sparsely written, the intangible nouns stand out. Some of these nouns—like *semi-penumbra, contaminated air, and semi-air*—reinforce each other to name Timerman's grim predicament. Others, like *life, light, glow, sensation, freedom, universe, Time, existence, duration, eternity*, attest to his hopes. Such intangible nouns carry an author's themes. They offer glimpses into something larger—the human condition.

8. **ADVANCED:** Show how powerful brand names can be—the good ones carry a raft of connotations. John McPhee and Joan Didion both use brand names to great effect. I encourage you to find your own examples here—it's so critical that you share with the students what you feel passionate about.

Homework

Berry good nouns:

Review Mark Twain's "potted geraniums" reference, in this chapter. And Jo Ann Beard's "pink geraniums grow[ing] like earrings on either side of the porch." Nouns give shape to ideas, heft to sentences. It's worth taking the time to get them right. It may seem old-fashioned, or just tedious, to work with a dictionary and a thesaurus at your side, but this is part of the practice of writing. Working with word books strengthens our imaginative muscles, and in turn strengthens our own mental thesauruses, our ability to call up precise words. Take a common noun like *fruit*. How many more specific synonyms can you come up with? Is one of them *berry*? Can you do even better than that? List as many different kinds of berries as you can, using your mental thesaurus.

When you've run out, go to a literal thesaurus. How many more did you get?

Surface energy:

The first step in learning how to write evocative scenes is to increase your powers of observation. First, really look. Then, start taking notes. Write down everything. Draw shapes. Note colors. Find new, more precise words. Notice the detail Thomas Pynchon squeezes into a one-paragraph description of Lt. Tyrone Slothrop's desk, early in *Gravity's Rainbow*:

It hasn't been cleaned down to the original wood surface since 1942. Things have fallen roughly into layers, over a base of bureaucratic smegma that sifts steadily to the bottom, made up of millions of tiny red and brown curls of rubber eraser, pencil shavings, dried tea or coffee stains, traces of sugar and Household Milk, much cigarette ash, very fine black debris picked and flung from typewriter ribbons, decomposing library paste, broken aspirins ground to powder. The comes a scatter of paperclips, Zippo flints, rubber bands, staples, cigarette butts and crumpled packs, stray matches, pins, nubs of pens, stubs of pencils of all colors including the hard- to- get heliotrope and raw umber, wooden coffee spoons, Thayer's Slippery Elm Throat Lozenges sent by Slothrop's mother, Nalline, all the

way from Massachusetts, bits of tape, string, chalk . . . above that a layer of forgotten memoranda, empty buff ration books, phone numbers, unanswered letters, tattered sheets of carbon paper, the scribbled ukulele chords to a dozen songs including "Jonny Doughboy Found a Rose in Ireland."

Pynchon's description goes on for another 164 words. Your own desk might not be such a "godawful mess" (his words), but look at it closely and describe what you see. Make your description more than a mere catalog.

Southern nouns:

Read the first four paragraphs of "The Ballad of the Sad Café," by Carson McCullers. (See the Handout.) Ask students to underline every noun in the passage, and take special note of the idea/feeling/abstraction nouns McCullers uses (*dreams, gaiety, ruin*). Have them write a few lines on how the author drops those nouns into the passage to set up her themes.

See, seeing, scene:

Reread the scenes early in the Nouns chapter— Paul Theroux's train compartment in Turkey, James Salter's hall at West Point, Arundhati Roy's landscape in Ayemenem. Go sit somewhere distinctive—a favorite garden, a cathedral, or even a grungy inner-city laundromat—and notice what is special or evocative about the place. Use concrete, vivid nouns to paint a picture of the scene. Carefully choose a few idea/feeling/abstraction nouns to convey what makes the place unusual. Is it a microcosm of something larger? Is it a symbol? A metaphor?

Transcendental time:

Read the descriptions of the Concord River written by Henry David Thoreau and then John McPhee on pages 30-32. Find a historical description of a particular place in your city, town, or county. Retrace the author's steps. Write your own description of the place as it is today, using the original as a starting point but letting John McPhee inspire you to see the essence of the place today.

**WEEK TWO:
NOODLING AROUND WITH NOUNS/HANDOUTS**

A. *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, Jacobo Timerman. Identify every noun in the following passage:

The cell is narrow. When I stand at its center, facing the steel door, I can't extend my arms. But it is long, and when I lie down, I can stretch out my entire body. A stroke of luck, for in the cell I previously occupied—for how long?—I was forced to huddle up when seated and keep my knees bent while lying down.

The cell is quite high. When I jump, I'm unable to touch the ceiling. The white walls have been recently painted. Undoubtedly they once had names on them, messages, words of encouragement, dates. They are now bereft of any vestige or testimony.

The floor of the cell is permanently wet. Somewhere there's a leak. The mattress is also wet. I have a blanket, and to prevent that from getting wet I keep it on my shoulders constantly. If I lie down with the blanket on top of me, the part of my body touching the mattress gets soaked. I discover it's best to roll up the mattress so that one part of it doesn't touch the ground. In time, the top part dries. This means, though, that I can't lie down, but must sleep seated. My life goes on during this period—for how long?—either standing or seated.

The cell has a steel door with an opening that allows part of a face, a minimal part, to be visible. The guard has orders to keep the opening shut. Light enters from the outside through a small crack, which acts also as an air vent. This is the only ventilation and light. A faint glow, night and day, eliminating time. Producing a semi-penumbra within an atmosphere of contaminated air, semi-air....

One of the guards has my watch. During an interrogation another guard offered me a cigarette and lit it with my wife's lighter. I later learned that they were under army orders not to steal anything from my house throughout the kidnapping but succumbed to temptation. Gold Rolex watches and Dupont cigarette lighters were almost an obsession with the Argentine security forces during that year of 1977.

Tonight, a guard, not following the rules, leaves the peephole ajar. I wait a while to see what will happen but it remains open. Standing on tiptoe, I peer out. There's a narrow corridor, and across from my cell I can see at least two other doors. Indeed, I have a full view of two doors. What a sensation of freedom! An entire universe added to my Time, that elongated time which hovers over me oppressively in the cell. Time, that dangerous enemy of man, when its existence, duration, and eternity are virtually palpable.

B. *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, by Carson McCullers. Underline every noun in the passage, and take special note of the idea/feeling/abstraction nouns McCullers uses (*dreams, gaiety, ruin*). How does the author drop those nouns into the passage to set up her themes?

The town itself is dreary; not much is there except the cotton mill, the two-room houses where the workers live, a few peach trees, a church with two colored windows, and a miserable main street only a hundred yards long. On Saturdays the tenants from the near-by farms come in for a day of talk and trade. Otherwise the town is lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world. The nearest train stop is Society City, and the Greyhound and White Bus Lines use the Forks Falls Road which is three miles away. The winters here are short and raw, the summers white with glare and fiery hot.

If you walk along the main street on an August afternoon there is nothing whatsoever to do. The largest building, in the very center of the town, is boarded up completely and leans so far to the right that it seems bound to collapse at any minute. The house is very old. There is about it a curious, cracked look that is very puzzling until you suddenly realize that at one time, and long ago, the right side of the front porch had been painted, and part of the wall-- but the painting was left unfinished and one portion of the house is darker and dingier than the other. The building looks completely deserted. Nevertheless, on the second floor there is one window which is not boarded; sometimes in the late afternoon when the heat is at its worst a hand will slowly open the shutter and a face will look down on the town. It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams-- sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief. The face lingers at the window for an hour or so, then the shutters are closed once more, and as likely as not there will not be another soul to be seen along the main street. These August afternoons-- when your shift is finished there is absolutely nothing to do; you might as well walk down to the Forks Fall Road and listen to the chain gang.

However, here in this very town there was once a café. And this old boarded-up house was unlike any other place for many miles around. There were tables with cloths and paper napkins, colored streamers from the electric fans, great gatherings on Saturday nights. The owner of the place was Miss Amelia Evans. But the person most responsible for the success and gaiety of the place was a hunchback called Cousin Lymon. One other person had a part in the story of this café-- he was the former husband of Miss Amelia, a terrible character who returned to the town after a long term in the penitentiary, caused ruin, and then went on his way again. The café has long since been closed, but it is still remembered.

C. Naming things. Identify all the nouns in the following passages. Which ones are common, which ones proper? Which ones specific, which generic?

From *Whoredom in Kimmage: Irish Women Coming of Age* by Rosemary Mahoney

...The man wore a wool cap and a heavy overcoat with the collar up, as though against a winter wind. The great wings of his collar hid the lower half of his face – all I could see of him was a black brow, a long, graying sideburn and an enormous hairy ear.... [He] addressed me without introduction or preface and without taking his eyes off the red dot of the fishing boat. I thought he was speaking Irish and stepped closer, the better to hear him, but it was English he was speaking, his second language. Aran Islanders – indeed most native Irish speakers – speak English in a mournful, faintly suspicious way, as though it pains them to be speaking such an unwieldy tongue, but this man's tone was exceptionally gloomy; it made him sound like the spy he resembled.

From "Death All Day" by Richard Rhodes (*Esquire*)

Dan's parents have waited up for us with Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon. Mrs. Cram appears to let us in – a slim, pleasant, dark-haired woman in a quilted robe, feminine without fluffiness, with delicate and graceful hands. She does not, as a farm woman might, leave the conversation to the men; as she asks her questions her eyes examine her son, assaying his health, his appetite, his state of mind. Married only ten months, Dan has not yet finally left home, and between his mother and his grandmother, in the next twenty-four hours, he will receive more attention than makes him comfortable, as befits a former Portis high-school basketball player.

From "Cowboy" by Jane Kramer (*The New Yorker*)

There was a fine-lined, weathered look about Henry at forty. Too much bourbon and beer had put a gut on him, but his gray eyes were clear and quick most days, and often humorous., and his sandy hair had got thick and wiry as it grayed – a little rumped and overgrown, because he hated haircuts, though never long enough to cause comment in a cowboy bar. He had a fine, solemn swagger. Saturday nights at the country-and-Western dance in Pampa, he thumped around the floor, serious and sweating, and the women liked to watch him – there was something boyish and charming about his grave self-consciousness. When he was young, he used to laugh and shake hands with everybody after a good polka. Now, more often than not, he blinked and looked around, suddenly embarrassed, and his laugh was loud and nervous, and made the women who had been watching him uncomfortable.

Still, Betsy was looking tired lately. All the cowboys' wives said so. She looked as if her life had hurt her and worn her out. Years ago, when Henry began to court her, she was the prettiest girl in her class at the district high school—a slender girl with wide blue eyes and a dimpled smile and wavy yellow hair that flipped in the wind when she went riding and was the envy of her friends. Now there was tension – a kind of tightness – about her. Her face had hardened under the bright, careful pouf that her hairdresser said was just the thing for softening the features of tall, thin women. She was getting sallow the way people who spend their youth outdoors turn sallow when they are shut up in closed cars and offices.

D. Geeky grammar.

Clean up these phrases by finding better, more specific nouns:

1. "a written warranty or any documents associated therewith"
2. "the location of manufacture"
3. " we have no present or future plans to do so"
4. "Welcome to the New York area!"

Eliminate the REDUNDANCIES in the following sentences, each one taken from a real book manuscript:

1. The Philadelphia chromosome derails normal bone marrow functioning and initiates an uncontrolled reproduction and proliferation of all types of white blood cells and platelets (which help blood clot).
2. Working as a scuba-diving instructor--scraping barnacles off boats-- would be a mundane, repetitive existence.
3. The way to begin is to eliminate any mindset or attitude that might be a source of conservatism or resistance to change.
4. Gates said that the Money team, with its limited resources, had increased the public's fascination and attraction with personal finance software.

Identify the junk nouns in these sentences and think of a way to improve them:

5. "This is all part of our global improvement product enhancement program." (A statement by spokesman for Hasbro after the toy company closed a Scrabble plant in Fairfax, Vt.)
6. "I am writing to you about our need for a communication facilitation skills development intervention." (From a letter to parents from a school principal)
7. "Careful operational organization of this policy is needed in order to avoid the pitfall of goal displacement." (From a government agency memo.)
8. "Agreement on the overall objective of decision usefulness was a prerequisite to the establishment of a conceptual framework." (From a company memo.)

**WEEK TWO:
NOODLING AROUND WITH NOUNS/ANSWER KEY**

A. Jacobo Timerman passage.

The **cell** is narrow. When I stand at its **center**, facing the steel **door**, I can't extend my **arms**. But it is long, and when I lie down, I can stretch out my entire **body**. A **stroke of luck**, for in the **cell** I previously occupied—for how long?—I was forced to huddle up when seated and keep my **knees** bent while lying down.

The **cell** is quite high. When I jump, I'm unable to touch the **ceiling**. The white **walls** have been recently painted. Undoubtedly they once had **names** on them, **messages, words of encouragement, dates**. They are now bereft of any **vestige** or **testimony**.

The **floor** of the **cell** is permanently wet. Somewhere there's a **leak**. The **mattress** is also wet. I have a **blanket**, and to prevent that from getting wet I keep it on my **shoulders** constantly. If I lie down with the **blanket** on top of me, the part of my **body** touching the **mattress** gets soaked. I discover it's best to roll up the **mattress** so that one **part** of it doesn't touch the **ground**. In time, the top **part** dries. This means, though, that I can't lie down, but must sleep seated. My **life** goes on during this **period**—for how long?—either standing or seated.

The **cell** has a steel **door** with an **opening** that allows **part** of a **face**, a minimal **part**, to be visible. The **guard** has **orders** to keep the **opening** shut. **Light** enters from the outside through a small **crack**, which acts also as an **air vent**. This is the only **ventilation** and **light**. A faint **glow, night and day**, eliminating **time**. Producing a **semi-penumbra** within an **atmosphere** of contaminated **air, semi-air...**

One of the **guards** has my **watch**. During an **interrogation** another **guard** offered me a **cigarette** and lit it with my wife's **lighter**. I later learned that they were under **army orders** not to steal anything from my **house** throughout the **kidnapping** but succumbed to **temptation**. **Gold Rolex watches** and **Dupont cigarette lighters** were almost an **obsession** with the **Argentine security forces** during that **year** of 1977.

Tonight, a **guard**, not following the **rules**, leaves the **peephole** ajar. I wait a while to see what will happen but it remains open. Standing on **tiptoe**, I peer out. There's a narrow **corridor**, and across from my **cell** I can see at least two other **doors**. Indeed, I have a full **view** of two **doors**. What a **sensation** of **freedom**! An entire **universe** added to my **Time**, that elongated **time** which hovers over me oppressively in the **cell**. **Time**, that dangerous **enemy** of **man**, when its **existence, duration, and eternity** are virtually palpable.

From *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, by Carson McCullers

The **town** itself is dreary; not much is there except the **cotton mill**, the two-room **houses** where the **workers** live, a few **peach trees**, a **church** with two colored **windows**, and a miserable **main street** only a hundred **yards** long. On **Saturdays** the **tenants** from the near-by **farms** come in for a **day** of **talk** and **trade**. Otherwise the **town** is lonesome, sad, and like a **place** that is far off and estranged from all other **places** in the **world**. The nearest **train stop** is **Society City**, and the **Greyhound** and **White Bus Lines** use the **Forks Falls Road** which is three **miles** away. The **winters** here are short and raw, the **summers** white with **glare** and fiery hot.

If you walk along the **main street** on an August **afternoon** there is nothing whatsoever to do. The largest **building**, in the very **center** of the **town**, is boarded up completely and leans so far to the **right** that it seems bound to collapse at any minute.

The **house** is very old. There is about it a curious, cracked **look** that is very puzzling until you suddenly realize that at one **time**, and **long ago**, the right **side** of the **front porch** had been painted, and part of the **wall**—but the **painting** was left unfinished and one **portion** of the **house** is darker and dingier than the other. The **building** looks completely deserted. Nevertheless, on the second **floor** there is one **window** which is not boarded; sometimes in the late **afternoon** when the **heat** is at its worst a **hand** will slowly open the **shutter** and a **face** will look down on the **town**. It is a **face** like the terrible dim **faces** known in **dreams**—sexless and white, with two gray crossed **eyes** which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret **gaze** of **grief**. The **face** lingers at the **window** for an hour or so, then the **shutters** are closed once more, and as likely as not there will not be another **soul** to be seen along the **main street**. These August **afternoons**—when your **shift** is finished there is absolutely **nothing** to do; you might as well walk down to the **Forks Fall Road** and listen to the **chain gang**.

However, here in this very town there was once a **café**. And this old boarded-up **house** was unlike any other **place** for many **miles** around. There were **tables** with **cloths** and **paper napkins**, colored **streamers** from the **electric fans**, great gatherings on Saturday **nights**. The **owner** of the place was **Miss Amelia Evans**. But the **person** most responsible for the **success** and **gaiety** of the place was a **hunchback** called **Cousin Lymon**. One other **person** had a part in the **story** of this **café**—he was the former **husband** of **Miss Amelia**, a terrible **character** who returned to the **town** after a long **term** in the **penitentiary**, caused **ruin**, and then went on his **way** again. The **café** has long since been closed, but it is still remembered.

B. Naming things. (Note the compound nouns; here the modifiers might be considered adjectives or noun modifiers. I have not boldfaced the pronouns acting here as nouns.)

From *Whoredom in Kimmage: Irish Women Coming of Age* by Rosemary Mahoney

...The **man** wore a wool **cap** and a heavy **overcoat** with the **collar** up, as though against a winter **wind**. The great **wings** of his **collar** hid the lower half of his **face** – all I could see of him was a black **brow**, a long, graying **sideburn** and an enormous hairy **ear**.... [He] addressed me without introduction or preface and without taking his **eyes** off the red **dot** of the fishing **boat**. I thought he was speaking **Irish** and stepped closer, the better to hear him, but it was **English** he was speaking, his second **language**. **Aran Islanders** – indeed most **native Irish speakers** – speak **English** in a mournful, faintly suspicious **way**, as though it pains them to be speaking such an unwieldy **tongue**, but this man's **tone** was exceptionally gloomy; it made him sound like the **spy** he resembled.

From "Death All Day" by Richard Rhodes (*Esquire*)

Dan's **parents** have waited up for us with **Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon**. Mrs. Cram appears to let us in – a slim, pleasant, dark-haired **woman** in a quilted **robe**, feminine without **fluffiness**, with delicate and graceful **hands**. She does not, as a **farm woman** might, leave the **conversation** to the **men**; as **she** asks her **questions** her **eyes** examine her **son**, assaying his **health**, his **appetite**, his **state** of **mind**. Married only ten **months**, **Dan** has not yet finally left **home**, and between his **mother** and his **grandmother**, in the next twenty-four **hours**, he will receive more **attention** than makes **him** comfortable, as befits a former **Portis high-school basketball player**.

From "Cowboy" by Jane Kramer (*The New Yorker*)

There was a fine-lined, weathered look about **Henry** at **forty**. Too much **bourbon** and **beer** had put a **gut** on him, but his gray **eyes** were clear and quick most days, and often humorous., and his sandy **hair** had got thick and wiry as it grayed – a little ruffled and overgrown, because he hated **haircuts**, though never long enough to cause **comment** in a **cowboy bar**. He had a fine, solemn **swagger**. Saturday **nights** at the country-and-Western **dance** in **Pampa**, he thumped around the **floor**, serious and sweating, and the **women** liked to watch him – there was something boyish and charming about his grave **self-consciousness**. When he was young, he used to laugh and shake **hands** with everybody after a good **polka**. Now, more often than not, he blinked and looked around, suddenly embarrassed, and his **laugh** was loud and nervous, and made the **women** who had been watching him uncomfortable.

Still, **Betsy** was looking tired lately. All the cowboys' **wives** said so. She looked as if her **life** had hurt her and worn her out. Years ago, when **Henry** began to court her, she was the prettiest **girl** in her **class** at the **district high school**—a slender **girl** with wide blue **eyes** and a dimpled **smile** and wavy yellow **hair** that flipped in the **wind** when she went riding and was the **envy** of her **friends**. Now there was **tension** – a kind of **tightness**—about her. Her **face** had hardened under the bright, careful **pouf** that her **hairdresser** said was just the thing for softening the **features** of tall, thin **women**. She was getting sallow the way **people** who spend their **youth** outdoors turn sallow when they are shut up in closed **cars** and **offices**.

C. Geeky grammar.

Finding more specific nouns:

1. "a written warranty or any documents associated therewith" → a guarantee
2. "the location of manufacture" → the plant or factory
3. " we have no present or future plans to do so" → we have no plans
4. "Welcome to the New York area!" → Welcome to New York!

Eliminating REDUNDANCIES:

1. The Philadelphia chromosome derails normal bone marrow functioning and initiates an uncontrolled **reproduction** and ~~proliferation~~ of all types of white blood cells and platelets (which help blood clot.
2. Working as a scuba-diving instructor--scraping barnacles off boats-- would be a **mundane, repetitive** existence.
3. The way to begin is to eliminate any **mindset or attitude** that might be a source of conservatism or resistance to change.
4. Gates said that the Money team, with its limited resources, had increased the public's ~~fascination and attraction~~ **infatuation** with personal finance software.

Identifying the junk nouns and improve the sentences:

5. This is all part of our global improvement product enhancement program. (A statement by spokesman for Hasbro after the toy company closed a Scrabble plant in Fairfax, Vt.)

→ We are laying people off to save resources.

6. "I am writing to you about our need for a communication facilitation skills development intervention." (From a letter to parents from a school principal)

→ Let's help our children write better.

7. "Careful operational organization of this policy is needed in order to avoid the pitfall of goal displacement." (From a government agency memo.)

→ To meet our goals, let's follow this policy carefully.

8. "Agreement on the overall objective of decision usefulness was a prerequisite to the establishment of a conceptual framework." (From a company memo.)

→ First we must agree on the importance of this decision. (Maybe?)

D. Berry good nouns

You might want to discuss this homework assignments and allow the students to compare notes. The word *berry* comes from the Old English *berie*, which originally meant "grape." According to dictionary.com, the berry family is not a botanical category but rather a linguistic invention particular to Germanic languages like English. (Languages like Spanish and French, do not link all these yummy little fruits with a similar name, but rather have distinct words for blackberries, raspberries, blueberries and strawberries. (In French, those would be *mûres*, *framboises*, *myrtilles*, and *fraises*.)

On my Web site (<http://sinandsyntax.com/uncategorized/list-of-berry-good-berries/>) I've compiled a running list of berries culled from classes and workshops. Please add more, if you have them, in the comments section, or have your students add more. Here's the preliminary list:

- Acai
- Alkekengi
- Barberry
- Blackberry
- Black currant
- Blueberry
- Boysenberry
- Bramble berry
- Bramble fruits
- Cherry berry
- Cranberry
- Currant
- Elderberry
- Goji berry
- Golden raspberry
- Gooseberry
- Grapes or "wine berries"
- Hakeberry
- Honeysuckle (watch out, some of these berries are mildly poisonous!)

- Huckleberry
- Jostaberry
- Lemon berry
- Lingon berry
- May apple
- Mulberry
- Nanny berry
- Oregon grape
- Poisonberry
- Raspberry
- Red currant
- Ribes
- Sea buckthorn
- Strawberry
- Thimbleberry
- Tomato
- Wild rose
- Wine raspberry